

WSJ Print Edition

The buildup of stuff is a uniquely American phenomenon.

image



FROM TOP: VAN SANTEN & BOLLEURS; JULIE HALL



When people sell, they often find their items are worth far less than they thought.

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Americans Treasure Their Clutter

Accumulating stuff takes a toll—and can be financially, physically and mentally taxing

BY DALVIN BROWN

he home had surrendered to its contents.

Vintage cameras lined

The shelves. A basement's worth of sagging boxes held vinyl records, sorted according to a system only an owner could decipher. There were 11 hammers in the garage. The kitchen counters, barely visible beneath cookware and appliances, featured a food processor still bearing remnants of a past meal.

Americans are drowning in their own stuff—and this is where it ends up. The discards of a lifetime of vacations and dinner parties and lazy afternoons were strewn about the Washington, D.C., estate sale in February for deal-hunting strangers to pick over. The owners had died, and their children had already claimed keepsakes. The leftovers were advertised online.

It is easier than ever to buy things, thanks to online shopping. But it is physically and mentally taxing to get rid of them. The result is overflowing basements and rented storage units. Eventually, if it doesn't end up in the hands of new owners, it is tossed or left for the children to deal with.

"We're battling a tsunami of stuff, and the stuff is winning," said Julie Hall, founder of the Estate Lady, an estate-clearance company.

The era of cheap stuff might be over, thanks to President Trump's globe-spanning tariffs. His Treasury secretary recently gave a speech saying access to low-cost goods "is not the essence of the American dream."

But if so, there is a significant legacy: a gigantic mound of stuff. And it is costing us. Consider this:

Americans in 2024 bought 5.7 times as much flatware and dishes and 3.5 times the furniture compared with 1994, according to Commerce Department data. They purchased 2.5 times the clothing and footwear.

Putting belongings in one of the country's roughly 58,000 self-storage facilities costs \$151.50 a month on average, according to Storable, a company that provides management software for self-storage facilities.

Downsizing a home takes as much as 40 hours' time, nearly double the time it took a decade ago, according to the National Association of Senior and Specialty Move Managers. Many hire professionals to help.

U-Haul increased the size of its largest moving trucks by 60% between 2014 and 2024 to reflect Americans' growing volume of possessions, according to the company.

Some 71% of Americans in a recent Storable survey said they repurchase items they already own because clutter keeps them from finding the original.

The biggest costs aren't always measured in dollars. Families fracture over how to divide up stuff—or whether to throw it out. More adult children will have to empty their parents' homes as the babyboomer generation ages. Couples postpone moving in together, overwhelmed by the prospect of combining belongings. Or, once they are cohabitating, tensions arise over clutter. Tiana Arriaga, 25 years old, downsized last year to a 500 square-foot apartment in Santa Monica, Calif., with her boyfriend, who owns just five shirts. "He was shocked by the huge moving truck it took for my stuff," she said. "He kept joking with my family, 'She's definitely a hoarder.'" Her weekly trips to thrift stores filled their space with clothes she rarely wears. Childhood memorabilia from her parents now occupy their limited storage. She recently bought a new bed frame with drawers, storage bins and a standing closet.

"I'm just buying things to manage my things," she said.

Despite the conflicts it causes, consumption has long been a celebrated part of American culture. On TikTok, users have posted more than 400,000 videos under #haultok, where they hold up the items they just bought, one after another after another.

Fast-fashion brands and marketplaces such as Temu and Shein make it simple to load up on lowcost goods with a few taps on a phone. Often the products are sold on TikTok, too.

"You see something cool for \$6 and think, why not?" said Anthony Russo.

Clutter isn't just limited to the U.S. In Toronto, Kylie Moore and her husband quarrel over an oversize massage chair he won't part with. They are currently looking to buy a place, and Moore anticipates conflicts about what they will bring with them to the new home. "He still has T-shirts from when he was 17 years old, and he's 42 now," Moore said.

But the buildup of stuff is a uniquely American phenomenon. Roughly 80% of the world's selfstorage facilities are located in the U.S., according to Nick Walker, a real-estate analyst at CBRE. The self-storage industry is one of the biggest beneficiaries of Americans' inability to let go. Chuck Gordon, founder of Storable, said on average, people rent their units for 14 months, though many units remain rented for years. "People forget what they've stored," Gordon said.

That happens at home, too. Victoria Leyva, a professional organizer in Houston, said she sees some families treating entire rooms like junk closets. About 21% of people dedicate over 500 square feet purely to storage, according to the Storable survey. That is roughly the size of a two-car garage.

"At some point, your stuff starts to own you rather than you owning it," said Jennifer Pickett, co-executive director at the National Association of Senior and Specialty Move Managers.

The U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging last year flagged concern about hoarding disorder, which becomes more prevalent with age.

Even those who don't meet clinical criteria for hoarding often struggle with "subclinical clutter," said Carolyn Rodriguez, a clinical psychiatrist at Stanford University who specializes in hoarding disorder.

"I can't think of a single person who isn't at least a bit attached to items they never use," she said. "In American culture, we're primed to see value or future potential in everything."

Anne Livingston realized the extent of her unused stuff last year when she started preparing to move out of her three-bedroom Washington, D.C., home. She thought she had been organized, labeling the bins in her hall closet and keeping them tidy.

But then, with the help of a friend, she started emptying out bins that had been untouched for years.

"I had a million suitcases," Livingston said. The friend told her she had a shoe problem. "Later she came back and said, 'I didn't realize you had a sunglasses thing, too,'" Livingston added.

Her real-estate agent suggested that she do an estate sale. She went on a 10-day vacation while others picked over her stuff.

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