

How Prepared is the American Public?

By James C. Jones, EMT/CHCM

In 2013 the American Housing Survey conducted by the US Census Bureau conducted a survey to determine the level of emergency preparedness of American families. The results of such surveys can be considered as “soft data” subject to how the respondents interpret the questions and their definitions of the wording. It is also important to consider that only responsible and probably well educated people would have responded to such a survey. It is doubtful that poor and uneducated people comprised a representative share of the respondents. Therefore we can probably reduce the percentages by at least ten or twenty percent.

Emergency Water Supplies: 54.3-percent reported having at least 24 bottles of water per person at home. A lot of homes do have bottled water just for home use. Such supplies may be much lower just before shopping day. Also, this is hardly adequate for cooking and washing. This is not really emergency supplies just -- what’s around the house. **I recommend at least 5-gallons of dedicated, stored water per person in addition to what you may have in normal supply.**

Nonperishable Emergency Food: 82-percent reported having a three day supply of food. This is probably accurate. All the odds and ends in most pantry’s, freezer and cupboards certainly can make up adequate, if not balanced meals for at least three days. Most middle class households probably have enough residual food for a week or more. **I recommend that you have at least enough non-perishable (canned, dried, dehydrated) food to last 30-day after you have used up the in-stock groceries**

Prepared Emergency Evacuation Kits: 51.5-percent of respondents said that they had some kind of evacuation kit on hand. I seriously doubt that people in the inner city struggling to get by have the reserves or resources to build such kits. The so-called “evacuation kits” are (in my view) inadequate. They are better than nothing and can get you to a shelter if one is available. These are not true “survival kits” or “survival packs” capable of providing shelter, food, water first aid, and self-protection during a long-term and/or wide-spread disaster. **Live Free USA has developed a modified evacuation kit list that extends the standard FEMA kit to provide more self-sufficiency when no shelter is immediately attainable.** These lists include stoves, more food, shelter and warmth provisions and other essentials.

Emergency Meeting Location: 37.4-percent said they had an emergency meeting location. A pretty sad number, considering that doing so requires zero investment and about ten-minutes of time to establish. **The family should regularly review emergency plans including near-home meeting places in the event of a home-fire, tornado or home-invasion and a more distant rendezvous locations for mass-disaster situations.**

Communications Plan: 33.0-percent said they had developed a communications plan for emergencies. Since the average family spends less than half of their time together at home, this should be a primary element in any survival plan. Dependency on cell-phones to bring everyone together during a true disaster borders on lunacy. **There should be established family “code words” for such things as “I’m in trouble”, “ it’s me don’t shoot”, “get out now” etc.. Available, programmable FM, UHF, VHF transceivers with up to 5-mile ranges may be a good investment, providing family members will carry them.**

Evacuation Vehicle: 88.6-percent said they had one of these? This clearly indicates that the urban population was not proportionately represented and that the term evacuation vehicle may have been liberally interpreted. A beat up sedan with a quarter-tank of fuel is hardly an “evacuation vehicle” **While a big, 4-wheel drive, SUV is ideal, a good condition, light-truck or SUV with good ground clearance that has plenty of space for the family and lots of survival supplies would be classified as an “evacuation vehicle” Any vehicle you have should already have 4-6 days of survival supplies (food, water, warmth, first aid, etc.) road safety equipment and never less than a half-tank of gas.**

Evacuation Funds: 69.8-percent said that they had could access least \$2,000 for expenses in an emergency situation. The concept of accessibility may be the issue here. Certainty ATMs, cell-phone APPs, and credit cards cannot to be considered reliable means of access to funds under truly disastrous situations. **The survivor is going to need to have immediate access to cash. This, in turn necessitates being armed.**

House or Building Numbers Clearly Visible: 77.5-percent said this was true for their residences. This applies only to those limited disasters where the Police, Fire and EMS can still respond to your needs, but it is important. As a police volunteer, I can tell you that modern house numbering systems can be quite confusing and poorly marked address signs can result in delayed responses to fires, crime and medical emergencies. **Your house address should be clearly visible from the street or ally night or day.**

