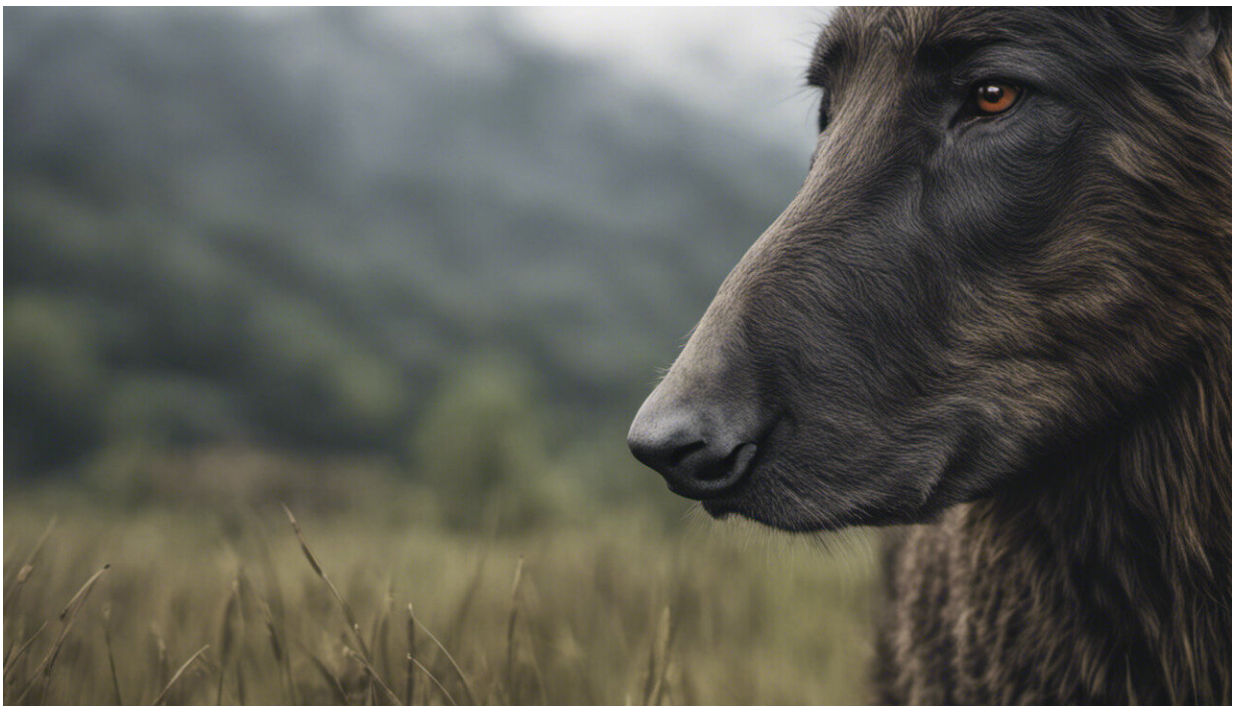


# We spoke to survivalists prepping for disaster: here's what we learned about the end of the world

June 24 2019, by Gary Sinclair, Norah Campbell And Sarah Browne

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

"We are all fucked." A crude though oft-uttered sigh which tries to encapsulate an intense, but vague anxiety we experience on many fronts. What's causing it? The possibility of climate-induced [population extinction](#), the development of so-called NBIC (nano-bio-info-cogno-)

technologies, global financial collapse and the exponential development of potentially malevolent machine intelligence, to name but a few. The Doomsday Clock, a symbolic gauge of our risk of [obliterating humanity](#), has never been closer to "midnight."

Of course, the end of humanity is as old as humanity itself—astrologists and religious orders have predicted that the world will end for millenia. But the types of risks we're concerned by today really are quite distinctive to our era: they are irreversible, they have planetary (and in some cases extra-planetary) reach, and they have new technological textures. These risks have been described as "existential" because they threaten to cause, as the philosopher Nick Bostrom [has written](#): "The extinction of Earth-originating [intelligent life](#) or to otherwise permanently and drastically destroy its potential for future desirable development."

As a result, the phenomenon of "prepping"—a predominantly American phenomenon of storing food, water and weapons, and developing self-sufficiency skills for independently surviving disasters—is on the rise. This can be seen in the increasing amount of literature, podcasts, movies and TV shows on the subject, fictional and "real," along with the inevitable growth in related [consumer](#) markets (such as camping equipment and bushcraft courses) that speak to the anxiety of existential risk. Growing prominence in Europe brought us to research this area.

