**Preppers: A Primer for Public Safety Professionals**

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Abstract.

The term *prepper* became popular in print and electronic media following the millennium Year 2000 fears surrounding potential mass computer crashes and the subsequent terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States where increased sales of survival equipment and supplies soared, as well as the proliferation of remote rural retreats by individuals and groups preparing for social, economic, political, disease, and natural disaster crises. This article reviews recent findings from the social and behavioral sciences, and popular media sources that provide evidence on *prepper* attitudes, behaviors, and influences on decision-making to prepare for extreme events. The research in this article is intended to provide a primer on *preppers* for public safety professionals.

**Definitions and Descriptions**

Lena Rahm, 2013, a Swedish sociological researcher describes preppers as survivalists, as members of society who are constantly preparing for the impending societal collapse due to terrorism, pandemics, natural disasters, and a shortage of resources, economic downfall, or what they anticipate as unexplained apocalyptic events. As a result, they constantly stock up on food, weapons, and supplies and even create personal safe houses or shelters .They train with firearms and acquire medical knowledge to be prepared for a variety of crises. A more concise definition (Baker 2102) suggests that “Preppers and survivalists are commonly described as people who believe in abrupt, and near in-time disasters and who are actively and practically preparing to survive …imminent collapse.” While formal academic research on preppers remains very limited, the term “survivalist” reveals more encouraging results. Reports on survivalists in recent times emerged in the news related to radical survivalists’ encounters with law enforcement agencies such as Ruby Ridge (1992); the Branch Davidian Complex (1993), and the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building (1995). These survivalist groups were hostile to interference from or contact from governmental agencies. The rationale for such US based groups to isolate and enclave vary from white supremacism to apocalyptic millennialism.

Chad Huddleston , 2013, a cultural anthropologist, investigating the prepper phenomenon noted that some preppers view popular television programs such as ‘Doomsday Preppers’ but reports that they consider the popular series only as entertainment. However, they may continue to collect significant stores of food, water, and ammunition. Of particular interest to public safety and health professionals who may encounter preppers in crisis situations, Huddleston indicates that they do not want to be identified as ‘doomsday preppers’ as much as ‘survivalists.’ Where Huddleston emphasizes that preppers seek to avoid being branded as preparing for the end of the world, Peter Behrens, a Penn State University psychology professor whose research focuses on the history of psychology and abnormal psychology, views preppers as a cult (Behrens 2013), reporting that individuals who store three days of emergency survival supplies are paranoid; he assigns them to three categories: pastime preppers; preppers who are preoccupied, and pathological peppers. Behrens suggests that preppers who devote more than 10 percent of their time on firearms training, and garnering supplies and resources, could be considered pathological.

A popular speaker and author in preparedness, Rick Austin, 2013, counters branding of preppers as a cult. Austin queries, “Do people who purchase insurance have a ‘pathological preoccupation’ with scenarios which will never occur? …The vast majority of so called ‘preppers’ are just normal people who are knowledgeable enough to understand that they need to be responsible for themselves…the government can’t ‘save’ everyone in times of disaster.” Austin further countered the prepper cult diagnosis responded to Dr. Behrens diagnosis of preppers as cultists by pointing out that thousands of families were in need of recovery assistance following the devastation of Hurricane Sandy. Though not categorizing preppers as cultists, there is concern that some preppers may exhibit what has been identified as “Doomsday Phobia.” James Mandeville, 2012, a survival expert, states “There is a danger that the strongly-held belief or delusion (that Doomsday is imminent) may sufficiently influence people so that they subconsciously desire it to happen, which in turn worsens the phobia.” Behavioral researchers continue to attempt to delineate cultist or phobic patterns of prepper behaviors, but identifying specific motivations for prepping may prove difficult. “It’s unlikely that any two preppers would share the same training, partly because preppers come from vastly different backgrounds, and partly because each one is prepping for something slightly different …One will tell you about invasion and nuclear attack, and another will talk about economic collapse. Some preppers expect imminent and unprecedented disaster.” (Gross 2012).

