

CSTS podcast series
Let's Talk About Your Guns
episode 202: Empowered and Armed – Women and Firearms

REBA RICE PORTWOOD: I'm originally from New York, but I moved to Arkansas at the age of five.

When I moved to Arkansas, that was the first time I ever saw a gun.

My grandparents had a huge home on a lot of acres. And my grandfather had about 2 or 3 firearms.

He had a really huge closet in his room, and he kept them in the corner on the inside of his closet.

I do remember asking my grandfather what was the purpose of the guns. Like, why did he have them? And he said that they that they were for hunting.

I stayed in Arkansas for five years. And then I came to Saint Louis, and I've been there ever since.

REBA RICE PORTWOOD: I worked as a correction officer for the city of Saint Louis.

I worked in the jail in open population with the inmates where they were out freely walking around us.

There was always a concern about safety. We didn't carry our firearms on the floors. And so you had to be on guard all the time.

REBA RICE PORTWOOD: One day, I was going to the gas station on my way to work, and we had had a riot prior to that. So when I came out, there was a young man standing there that happened to be one of the inmates that was involved in that riot, and he was at the gas pump pumping gas. And he started yelling obscenities at me, saying, I know you were one of those officers that was involved in that riot. And I should come and blow your head off right now.

I got away from that area to get my own self to safety. And I remember just being really shaken and shaken up, really nervous. I was so afraid because he was a man, that if he was able to get to me, the harm that he would have brought to me.

REBA RICE PORTWOOD: That situation basically changed everything for me.

I didn't like firearms. I didn't like them, period. Didn't want to be involved with them but once I had that incident at the gas station, my mind was made up.

REBA RICE PORTWOOD: I was divorced and so I was raising my son by myself, and I was afraid. And I felt like by any means necessary, I had to protect him.

But when I got the firearm, it brought on other stressors.

It was a false sense of protection.

REBA RICE PORTWOOD: My son's name was Ricky. And Ricky was an amazing young man. But he battled with depression.

REBA RICE PORTWOOD: In September of 2014 my phone rang, and it was his fiance.

She was screaming in the phone and I couldn't quite make out what she was saying, but something went down my spine like I knew what she was saying.

She said my son Ricky took his own life.

When he passed the depression started hitting, me really bad.

And because of the fear of the depression that I was going through I decided I needed to get my firearm out of my house.

I started to feel like I was no longer safe.

DR CURT WEST: Reba Rice Portwood's situation is not uncommon. Gun ownership among women has increased dramatically over the past two decades. In 2005, only 13% of gun owners were women. Today, one in five women reports owning a firearm.

DR CURT WEST: But while most women buy firearms for protection, having a gun in the home also increases the risk for suicide.

DR CURT WEST: Women who purchased handguns were 35 times more likely to die from suicide by firearm than those who did not have a gun in the home.

DR CURT WEST: So what's the best way to stress that safe firearm storage can help the women we know avoid a potentially dangerous situation? This is a tough conversation, but having it could save a life.

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 Reba Rice-Portwood about her experiences with firearms and safe storage. We'll also talk to Dr. Lindsey Monteith, a clinical research psychologist who studies suicide risk and prevention.

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, we'll discuss how to have conversations with the women in our lives who may have a firearm at home. We'll talk about storing it safely before they're in a time of 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: Reba, your story highlights one of our key points in this podcast - having a plan for alternate storage when things aren't going so well. It sounds like maybe you didn't have a plan in place at the time, so what did you do? Who did you talk to?

REBA RICE PORTWOOD: The conversation started with my friend. I was honest with her. I told her what was going on. Everybody everyone knew what my situation was? So I had no need to make up a story when talking to her. And so I, I honestly told her I'm frightened with having this firearm in my home. I'm not for sure what I would do to my own self.

Sometimes it will get so dark in my thoughts that I was afraid of what I may have done to myself.

DR CURT WEST: So, you decide that you want to have alternate storage. You want to transfer your gun. What was that process like??

