

## Rise of the Preppers: America's New Survivalists

By **Jessica Bennett**



Lisa Bedford is what you'd imagine of a stereotypical soccer mom. She drives a white Tahoe SUV. An American flag flies outside her suburban Phoenix home. She sells Pampered Chef kitchen tools and likes to bake. Bedford and her husband have two young children, four dogs, and go to church on Sunday.

But about a year ago, Bedford's homemaking skills went into overdrive. She began stockpiling canned food, and converted a spare bedroom into a giant storage facility. The trunk of each of her family's cars got its own 72-hour emergency kit—giant Tupperware containers full of iodine, beef jerky, emergency blankets, and even a blood-clotting agent designed for the battle-wounded. Bedford started thinking about an escape plan in case her family needed to leave in a hurry, and she and her husband set aside packed suitcases and cash. Then, for the first time in her life, Bedford went to a gun range and shot a .22 handgun. Now she regularly takes her two young children, 7 and 10, to target practice. "Over the last two years, I started feeling more and more unsettled about everything I was seeing, and I started thinking, 'What if we were in the same boat?'" says Bedford, 49.

In the past, survivalists and conspiracy theorists might go out into the woods, live out of a bunker, waiting (or sometimes hoping) for the apocalypse to hit. It was men, mostly; many of them antigovernment, often portrayed by the media as radicals of the likes of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh. In the late 1990s, Y2K fears brought survivalism to the mainstream, only to usher it back out again when disaster didn't strike. (Suddenly, unused survival gear began showing up in classifieds and on eBay.) A decade later, "preppers" are what you might call survivalism's Third Wave: regular people with jobs and homes whose are increasingly fearful about the future—their paranoia compounded by 24-hour cable news. "Between the media and the Internet, many people have built up a sense that there's this calamity out there that needs to be avoided," says Art Markman, a cognitive psychologist at the University of Texas who studies the way people think. And while they may not envision themselves as Kevin Costner in *Waterworld*—in fact, many preppers go out of their way to avoid the stereotypes that come along with the "survivalist" label—they've made a clear-eyed calculation about the risks at hand and aren't waiting around for anybody else to fix them. "I consider it more of a reaction than a movement," says Tom Martin, a 32-year-old Idaho truck driver who is the founder of the *American Preppers Network*, which receives some 5,000 visitors to its Web site each day. "There are so many variables and potential disasters out there, being a prepper is just a reaction to that potential."

That reaction, of course, means different things to different people. Some prep for economic disaster, while others prep to escape genetically modified foods. An organic farmer could be considered a prepper; so might an urban gardener. Some preppers fear putting their names out in public—they don't want every desperate soul knocking down their door in the event of a disaster—while others see it as a network they can rely upon were something horrible to happen. Some preppers fear the complete breakdown of society, while others simply want to stock up on extra granola bars and lighter fluid in case of a blackout or a storm. Hard-core survivalists might think of preppers as soft; "Eventually, the Chef Boyardee is going to run out," jokes Cody Lundin, the founder of the *Aboriginal Living Skills School*, a survival camp based out of his home in Prescott, AZ. But prepping, says Martin, is just a new word for a very old way of life. "You don't have to have a survival retreat loaded with guns secluded in the wilderness to be a prepper," adds David Hill Sr., 54, a former jet mechanic who runs the Web site [WhatisaPrepper](#) from his home in rural West Virginia. "There are many people who live in

urban and suburban areas who don't own guns who also identify themselves as preppers."

Researchers say that interest in survivalism can often be a barometer of social anxiety; and in many cases, says sociologist Richard Mitchell, it can be a response to modern stress. If that's true, it's no surprise we're seeing an uptick in it now: from climate change to the economy, swine flu to terrorism, the current state of the world is enough to make even the biggest cynic just a little bit worried. As U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano reminded us in a recent speech at the [American Red Cross](#), 90 percent of Americans live in an area where there is moderate or high risk of natural disaster. "I think what we're experiencing is a kind of generational panic attack," says Neil Strauss, the former New York Times writer whose latest book, [Emergency](#), is about how to survive in a disaster. "We were born in a good time. We experienced booming technology and rising stock prices. And then all of a sudden, 9/11 happened, Katrina happened, the economy plunged. And it's like the rug being pulled out from under our feet."

