



US news

'Our top search term is nuclear': US bunker sales soar as anxiety over Russia rises

Amid Russia's war on Ukraine and a global pandemic, pressure is once again building to think about how people can protect themselves during a crisis

Bradley Garrett

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Gary Lynch is the CEO of Rising S Company in [Texas](#). When I first visited his warehouse in 2018, I watched his crew assemble, deliver, and bury a handful of bunkers in people's backyards every month. The bunkers are thick plate steel boxes that are welded together like a giant Lego set - the size of the bunker limited only by a client's resources.

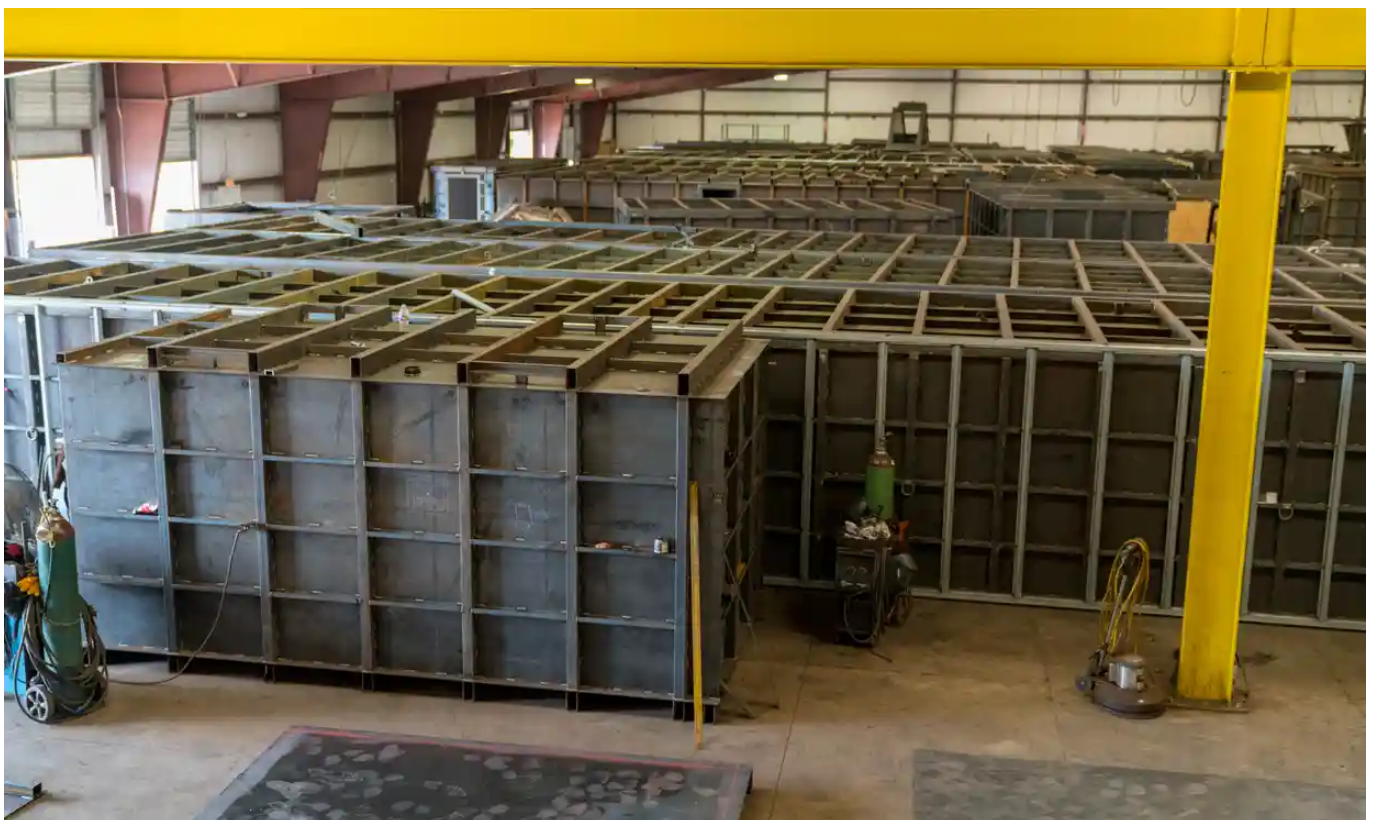
Sales, he says, have spiked 1,000% since that time as anxieties around the pandemic, civil unrest, climate change and war have driven more buyers to his company.