REBA RICE-PORTWOOD: Now, actually, it that process wasn't too difficult. The young lady that I relinquished it to, she had the background of being in the service and so and she has a lot of firearms at home. She doesn't have any children. She knew the process. And so we went, to the gun shop and we had to sign papers. He kept the gun there for like three days, and they did a thorough background check on her. And once her background check came back, she was able to go back up to the shop and get the firearm.

DR CURT WEST: Reba's story takes us to the intersection of women, gun ownership, and suicide risk as more women, black women in particular, become first-time gun owners.

DR CURT WEST: Dr. Lindsey Monteith is a research psychologist and suicide risk and prevention researcher. She is working to understand risk factors for suicide among women Veterans, and strategies for mitigating suicide risk.

Dr. Monteith, what do we know about patterns of gun ownership and safety practices among women?

DR LINDSEY MONTEITH: We know that that rates of firearm ownership among women have increased substantially, whereas they have not increased among men.

I'm not sure if we definitively know why that is, but I think we have seen that some of the increase occurred during the COVID -19 pandemic. And that women's sense of safety seems to have been impacted during some of the national events that were occurring during that time.

We also know that with increased rates of firearm ownership comes an increase in the risk of suicide by firearm.

So the rates of suicide among women have also increased disproportionately.

DR CURT WEST: Now do women tend to purchase firearms for different reasons than

men do?

DR LINDSEY MONTEITH: For women, it's still about protection, similar to what we see among men. However, for women, the reasons for having a gun for protection appear to differ. In particular for women, when we've done interviews or conducted surveys, we hear a lot about wanting a gun for protection in order to feel safe against interpersonal violence. Even when conducting interviews that weren't focused on trauma, inevitably trauma tends to come up.

For many women, they've experienced sexual trauma or sexual harassment. Some have also experienced intimate partner violence. And these are often drivers of either wanting to own a firearm or have a firearm readily accessible.

DR CURT WEST: Ok. So if we understand that a significant number of women own firearms for protection, does that have an impact on their storage practices?

DR LINDSEY MONTEITH: I think for many women, including women veterans who have firearms for self-protection, that does impact their storage practices. I've interviewed many women veterans who have talked about having firearms that they kept very readily accessible, such as on a nightstand or underneath their bed, in order to feel safe due to prior experiences and not wanting to experience interpersonal violence such as sexual assault again.

DR CURT WEST: OK so women are storing these guns readily accessible in order to feel safe. But we know that storing a gun unlocked like that actually increases the risk of suicide.

What can we say to a woman firearm owner to influence them to store their guns more safely?

DR LINDSEY MONTEITH: I think what to say is such an important question. I think a really important first step is understanding what is her reason for storing her firearm or firearms in specific ways? And then taking a trauma-informed approach.

And what I mean by that is really trying to understand what the impact of trauma may be on someone's behaviors and their willingness to think about changing their behaviors.

Validating a sense of vulnerability is important. For many people who have experienced trauma, especially when it comes to interpersonal violence or sexual violence specifically, often people have not been believed in some of those

experiences or have had some of their experiences questioned. So I think knowing that they are believed within what they've experienced is key to opening up those conversations.

DR CURT WEST: I'm so glad that you brought up this idea of trauma-informed conversation and being ready to validate a sense of vulnerability. What else? Is there a trauma-informed approach to promoting safer storage?

DR LINDSEY MONTEITH: I think one really important piece is exploring what are other ways that she can increase her sense of safety and decrease that sense of vulnerability? Are there ways other than keeping a firearm loaded or readily accessible that can sort of serve that function instead.

And sharing different options so that they can choose themselves the option that fits both for them and with their values and based on their personal circumstances. That might involve storing their firearms differently, taking them outside of the home, removing a firearm from the home, such as in Reba's situation.

DR CURT WEST: Something that we should keep in mind is that many women are mothers and may have children in the home, does that potentially impact this conversation? I'm thinking something like "Have you thought about the risk of your child getting access to this loaded gun, has that occurred to you? Is that concerning to you?" Is that an approach that you think women are receptive to?