Generator Present: Only 18.3-percent responded positively here. This seems reasonable. Apartment dwellers don’t have this option at all. A “generator present” does not indicate if the generator is adequate, well maintained or if fuel is available for any extended situation. Generators create their own inherent hazards. They are recommended for maintaining freezers, sump pumps and other essential systems for a limited time. **Fuel may not be available for long-term situations. I recommend having a generator, but not being dependent on a generator. There are good alternatives for light, power, and heat without a generator.**

Access to Financial Information: 76.6-percent said they had this one covered, but what kind of “access” were they depending on? In a true disaster the internet and all other forms of electronic data transfer could be unavailable. **Hard-copy, paper records of**

critical bank information, birth certificates, medical records, deeds, titles, insurance policies, etc. should always be included in your evacuation pack. Keeping the originals in a bank, safety deposit box is highly recommended.



Items Not Included in the Survey

Several essential home safety items were not included in the survey. This probably reflects the governmental bias against comprehensive self-reliance. The items that were included are directed towards temporary and superficial disasters where most government services would still be available.

Fire Extinguishers: NOT INCLUDED IN THE SURVEY. This is a serious omission. Home-fires are a major cause of injury and death under normal circumstances and much more important in a disaster when survivors would be using generators, camp stoves, lanterns and candles and the Fire Department response time would be delayed or even nonexistent. **I recommend at least two large (20#) ABC rated extinguishers for the home.**

First Aid Kit and First Aid Manual: NOT INCLUDED IN THE SURVEY. Another serious omission. Most disasters include the potential for physical injury as well as exacerbating illnesses. Medical services might be long-delayed or unavailable in these circumstances. **A well-stocked first aid kit and a good first aid manual is the minimum requirement here. Advanced medical training is recommended. A stock of your prescription medications is also a must.**

Respirators and Bleach. NOT INCLUDED IN THE SURVEY. Since many of the disaster scenarios would involve smoke, biological hazards, and toxic dusts and mists respiratory protection should be included. Bleach is an essential requirement for water purification, sanitation and biological decontamination needs. **There should be at least two gallons of fresh (it deteriorates) bleach available in every household at all times. A stock of the basic N-95 dust/mist respirators or the charcoal impregnated soft folding respirators should be at home, in your pockets and in every evacuation kit.**

Self-Defense Devices: NOT INCLUDED IN THE SURVEY. No surprise here. Political correctness and the “we can protect you” bias of government agencies would clearly predicate against recommending any form of self-protection. The combination of desperate people and an overstretched police force would make self-defense an essential survival capability. Home invasion and looting would become more frequent in a prolonged “shelter-in-place” situation as water, food and other essential run out for the unprepared population. If forced to evacuate, you would be an immediate target for armed thugs and gangs. To put it simply “If you are prepared and unarmed you have prepared the survival needs for someone else”. **A shotgun is my standard recommendation for minimal home defense in disaster situations. The shotgun along with a good quality, high capacity handgun with extra magazines should be carried in any evacuation situation.**

Then and Now

It is interesting to note that back in the “Cold War” days Live Free USA conducted a few surveys and conclude that families were either in total denial and completely unprepared based on the belief that a nuclear war was unthinkable and/or not survivable or the family was very prepared with a retreat or fallout shelter based on the belief that nuclear war was inevitable, but survivable. Today’s “threat matrix” of multiple disaster scenarios and developing problems has created a wide range of preparedness levels, ranging from basic (three or four days) survival to completely self-reliant living systems. **The realization that the existing, centralized dependency systems are slowly failing while the occurrence of disasters such as terror attacks, civil unrest, epidemics, storms, droughts, floods and fires is increasing is overcoming complacency and denial.** While the survey numbers may be more optimistic than reality, they indicate far more interest in preparedness and self-reliance than a decade or two ago. We can expect an increase in basic preparedness by more families in the coming years. **We can also expect to see established self-reliance and preparedness practitioners moving on to greater sustainable living systems and sustainable-living networks in response to greater threats and declining conditions.** The challenge those of us who founded and developed the concepts, methods and philosophies associated with these trends will be to support and guide this process in constructive and responsible ways.