“In the past month, I would have normally fielded less than 100 inquiries - I’ve fielded over 3,000,” Lynch tells me over the phone. He sold five bunkers on a single day in February, at prices ranging from \$70,000 to \$240,000.

As we move into the second month of a war that has already killed more than 10,000 people, there is no doubt bunkered space has renewed appeal. Ukrainian citizens have been huddling together, sleeping, cooking food, and even giving birth deep underground, surviving in solidarity, and then emerging to fight or flee.

Ukraine has at least 5,000 publicly accessible bomb shelters, many of which have been upgraded since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. In stark contrast, the US has few public shelters. This disparity can be traced back to the cold war, when the Soviet Union invested heavily in public defence infrastructure and the United States placed the burden of nuclear protection on private citizens.

Lynch says some customers are panic-purchasing. “There are definitely a few ‘I told you we needed one of these’ conversations going on in households around the world right now,” he says. “But we have also previously shipped shelters into Ukraine and I’m certain they are currently being used.”



📷 A bunker in California. Photograph: Bradley L Garrett

With Nato implementing upgrades to counter potential nuclear, biological, and chemical attacks from Russia, and the recent test of a North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile that can strike targets across the Pacific Ocean, pressure is once again building to think about how people can protect themselves and their families during a crisis.

While writing my book *Bunker: What it Takes to Survive the Apocalypse*, I travelled to the UK, Germany, Australia, Thailand, Ukraine and across the United States to tell a story about people's preparations for calamity, ranging from fortified and hardened citadels to sprawling rural farms. Most of the people I spoke to who were buying space in bunkers were doing so as a short-term stopgap against existential threats of precisely the sort we're now facing.

Business has never been so good. My inbox has been flooded in recent weeks by emails from preppers sensing an opportunity. One from the California-based Vivos Group, cautioned "...with all hell now breaking loose in Ukraine, and the beginning of what may be WW3, you are probably wishing you had secured a Vivos bunker".

Minus Energie, an Italian company that has installed 50 bomb shelters in the past 20 years, told me they've experienced a surge of interest - they received more than 500 inquiries after the Russian attack on Ukraine.

There's a particular interest in creating bunkers to prepare for a nuclear blast. John Ramey, founder of The Prepared, a website advocating for "practical prepping", told me traffic on the website increased multi-fold in the last few weeks. "Our top on-site search terms have been 'nuclear', 'iodine', 'emp', and 'radiation sickness'," he says. "Those terms are normally nowhere near the top."

But this sudden surge of interest is also part of a longer trend. A 2012 National Geographic survey found that 62% of Americans thought the world would experience a major catastrophe in less than 20 years (which proved correct). A further 40% believed that stocking up on supplies or building a bomb shelter was a wiser investment than saving for retirement. Between 2017 and 2025, the global market for "incident and emergency management" is expected to jump in value from \$75.5bn to \$423bn. As a clear short-term indicator of this increase, the number of people buying emergency supplies doubled between 2020 and 2021. The fastest growing group buying supplies are millennials, 77.7% of whom have emergency supplies on hand or stated that they bought them in the past 12 months.

Dr Chris Ellis, a Cornell-trained expert on disaster preparedness, uses Fema National Household Survey Data to estimate the population of what he calls "Resilient Citizens": those Americans able to survive for 31 days or more in a state of self-sufficiency. In other words, without provision of water, power, fuel or food. Based

on his most current research, he told me that his preliminary data shows the percentage of Resilient Citizens rose from 3.8% to 5.8% between 2017 and 2020. Perhaps even more striking, the number of “Ultra High Resilient Citizens”, who can survive 97 days or more on their own, has appeared to have jumped from 1.1% to 2.6% over the same period. “In the face of threats and uncertainty, more people are clearly taking large-scale disaster possibilities seriously,” he says.