DR LINDSEY MONTEITH: I think that that approach can be even more salient for women. One thing that's been found in research with women around firearms is that the presence of children in the home can be even more of a sort of motivating factor for storing firearms more securely or for not having firearms in the home.

On the other hand, it appears that having children in the home seems to be a reason for wanting to have firearms for protection of their children especially for single moms for example.

DR CURT WEST: That was something that Reba mentioned as well. As a single mother, she felt an extra layer of protection to keep her son safe, which is why she bought a gun.

So I imagine that in any discussion of safe storage, context is very important.

And by that I mean understanding the living environment, the neighborhood environment, the relative sense of safety where the woman lives. Is it a very isolated

environment where she fears that there might not be a police response? Is it a very otherwise threatening environment where there's violence not far from home versus, you know, is it a quiet tree-lined street where you never feel threatened and there's not somebody targeting her but she feels that way because of what she's been through?

Who do you think would be the best person to help think through a potential disconnect between a woman's feelings of trauma and the reality of her current situation?

DR LINDSEY MONTEITH: I think a friend can help bridge that gap. A friend might be able to say, hey, I know you see this this way, but I can see it in these other ways too. For you, you feel this strong sense of vulnerability and you know, are really kind of focused on these really difficult things that you've experienced. But for me, I'm also thinking about your kids and how young they are and how they might be able to really easily access those firearms and how something might happen very quickly on accident.

A friend also might be able to mention some other ideas for decreasing that sense of vulnerability and feeling safer, such as getting a security system or other sort of means, even if they're temporary.

DR CURT WEST: It sounds like the key is to empower her to make her own choices rather than to prescribe a course of action.

DR LINDSEY MONTEITH: Not telling someone what to do, but rather suggesting options is really trauma-informed because it's coming from a place of recognizing that often when trauma occurs, it sort of takes away someone's sense of control.

For many survivors of interpersonal violence, having a firearm is a way of trying to take back that sense of control. On the other hand, offering someone options so they can choose for themselves how to address that sense of vulnerability and to feel safe again is a way of empowering them to make those decisions and regaining a sense of control.

DR CURT WEST: I'm not sure if this fits under trauma informed, but what about emphasizing connection and how you want to do this with them and that you want their life or their situation to be better or safer? How important is that?

DR LINDSEY MONTEITH: I think that sense of connection is really key. I think it's foundational.

I think a cornerstone of these conversations has to be women feeling genuinely cared about and knowing that the person who's having these conversations with them has good intent and has their best interest in mind as a starting place for having these conversations.

In our interviews with women veterans, one thing that we've heard time and time again when we ask about firearm lethal means safety or suicide prevention is just how much it matters that there's trust as part of those conversations and with a provider or someone else that that person cares about them genuinely and that they're not going through sort of a checklist approach or just saying things because they sort of have to but really because they think that it matters for that person, for the woman herself and it's from a place of caring.

DR CURT WEST: Something that's become clear to me in this podcast is that these are conversations you have with people that matter to you. It's not a casual or out of the blue. And what I hear you saying about the conversation with women is that trust is so important. The message needs to be, "I care about you, and this is not about an agenda to get you to do something."

DR LINDSEY MONTEITH: I think conveying that is important and then that can be done explicitly or implicitly, letting the person know, I care about you regardless of how you respond to this conversation.

Change often does take time. And for the person on the other end of that conversation being okay with that, even if it's not what they were hoping for.

Acknowledging that and being okay with that is important. Otherwise it might feel like they're trying to control the person or it just might, I don't know, it might not go as well.

DR CURT WEST: So it's about approaching the conversation about safe storage from a place of concern rather than judgment and giving the person lots of space to make her own decisions rather than trying to control the outcome.

DR LINDSEY MONTEITH: We might not know everything about what someone's experienced. We might not ever know. And we don't necessarily even have to know that to be able to have these conversations from a place of caring and to talk to them about different options that could save their life, that could save someone's life at the end of the day.

