

When It Comes To End Times Survival, Viewers Can't Get Enough



Chris Dorsey, *Forbes.com*

Want to know what's on the minds of Americans and others around the world? Just study what they're watching. Netflix recently released its first ever biannual viewing report which gives insights into what people across the globe are craving on their screens.

One trend that is unmistakable is viewer obsession with apocalyptic survival. The Obama-produced *Leave the World Behind* about the aftermath of a cyber-attack on the US, scored a massive opening weekend on the mega-streamer. More than 2.6 million U.S. households viewed the doomsday film within the first three days of release alone making it a chart topper.

That film follows on the heels of the post-apocalyptic drama *The Last of Us*, which premiered in early 2023, and had 30 million total viewers over six episodes, averaging

five million per episode and an astounding 8.2 million people watched the final episode.

There are scores of other movies and series, of course, that focus on what might happen after a collapse of civilization (hint, lead might be more valuable than gold and silver in a post-doomsday economy). As fans of AMC's mega-hit *The Walking Dead* and its spin-off series know, the shows are far less about coping with zombies than they are showing audiences the tribal behavior that emerges when desperate people try and survive without societal support.

You can also bet reality networks are taking their cue from the success of these scripted programs and are now busy developing their own series to feed America's (and the world's) insatiable appetite for information and

characters in the world of prepping and survival. *Preppers*, if you didn't know, are people who plan for a wide assortment of disasters (man-made and natural), and they are part of a movement that began at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s when fear of nuclear attack was top of mind for most.



The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reports a 50 percent increase from just 2017 to 2020 in people capable of up to 31 days of self-reliance. While preppers tend to live outside big cities, the number near urban areas is far larger than previously thought and growing according to new FEMA estimates.

By total box office revenue, dystopian movies and TV series have been among the most popular in the United States for at least the last two decades. Many believe the surge in the genre's popularity is driven by the plausibility of catastrophic events fundamentally changing life on our planet. The question on the minds of most viewers drawn to these productions is simple: *Would I survive if this ever happened?*

The obsession for dystopian content helps explain the massive surge in interest in prepping across the globe. In a recent *Finder* survey, roughly one third of the US adult population now identifies as preppers—spending some \$11 billion annually to hedge against a breakdown of society. That figure is up from just six percent 15 years ago. While many might think prepping is a male behavior,



nearly one-quarter of adult American women also prep in some form.

When it comes to age groups who are bracing for doomsday or disastrous events, Gen Z (people born between 1997 and 2012) are the folks most likely to prep—fully 40 percent of them identify as such. Regionally, the west and south contain the highest percentages of preppers in America.

Preppers site many reasons for their concerns over the future: another global pandemic, coordinated terrorist attacks, natural disasters, cyber-attacks, civil unrest, electro-magnetic pulses (EMPs) and a take-down of the power grid, geo-political conflicts, supply-chain disruptions, and the like. Moreover, the US government reports more than 120 separate disasters occurred in America from 2016 to 2022, with more than 5,000 fatalities and north of \$1 trillion in damages. For many, the question isn't if catastrophe will strike, only when.

While some once considered prepping the purview of the tinfoil hat conspiracy theory crowd, it's clear now that it has gone mainstream. After the recent COVID-19 pandemic, people who once viewed their prepper neighbors suspiciously are now stockpiling their own supplies (toilet paper, anyone?) and are developing bug-out plans. For some, prepping is a form of therapy taking the edge off an anxious and uncertain world by providing a sense of control. For others, they want to be the last people standing when the fallout settles.

While prepping was once largely an American phenomenon, it has now become a global endeavor. Surveys of European preppers, for instance, shed light on the distrust they have in their governments' ability to handle crises and the need to take control of their own fates should the unthinkable happen.

“With increasing threats posed by climate breakdown, such as flooding and wildfires, as well as fears over Russia's invasion of Ukraine,” writes Tom Ambrose in England's *Observer*, “prepping has elbowed its way into mainstream society. The scenes of empty food shelves caused by panic buying early in the pandemic have exposed Britain's fragile retail supply chains, and spurred a burgeoning industry that targets people hoarding essentials for the kind of doomsday scenario that lockdowns made more imaginable.”

Is it any wonder, then, that according to the Pew Research Center, 40 percent of U.S. adults believe

humanity is living in end times. Adding to that thinking, the World Health Organization says we should be bracing for another global pandemic within the next decade—one that could conceivably be far worse than COVID-19.

Further evidence of the growth of the prepper category can be found in the increase of products targeting preppers. The global survival tools market alone is slated to soar to \$2.46 billion by 2030, growing at a compound annual rate of over 7 percent, according to Zion Market Research.

Companies of all kinds are now moving to capitalize on the burgeoning prepper market. Yeti, the famous cooler brand, has partnered with Uncharted Supply Company, releasing a \$730 survival kit that includes a Mylar tent, emergency blankets, a water filtration system, shovel, and other key items to help you see another sunrise.

A recent *Wall Street Journal* article also highlighted the transition of prepping from a fringe activity to mainstream behavior. A litany of wealthy and well-known individuals also are now joining the ranks of preppers—on a slightly higher level. Some are making massive investments in remote, off-the-grid getaways, which is making many Americans ask, *what is it they know that we don't?*

Recently, word leaked about Mark Zuckerberg's 1,400-acre secret self-sufficient compound on Kauai that reports say is likely to cost more than \$270 million. An article published in *Wired* says plans call for the compound to have a six-foot wall around it and more than a dozen buildings—including two mansions that will be connected



Zuckerberg isn't the only wealthy elite planning his escape, however. Many high-end real estate agents reported a boom in interest in private islands and ranches during the pandemic.

"I began seeing my high-net worth clients come to me looking for land with certain features," says Jon Kohler whose **Jon Kohler & Associates** is a Tallahassee, Florida-based real estate company that also trade-marked Social Storm Properties, for just such an eventuality. "They never say that they're looking for bug-out escapes in case of difficult times, but there's a lot of smart, educated and powerful people that are all of the sudden looking for land for the same reasons," says Kohler.

You might remember the hit *Doomsday Preppers* series that ran on the National Geographic channel from 2012 to 2014.

Many of the featured families mentioned fears of a global pandemic being one of the reasons for their choosing to prep. At that time, such concerns often sounded like paranoia, but after COVID-19 lockdowns and the subsequent mass exodus to rural and small-town America, perhaps the series was just a bit ahead of its time. Nevertheless, even without the recent pandemic to spur interest in the production, it rated in the top 15 percent of all reality shows. "The program has been a ratings bonanza, with a 60-percent male audience," proclaimed the *New York Times*.

For now, we can expect reality networks to take another swing at the prepper space with the revelation of this massive new (and rapidly growing) audience. Question is, will they do it before it's too late?



by an underground tunnel. One could guess that Zuckerberg doesn't just plan to survive when sh-t hits the fan, he's banking on thriving and spending big to do so while his wealth still has value. Reportedly, the compound comes with a full-size gym, pools, sauna, hot tub, cold plunge, and a tennis court.