While there's no scientific data to track survivalism's recent growth, some preppers have speculated it's reached a level not matched in decades. Emergency-supply retailers say they're seeing business boom; the Red Cross has had a surge in volunteers over the past year (up some 160,000 over 2008), and there are networks of preppers—from [Prepper.org](#) to the [Suburban Prepper](#), to Bedford's own blog, "[The Survival Mom](#)"—sprouting up all over the Web. FEMA's new head under Obama, Craig Fugate, has encouraged Americans to get in touch with their inner survivalist. "I encourage all Americans to take some simple steps to make their families more prepared, such as developing a family communications plan," he tells NEWSWEEK. His organization recently launched a "[Resolve to be Ready](#)" campaign suggesting that Americans to make preparedness part of their New Year's resolutions. "I think what people have come to realize is that [organizations like ours] can't always be everywhere we need to be as quickly as we need to be," says Jonathan Aiken, a spokesman for the American Red Cross. "So I think the messaging has changed, from FEMA on down, that in the event of an emergency, people need to be prepared to take care of themselves for a couple of days until the rest of us can come out and get to you."

Government has always played an active role in emergency preparedness. Nuclear-raid drills were part of everyday life for school children in the 1950s and '60s, and building bomb shelters was encouraged because of the nuclear threat. In 1999, the government set up a \$50 million crisis center to deal with the computer threats posed by Y2K, and after 9/11, residents were pushed to stock up on plastic and duct tape to seal their homes in the event of a biological attack. But in 2010, as we enter the new year under an elevated threat level, the problems at hand can seem insurmountable and unknown, to the point that even Barton M. Biggs, the former chief global strategist at Morgan Stanley, warns in his 2008 book that we must "assume the possibility of a breakdown of the civilized infrastructure." Where that leaves preppers is struggling to fill the void. "We want people to understand that preparedness is an individual's job, too," says Joseph Bruno, New York City's commissioner of emergency management, where polling has shown that more than 50 percent of residents are thinking about preparedness—up from just 18 percent in 2004. "I'm a newsaholic, and that probably feeds some of this," says Bedford. "But I like to think that if we're prepared, it's one less family the government has to worry about."

In the end, what it all boils down to, at least for the preppers, is self-reliance—a concept as old as the human race itself. As survival blogger John Solomon pointed out in a recent column, during the Victory Gardens of WWII, Americans managed to grow 40 percent of all the vegetables they needed to survive. "My mother's parents had a 10-acre garden, and my grandfather worked at the dairy farm next door," says Hill, the former jet mechanic. "They worked by raising their own food, they had their own chickens, they canned vegetables, and my grandfather fed a family of 12 like that." But in the modern world, he says, many of those skills are easily forgotten. Today, our food comes from dozens of different sources. Most of us aren't quite sure how electricity gets from the wires to our stoves. We use debit cards to buy a can of tuna and we wouldn't have the slightest idea how to filter contaminated water. We are residents of the new millennium; we simply haven't needed to prepare.

So for the moment, people like Bedford are reteaching themselves lost skills—and in some cases, learning new ones. Bedford has read up on harvesting an urban garden, and is learning to use a solar oven to bake bread. She is ready with a pointed shot in the event she ever needs to hunt for her own food. And until then, she's got 61 cans of chili, 20 cans of Spam, 24 jars of peanut butter, and much more stocked in her pantry; she estimates she's spent about \$4,000 on food supplies, an amount that should keep her family going for at least three months. Now, even if something simple goes wrong, like a paycheck doesn't go through, "we don't need to worry," she says.

Bedford knows it all might sound a little nuts—and she's careful about how much she reveals, and to whom. But she believes that in times of uncertainty, what she's doing is simply common sense. As for the rest of us, isn't it a little bit crazy not to prepare?

With that last question in mind, ask yourself this simple question as well: ***If power is out and phones (including your cell phones) are down, how will you be able to contact your family?***

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