Debunking Nuclear Bunkers

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Introduction

Nuclear bunkers or fallout shelters have been sold as a measure to mitigate the threats of nuclear war. While bunkers were popularized during the Cold War, still today, some are interested in acquiring or building bunkers as a way to secure their survival in the case of nuclear war. Nuclear weapons pose an enormous threat to humanity which nuclear bunkers can never fully address, as illustrated by the following answers to frequently asked questions about nuclear bunkers.

What is a nuclear bunker and where are they?

Bunkers are typically rooms reinforced with metal or buried underground intended to be a place of shelter in the event of a nuclear weapon attack. Bunkers and the concept of civilian-made bunkers were popularized during the Cold War to make civilians believe they could prepare and survive a nuclear attack.¹ There are nuclear bunkers around the world, in urban and remote areas. Many nuclear bunkers are relics of the Cold War era and no longer operational, while other more modern forms of nuclear shelters have increased in popularity in recent years.

Switzerland is required by law to have enough bunkers to fit its population of 8 million, but even in this case, there are a number of practical issues with Swiss bunkers, however, it would likely be so cramped that each person would be confined to an extremely small bunk.² The United Kingdom and New York City developed networks of bunkers during the Cold War, however, today they are all inoperational.³

Why were nuclear bunkers built?

Building bunkers or outfitting parts of your home to try and withstand a nuclear weapon was encouraged by the United States and other governments during the Cold War to give civilians a sense of security in the face of the existential threat of nuclear war.⁴ However, these bunkers do not prevent or mitigate the risks of nuclear war and in reality attempt to legitimize the inhumane and unacceptable risks nuclear weapons inherently pose. By encouraging civilians to rely on bunkers, it removes the burden of cost for governments and gives citizens a false sense of security about the survivability of nuclear war. By making nuclear war seem survivable, this inherently condones the government’s procurement or production of nuclear weapons. As Joseph

Masco wrote in “Building the Bunker Society”: the main goal of bunkers “isn’t to stop violence, but psychologically endure it.”

How do you know when to go to a nuclear bunker or how to find one near you?

There is relatively little up to date public information about the location and protocols for finding and entering a nuclear bunker in the event of a nuclear attack. In 2018, when Hawaii residents received a false alarm of an incoming ICBM for example, the only instruction they received was to “seek immediate shelter,” with no indication of where or how to find appropriate shelter. A widely criticized 2022 New York City “Nuclear Preparedness PSA” video likewise contained no information about finding or entering a nuclear bunker in the event of a nuclear attack, merely instructing people to “get inside,” “stay inside” and “stay tuned.”

Even in a country with the most nuclear bunkers per capita, Switzerland, where Swiss law guarantees every resident a shelter in the vicinity of their residence, shelter spaces are used for other purposes, including storage or temporary housing, and are only required to be prepared for a nuclear attack within five days. As of 2022, one of Switzerland’s most populous cities, Geneva, only had nuclear bunker capacity for 75% of its residents.

Even if there is space for you within a shelter that is near enough to you at the moment of notice of an attack — if you do receive notice — you could have only minutes to reach it. There would also likely be mass chaos amongst others, especially in urban areas which would be the most probable targets of a nuclear attack, making it nearly impossible to reach a shelter. Many cities today cannot even withstand natural disasters and emergency response in these situations are sorely lacking. A nuclear attack on a city would be undoubtedly more destructive than any recent disaster, which makes the likelihood of effective government response even more dubious.

When is it safe to leave a nuclear bunker after a nuclear explosion?

Assuming that against all odds you have managed to find an operational nuclear shelter within minutes and that this shelter provided some protection against the initial explosion, you would next need to determine when it would be safe for you to leave your shelter to avoid the worst dose

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of radioactive fallout. This answer also varies widely depending on the size and location of the nuclear detonation(s). It would be impossible to make an individual accurate judgment in the aftermath of a nuclear explosion to answer these questions. Many sources recommend anywhere from three days to two weeks to avoid the immediate or most adverse effects of radioactive fallout following a nuclear explosion which include cancer and radiation sickness, however, given the unpredictability of size and location of potential nuclear strikes in relation to shelter, it’s extremely hard to predict.12

Authorities recommend, therefore, that all residents keep a radio on hand or follow social media or text alerts to know when it would be safe to leave their shelter. But this is highly unrealistic advice. A radio is no longer a common household device among younger generations, who rely on other digital devices to follow the news and an electro–magnetic pulse that could accompany a large nuclear detonation could disable digital communication infrastructure.13 The truth is there would likely be no communication with any authority that could provide clear or accurate information about how long to stay in a nuclear bunker. Furthermore, due to the highly radioactive environment, emergency help or services would likely not be able to reach the area for potentially days or respond after the attack or to communicate directly with those in shelters.

Are nuclear bunkers guaranteed to keep you safe during a nuclear attack?

Even in the event that you manage to find a nuclear bunker quickly enough that has space for you, there is no guarantee that a bunker will save you from a nuclear attack. Whether a bunker can provide any protection depends on the size of the bomb and proximity of the bunker to the detonation. Some bunkers in close proximity to the detonation would overheat and become like ovens as nuclear-fuelled fires raged above ground.15 In World War II, German bunkers became “tombs” after onslaughts of Allied bombings, making underground shelters as an antidote to today’s potential of nuclear attacks even more questionable due to the size and scale of these weapons in comparison to any other conventional ones.16 Some nuclear weapons are also specifically designed to target bunkers, called “bunker busters” potentially destroying or incinerating structures beneath the surface of the earth.17

What happens after a nuclear explosion if you are in a bunker?

Even if a city bunker could withstand the force of a nuclear weapon, the mass destruction and lack of humanitarian or healthcare response to a nuclear weapon is still nearly unsurvivable. The

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14 Footnote on EMP
immediate fireball, heat and shock wave, followed by radioactive fallout would render a city destroyed, and even if you were to be in a bunker at the time of the attack, the chances of survival in the absence of an organised humanitarian response are slim.

What can prevent a nuclear war?

Relying on bunkers to protect human life in the event of a nuclear war is not a realistic strategy.

Cities remain one of the most likely targets of nuclear weapons as they have historically been the only target of nuclear weapons use during war. Cities around the world have been joining the ICAN Cities Appeal in calling for their governments to sign onto the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) citing the humanitarian costs of nuclear weapons and civilians’ rights to live in a world free from nuclear weapons.18

Civilians who face the greatest costs in the event of a nuclear war cannot prevent a nuclear war by building bunkers. Only governments can eliminate the possibility and threat of nuclear war by joining the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The TPNW entered into force in 2021 and countries from around the world are signing on. The TPNW remains the only treaty which prohibits the possession, use, stockpiling, and transport of nuclear weapons making it the only solution to ending the threat of nuclear weapons. Join ICAN in calling on your government to sign and ratify the TPNW.

Further reading and works cited


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