

Survivalists 2.0: Regular people get ready for the worst

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By [McClatchy Newspapers](#)

FORT WORTH, Texas - Jack Spirko owns a media company, is married to a nurse and has a son in college. He has two dogs and lives in a nice house with a pool in a diversified neighborhood in suburban Arlington, Texas. Spirko, 36, considers himself an average guy with a normal life.

But for the past few years, Spirko has been stockpiling food, water, gas, guns and ammunition. He also has a load of red wine, Starbucks coffee and deodorant stashed away.

"I refer to myself as a modern survivalist, which means I don't do without," Spirko explained. "I have a nice TV; I have nice furniture. We are not living in the sticks, but I take all of these things very seriously."

Spirko, an Army veteran and self-described "stark-raving-mad Libertarian," is part of a growing movement of people who are preparing for a disaster natural, economic or man-made. Referred to as "modern survivalists" or "preppers," they are taking steps to protect and provide for their families should something bad happen.

Theirs is a different breed of survivalist, far from the militants or religious extremists who hole up in bunkers, live off the land and wait for the apocalypse.

Preppers are regular people with regular jobs who decided after Sept. 11, after Hurricane Katrina or when their 401(k)s tanked that they can't rely on someone else to help them if something goes awry.

"We are normal people just like you," Spirko said. "We just understand that, sometimes, stuff goes wrong."

Donnie, 38, a McKinney, Texas, resident who is an account executive with an international trade show organization, said Hurricane Katrina opened his eyes. He spent six weeks working as a paramedic in New Orleans.

"It was a logistical nightmare getting to the area," Donnie said. "And the longer you were there, the more you realized that, in a blink of an eye, your life can be turned upside down. I don't want to be the person in the bread line or standing in line for ice."

Donnie, like many of those interviewed for this article, agreed to talk to the Fort Worth Star-Telegram on the condition that his last name not be used.

"I usually don't advertise it," Donnie said. "There are people who cast a wary eye."

He said that after Katrina, he amassed about two weeks' worth of food. But last September, after the economy began to sour, he "kicked into a higher gear" and acquired more supplies and water-filtration systems.

"I probably have about six months' worth of food for two people," Donnie said. "I keep about 30 gallons of water on hand, and I have the means to store another 200 gallons if I have advance notice of something going bad."

Art Markman, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, said that when people start stockpiling food and water or buying weapons, they are in a motivational state called "avoidance mode."

"You turn on the news and only hear about job losses and the prospect that things are going to get worse than better," he said. "You see signals that the world is full of nasty things you need to avoid. ... You are trying to focus on safety concerns."

Markman said the trend is not surprising, given the economy.

What exactly preppers are preparing for isn't specific. It could be a layoff, tornado, global pandemic or nuclear war.

Internet sites devoted to survivalism often refer to scenarios like TEOTWAWKI, an acronym for "the end of the world as we know it."

"I am prepared for just about any disaster that disrupts everyday living," said Bob, 43, a sales manager from eastern Pennsylvania who runs www.thinkprepared.net.

"The economy is at the forefront of my concerns. The unemployment rate is soaring, and most people are not prepared to be without a paycheck for a week, much less a month or longer," Bob said.

Businesses that sell storable foods, disaster shelters and guns are thriving.

Bruce Hopkins, owner of Best Prices Storable Foods, which sells dehydrated and canned foods, said sales "exploded" last spring and remain steady. On a single day recently, Hopkins sold \$31,000 worth of storable food. Hopkins said a popular item is a one-year food supply for a family of four or family of two, priced at \$4,000 and \$2,700, respectively.

"I think to have anything less than a month's food supply is foolish," said Hopkins, whose business is in Quinlan, Texas. "I think it is time to stop watching 'American Idol' and start paying attention to what is going on in the world."

At Cheaper Than Dirt Outdoor Adventures, a gun store in north Fort Worth, business has never been better. Owner Dewayne Irwin said he sees three types of customers: "You have the everyday good ol' boy Texas gun owner. You have the folks that are coming in and saying, 'I've lost my job and my neighbor lost their job' and they really believe they might have to fight over a bucket of carrots or something. And you have the guys who are first-time gun buyers and they don't really know why. It is Main Street. It is crazy."

Spirko grew up in rural Pennsylvania, where hunting, fishing, gardening, and canning and storing food were a way of life.

"No one looked at that back then and said, 'These people were survivalists,'" Spirko said. "That is just what you did."

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