DR WEST: Reba Rice Portwood decided to make suicide prevention and firearm safety her life's work.

She currently works as a program coordinator for Safer Homes Collaborative in St Louis.

REBA RICE PORTWOOD: The part of the program that I'm in is about firearms safety, firearms suicide prevention. And the main area that I'm focusing on is the faith based African American. Our goal is to be able to go to different churches or whoever has what certain area and talk to them about firearm safety.

So it's not it's not our plan to say, hey, you shouldn't have firearms in your home. We don't get to make that decision. Everybody has the right to do however they feel. But our main goal is to get them to see that sometimes you may have someone in the home who's suicidal. You may not know that they're suicidal and that firearm is there. And we're saying, if you can keep that firearm locked up, you know, in a safe box, the access won't be as easy. And it will actually slow down the chance of someone dying by suicide with a firearm.

We've even shared things as far as if you put it in a lock box, how about putting a picture inside of that lock box? If you're in that mood, maybe feeling depressed or something, you can put a picture on the top of it. You can put a scripture on the inside it if you believe in that.

So we come up with all different ways, creative ways that are actually evidence based to know that they work when you secure your firearms. Because of course, we have questions. Well, if somebody breaks in my house, I got to go through all of this to get to my firearm. And we know that we will panic at that time if someone should come into the house. But I share with them if at all possible try to take that deep breath. Get that key. Keep it somewhere taped up on the desk or something underneath where no one knows. Get that key. Unlock your box. And take care of your home.

DR WEST: One thing we understand between the relationship of woman and firearms is that many women have experienced trauma, particularly sexual violence, or intimate partner violence and that leads them to acquire guns. Has that been your experience?

REBA RICE-PORTWOOD: Yes. I don't remember talking to one mom who had who hasn't had a history of trauma, including myself.

DR WEST: Does that change the way you approach the conversation when you know the woman is a trauma survivor?

REBA RICE-PORTWOOD: Well, I will say that because I've dealt with trauma myself, it's easier for me to have those conversations with the women because I don't mind sharing my trauma with them. And once I share and once I'm transparent, it gives. It gives them a safe place to open up and start sharing with me.

DR WEST: Do you feel that your experience helps you relate better to the single mothers you meet through the program?

REBA RICE PORTWOOD: There are a lot of single mothers who have firearms in their home for protection, and so we'll talk about that and I'll tell them, I understand you want to have protection in the home? But I also know that if you're raising young kids and the children are being bullied so bad these days, the girls are being bullied. Oh, it's so horrible.

I had another friend who 14-year-old died by suicide. Young 14-year-old little girl because she was being bullied. And so I'm having those conversations with those moms telling them, I get it. I'm not asking you to get rid of your gun, your firearm. I just want it to be safe.

DR WEST: What else have you learned about these women?

REBA RICE PORTWOOD: They ask a lot of questions. The men don't ask a lot of questions, but the moms, the women, they ask a lot of questions like, what can I do? How should I do it? Where can I go and get assistance as far as, obtaining locks and all those things for their firearms. They are really interested when you can have that conversation with them and how to have teach them how to have a safe conversation and not be afraid to ask the hard questions. And I'll even have them to practice on those questions. And it's good.

If I could get suicide down to zero suicide and it was possible to do that, then I would spend the rest of my days making sure it got done.

DR WEST: Today's conversation was about women, guns, and safety. These are important conversations, and maybe overlooked. The number of women owning guns continues to increase. We should be doing what we can to be sure the women in our lives know that we care about them and we want them to be safe, and part of safety means storing firearms securely. That can be tough, but if we stick to foundations of connection and caring, and acknowledge the need to feel safe, this conversation might make a difference. Because at the end of the day, this is about creating safer

environments, where there is time and space between an impulsive thought and a fatal act. It's not about being for or against guns, it's about saving lives.

DR WEST: Thank you to Dr Lindsey Monteith and Reba Rice Portwood for participating in today's discussion.

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