**Historical Precedents for Prepping**

The Office of Civilian Defense was created by the federal government in 1941 as a result of the US entry into World War II to prepare the public attacks on the homeland (Issacs, 2012) Federal concerns about public preparedness resurged during the 1950’s due to the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The potential for widespread destruction and radioactive fallout gave rise to Civil Defense (now the Federal Emergency Management Agency) to inform and educate the population to take self-initiated measures in the event of nuclear attacks that could leave individuals and communities without access to safe food or drinking water supplies for extended periods of time. It may be argued that the concept and practice of prepping began in the US during the Cold War era. A printed guide from that era, *Civil Defense: Are You Ready? An In-Depth Guide to Citizen Preparedness* warns the public to “learn how to protect themselves and their families against all types of hazards.” The guides contains “information on how to assemble a disaster supplies kit that contains the food, water, and other supplies… to survive following a disaster in the event they must rely on their own resources.

The shift in perception from the World War II era, in which federal and state governments, assumed responsibility for protection of the public, to height of the Cold War in the 1960’s may have been a predictor of future prepping behaviors. Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense in 1961, commented in a nationally televised broadcast that “certainly the federal, the state, and local governments all have parts to play, but most importantly, it’s the responsibility of each individual to prepare himself and his family for that (thermonuclear) strike (Rose, 2004). The thermonuclear strike that potential McNamara clearly identified bears resemblance to a Doomsday event. Recent research on extreme events, described as “X” events indicate public concerns about possible catastrophic problems for which governments and current engineering and scientific communities are unable to respond. “What if the historical record is too short, too thinly populated, or simply does not contain something even remotely similar to our target event (sic catastrophe)…This is the domain where “rare,” “improbable,” and “unlikely” morphs into “surprising. “And the more surprising, the greater the extremity-and potential; “X”-ness-of what actually takes place” (Casti, 2012).

**Public Safety and Health “X” Events?**

“X” events that consume the interest of preppers are also of research interest to governments.

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Plans developed over the last fifty years by the U.S. Department of Defense program, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). DARPA created in 1958, had the mission of preventing surprise strategic attacks from negatively impacting national security. DARPA was conceived with the recognition that large scale nuclear and other forms of technologically delivered attacks could threaten the capability of federal agencies to effectively respond to basic health and safety needs of the population, much less mount an effective retaliatory response <http://www.darpa.mil/>. Moreover, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Public Health reported in an online national blog as recently as 2013 that “…gaps do exist in the government’s ability to respond to mega-disasters and that essentially, everyone (extremist or not) becomes a first responder who must be ready to take on that role.” Beyond governmental and health agency interest, a National Geographic Society television channel devoted fifteen episodes to the prepper entitled Doomsday Preppers. The popularity of broadcasts and extensive follow-up of public responses on National Geographic’s web-based blog site

indicated an increasing level of interest in prepping and survival strategies particularly among younger audiences (http://tvblogs.nationalgeographic.com/blog/doomsday-preppers/).

**Preliminary Conclusions**

Preppers do not lead isolated lives and they are not hermits in the traditional sense. The extensive use of internet resources, including prepper blogs, marketing sites that directly address prepper supplies, and the numerous prepper educational and informational websites indicate a computer literate, internet savvy culture that has emerged.

Internet discussions and arguments between preppers indicate that preppers tend to be aware of distinct types or forms of prepping. The online National Geographic series shows evidence of cautious or more moderate preppers who do not want to be viewed as “Doomsday” preppers or survivalists; nor did they want to be associated with extremist political groups that have been enclaving into bunker communities.

Federal officials have increasingly communicated the need for the public to be prepared for crisis. The post 9/11 and post Hurricanes Katrina era has reinforced that emphasis. Public health authorities have increased emphasis on the need to be prepared for dangerous infectious diseases such as H5N1 (Avian influenza) and the more recent H1N1 (Swine influenza).

Prepping also reflects a public response to increased reporting of crises and indicates public capacity to act at the cellular level of society.

Is prepping a post-apocalyptic or catastrophic law enforcement crises? As indicated by James Mandeville in 2012, “One thing must be clear by now to the unscrupulous elements of society — if you want to find food, water, fuel and weapons in a post-apocalyptic society simply find the home or shelter owned by a prepper. After a short gun battle, you can have all the supplies you need and you didn't have to invest any time, money or effort to get them. However well-armed Preppers are they will be unable to withstand a sustained and determined attack by a superior force of equally well armed and hungry people.”

Are preppers overstating catastrophic threats? “People getting ready for cataclysmic disasters by stockpiling food, water and, in many cases, guns are easy to dismiss as alarmists. But a stream of natural and human-created disasters has made so-called preppers seem less eccentric and more sensible. Even the Red Cross and government agencies recommend assembling emergency supplies and planning for disaster. Some preppers go several steps beyond — building rural retreats, for example, where they would hole up if society fell apart” (Katel, 2013).

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