

American 'prepping' culture influenced by media and government fears

May 23 2018, by Dan Worth

New research from SSPSSR finds most people hoarding items such as food and water do so 'just in case', rather than because of deeply-held, irrational beliefs that society is on the verge of an imminent collapse.

The culture of preparing for disasters in the USA is usually portrayed as a delusional response to the belief in the imminent long-term collapse of society due to irrational fears of foreign invasions, the conspiratorial plans of New World Orders or a religious apocalypse.

However, new research at the University of Kent has found most 'preppers' are influenced in their actions by concerns related to a wider range of risks that are directed by the mass media and the government. Furthermore, most preppers only believe they would have to self-sufficiently survive a disaster for the short to medium-term and that society would soon recover from any incident that should occur.

Dr. Michael Mills, from the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, interviewed a number of American preppers in 18 states to examine their motivations for stock-piling items such as food, water and medicine, an activity which has grown notably over the last decade among US citizens.

He found those who engage in prepping are often concerned by an array of disaster risks—such as economic collapse, cyber-attacks, terrorism, flu pandemics and natural disasters—and that while they do not believe any such event or societal collapse to be imminent, they see sense in

preparing 'just in case'.

Dr. Mills explains that this response can be seen as, in part, an outcome of the growing culture of fear that exists in the US, specifically since 9/11 and the rhetoric of successive governments, such as the War on Terror or the infamous 'unknown unknowns' of former Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Furthermore, official recommendations from the US government, typically via the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), amplify these concerns by suggesting, for example, that citizens have enough water stored in their house to last two weeks.

Many preppers said it is both because of these sorts of recommendations from the government, and doubts the government would be of help in the initial stages of a disaster—based on the failings during events like Hurricane Katrina in 2005—that such advice is heeded.

Linked to this rise in [government](#) advice about preparing for [disasters](#) is a rise in mass media coverage of threats and their potential impact. Such coverage of these events often over-states the threat they pose, or heavily focuses on the experiences of a tiny minority of individuals, to suggest a bigger risk than really exists.

For example, in 2014 US media coverage was dominated by concerns of a mass Ebola outbreak, despite the fact just four people were infected.

Nonetheless, preppers are often keen consumers of [mass media](#) news and most admitted in their interviews that the coverage they see underlines the sense in prepping and the reality that, while they do not believe an 'apocalyptic' event is imminent, the likelihood of a disaster of some sort occurring cannot be ruled out and so preparing is an important step to take.

Overall, the research demonstrates that the motivations for prepping are more nuanced than first thought and the impact that communication of risk and disaster-related topics can have on individual behaviours.

The paper, entitled Preparing for the unknown... unknowns: 'doomsday' prepping and disaster risk anxiety in the United States, has been published in the *Journal of Risk Research*.

More information: Michael F. Mills. Preparing for the unknown... unknowns: 'doomsday' prepping and disaster risk anxiety in the United States, *Journal of Risk Research* (2018). [DOI: 10.1080/13669877.2018.1466825](https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2018.1466825)

Provided by University of Kent

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