Those numbers may increase further as new threats loom. In Ukraine, bunkers have provided some degree of safety from Russian bombs, although not in every case. Just a few weeks ago, the Donetsk Regional Drama Theatre in the now-decimated city of Mariupol was hit by a Russian airstrike. 1,300 civilians were sheltering inside, many in a bomb shelter beneath the building, the door to which was encased by rubble from the collapsed building. The rubble was eventually cleared but at least 300 civilians, including women and children, lost their lives in the attack. They remain, however, the only effective mitigation to attacks of this nature.

Both Ramey and Ellis argue that bunkers fail to keep out many other threats.



📷 A bunker with a pool. Photograph: Bradley L Garrett

Larry Hall, the developer who built Survival Condo, the most expensive and lavish private bunker in the world, almost died last year after contracting the Delta variant. A bunker doesn't act as an effective bulwark against disease, and he never ended up pulling residents in and shutting the blast doors in any case, given the incremental and unpredictable spread of the virus.

It's also the case that many of those who sell bunkers meant to assuage our anxiety are shysters. A few of the bunkers I have tried to visit never existed. The Oppidum in the Czech Republic and Vivos Europa One in Germany, for instance, turned out to be little more than a CGI pipe dreams. (The latter, offering \$2m apartments in “shell

condition” is described on the company’s website as “operational” but “ready for improvements”). Some of these places had collected deposits from clients and never finished building. In one case, at Trident Lakes in Texas, the founder, John Eckerd, was arrested by federal agents after accepting a \$200,000 wire transfer for the build-out that he thought was coming from a Colombian drug cartel. Eckherd was sentenced to 15 months in federal prison.

That’s why many of the preppers I’ve met are moving away from purchasing bunkers and towards a simpler model for resilience that mitigates almost all threats: they’ve sought rural properties where long-term stability could be achieved in off-grid communities, ranches and rural redoubts, where they learned to grow food away from (mostly urban) areas that are both geopolitical targets and sites for social friction.

In the foothills of the Great Smokey Mountains of Tennessee, Heidi, a “homestead prepper”, lives in a tight-knit community based around a survival supply store called Tennessee Readiness. Heidi told me that “war time bunkers are like tornado shelters, built for a limited period of usage”. A more sustainable model, she contended, was to build a community where knowledge could be shared about growing, canning, dehydrating and storing food, while also investing time in weapons crafting, stockpiling and hunting.

When I inquired as to how her community had navigated the pandemic, Heidi says that they survived by taking it one day at a time and that sales at the store were “going gang busters” as people flooded in to stock up for the next disaster. She was confident the worst is yet to come. “You better hang on to your britches because we are heading for a wild ride this year!” Unnervingly, she had said something very similar to me in 2019, just before outbreak of Covid-19.

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,” Henry Thoreau wrote in 1854. This practical deliberateness is where the preparedness movement is now headed. Aligning realistic fears about the future with practices of self-sufficiency, sustainability, self-care and community building forms the foundation for what some are now calling Doomer Optimism. For decades the media has caricatured preppers as conspiracy theorists. Now, these preppers are flooded by requests for advice and assistance as people seek to build their own arks to cross into safety.

In 2019, I flew into Ukraine with three friends to head into the Exclusion Zone surrounding the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, the site of the worst nuclear disaster in human history. An urban explorer named Kirill Stepanets served as our guide during a three-day trespass that revealed abandoned bunkers, radar systems, missile launch facilities and decaying homes. I was interested in experiencing the

post-apocalyptic world the preppers imagined, and what we found instead was life springing back. Wildlife was abundant, riparian zones were healing, even people were returning. That unexpected story of survival and resurgence is what I think about now when I see images now of people taking refuge underground.

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