## **Beyond tin foil hats**

Media accounts tend to focus on the peculiarities of prepping through extreme examples: reports of the [Silicon Valley elite](#) buying up bolt holes in remote New Zealand or the tin-foil hat wearing, forest-inhabiting eccentric. But prepping is not a marginal subculture, but a precautionary response people have to permanent crisis, as [our research](#) reveals. By analysing and engaging with online forums and speaking at

length with a series of self-identified preppers, it became clear that most preppers aren't so out of the ordinary.

Listening to preppers, you can begin to understand their reasoning. They often talk about their prepper lives as originating from some trigger or turning point—such as an insider seeing financial collapse firsthand and the house of cards it reveals, or the difficulties that come with illness or unemployment. After these realisations, our interviewees explained that they transition from being a woefully under-prepared to a prepared individual.

Our research concentrated on European preppers, who are somewhat differentiated from the American stereotype. We found that the European prepper views the culture of their American counterparts as political, religious, weaponised and misogynistic. They feel that the media attention this receives delegitimises the emphasis on rationality and practicality that is embedded into their practices.

Instead, common sense is the most valued currency in European prepper culture. They are profoundly distrustful of the ability of institutions to face crises. And in comparison to some popular accounts, we found that preppers are often more concerned with mundane failures of the system (electricity cuts or pension losses) than the more spectacular apocalyptic aesthetics associated with prepping culture (such as environmental collapse or nuclear fallout).

They know they are ridiculed and stigmatised—a consequence of the American stereotype. Their online forums are filled with warnings: if you are a journalist, keep out. They are concerned with "op-sec" (operational security): concerns about personal privacy and the strategic advantage of withholding information about the location of resources in the eventuality that any "prep" may be put into practice. Again, such practices are framed within the narrative of common sense. Common

sense is claimed in order to reject its opposite: paranoia.

## **Bin bags and radios**

Preppers consider people who don't prepare—the rest of society—as shockingly ignorant of the world around them. It is "we" who are abnormal. The dependent civilian is variously viewed as oblivious, dilettantish, complacent and trusting, while the prepper is watchful. Preparation is seen as a type of foresight that is missing in ordinary consumers.

A prepper looks at the world differently: far from a smart, interconnected and highly functioning infrastructure subject to the rule of law, the city is a jungle where the lone prepper negotiates manifold dangers. This is why they carry "preps" with them at all times—from fire-making equipment to bin bags to radios—in their pantries, in their cars, on their person. One prepper told us: "I always carry two or three bin bags so I can make shelter no matter where I go. One of the bin bags can be used to make a roof and I could fill the others with leaves to create comfort and heat."



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Preppers pour scorn on consumer-centric technological interfaces such as social media and invest their time in pre-digital technologies like primitive fire and farming. Again, common sense is the most valued currency.

So what will happen to the rest of us? The prepper has trained for a world without a market system and considered what will happen when the dependent civilian comes calling. In common scenarios (such as electricity cuts, council water repairs) preppers tend to depict themselves as generous, helping out dependant neighbours despite the mocking it still often brings.

But in the ashes of a more serious consumer collapse, our conversations revealed an implicit subtext that when the shit does hit the fan, it will be

everyone for themselves. And ultimately, it will be your neighbour that presents the biggest threat. Again, this is the common sense reality for preppers living in a world where the majority of people are seen as under-prepared, for whatever disaster we may befall.

## Prepper lessons

When we think about escaping the constraints of the capitalistic dominant economy we are often met with utopian connotations of a "sustainable society" that places emphasis on community, cooperation, sharing and caring. The preppers offer a different take on what a "sustainable" world looks like, one grounded in ideologies of protectionism and self-preservation.

This echoes the 17th-century philosopher [Thomas Hobbes's](#) famous suggestion that in the absence of institutions humans would become trapped in a cycle of violence—"a warre of all against all." In other words, community is dangerous and consumption requires bunkering down.

Such individualistic "prepper" modes of thinking are likely to germinate further within society, particularly in the face of the current climate crisis. And this must be considered when we think of the practicalities of alternative systems to the neoliberal marketplace.

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