


Supplies You Can Scavenge from Vehicles after the Collapse

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 COLLAPSE SURVIVAL SITE

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It's hard for some people to imagine a time when we would be salvaging stuff from abandoned vehicles to survive. But [the precedent is everywhere](#) around the world right now.

Countries across [Asia](#), [South](#) and [Central America](#) and [Africa](#) are in full collapse or collapsing. Economies have broken down to a level defined by barter commerce, and anything that can be salvaged is reused from derelict homes and apartments to abandoned vehicles left in the streets.

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And it's Happening Here

Take a look at some of the [homeless encampments that are popping up in cities](#) across the U.S. and you can see a reflection of what [a collapse of American society](#) looks like.

The shelters are improvised from boards, tarps, and yes –automobiles and vehicle parts. People sleep on improvised mattresses, use car seats for couches and cook in hub caps wherever a fire can be built.

We Had a Recent Lesson

One of the things that lead to the collapse of a society are [compounding or cascading disasters](#). It's when one event leads to another and another. The recent pandemic brought this home when common (and some not so common) natural disasters struck in the middle of the pandemic.

There was a period of time when [Texas was without power in winter](#) while the pandemic raged. [Wildfires crossed California](#) while storms powered by the [Pineapple Express](#) offered little relief and still –the pandemic raged. The [supply chain unraveled](#), manufacturing was limited if not halted, the stock market was a roller coaster all while –the pandemic raged.

Somehow we got out of it, but the events of the last few years demonstrated the precarious nature of a healthy and robust society. If war were to break out beyond the current conflicts, if [climate change](#) continues to overwhelm countries and regions, and God forbid –if another pandemic emerges we may see the homeless lifestyle spread to places and people who never saw it coming.

The Realities of Survival Salvage

Salvage is nothing new. Many people have done very creative things building everything from [cabins](#) to [furniture](#) using lumber from pallets and abandoned buildings. The whole [concept of upcycling items](#) that some would consider junk has a large following and some of the things they craft are remarkable.

Salvaging things from a car is no different although what someone chooses to salvage varies depending on their situation and the circumstances. Most people salvage cars for replacement parts for their vehicle. Junk yards depend on it. But survival salvage goes beyond the usual collection of second hand parts and occasional upcycling.

Survival salvage is the ability to satisfy a desperate need with something that is found, salvaged and repurposed. In that regard, salvaging an abandoned car is all about looking at everything in and on the vehicle that could be used for a practical purpose.

It assumes that common sources for many types of products and supplies don't exist or stores simply don't have most anything in stock. That's a common occurrence in a collapsed society.

Another reality driving survival salvage is [hyperinflation](#). When everyday goods become too expensive for the average person the only alternative is to improvise or do without. It's the ability to improvise that makes salvaging vehicles for parts a promising opportunity.

The Realities of Collapse

Another reality driving survival salvage is the intensity of the situation. Many stories about societal collapse seem to assume that we go from civilization to apocalypse overnight. That's actually [an uncommon scenario](#) from an historical standpoint.

Societal collapse happens much more slowly and in stages, and the behavior of people in that society evolves to events over time. For that reason we're going to look at how stages of societal collapse affect lifestyle and the need to see salvage from vehicles as a necessity.

4 Possible Stages for Vehicle Salvage

There's a good possibility that many cars may be abandoned in a time of societal collapse. Gas may simply be unavailable, and some people may not have the skills or the money to repair their vehicles. Others may have simply abandoned their vehicles because of a failed bugout, a hopelessly jammed highway that has become a parking lot, or hastily fled the violence in the streets.

There will still be junk yards but most will have been picked clean. The only alternative may be the new junk yards that fill the streets and neighborhoods of towns and neighborhoods. It won't be easy to determine when a vehicle has been truly abandoned, but if the tires are flat and the windows are broken it's a good bet the car is no longer valued by anyone—unless you know what to look for.

How much of a vehicle you would need to salvage is proportional to your situation and needs. A lot of that has to do with the general situation in society, but a collapse of anything affects different people in different ways. Here are

the 4 possibilities or stages that could make salvage of a vehicle necessary in a time of societal collapse.

STAGE 1: Collapse has Begun and Your Car is Still Running but You Need Parts

The overall situation isn't hopeless but a collapse has begun and many basic things like auto parts and accessories are either unavailable or simply too expensive. This is the classic auto salvage scenario and it may become a common practice if the situation doesn't improve.

If you are lucky enough to have a car that's still running and come across the same car or a similar make and model, you're in luck. Hopefully you have the [tools and skills to fix it yourself](#). Here are some of the parts worth salvaging whether you need them immediately or possibly in the future.

√ The Battery

In any situation a car battery can have extreme value in desperate times. If you have [an inverter](#) and the [ability to recharge the battery](#), all the better. And this isn't just about replacing the battery in your car; a car battery can provide you with light and power.

Chances are good the battery will be dead and there's no guarantee it will recharge successfully, but it is definitely worth the effort. We'll get into some ways to improvise solutions to recharge a car battery.

√ Gas

It's a good bet gasoline will be in short supply and very expensive. A siphon hose and gas can are a good idea although many vehicles have anti-siphon mechanisms. However, there are

some [work-arounds even on anti-siphon mechanisms](#).

Puncturing the gas tank is a really bad idea. Any spark can ignite the vapors even if the tank is empty. An explosion will result. It's not worth it.

Not only can you use the gas for your car but also to power gas chain saws and other tools.

✓ Oil and other Fluids

When no oil is available, any oil will do. The same applies to transmission fluid, brake fluid, even windshield washer fluid. We'll get into additional uses later but if you have a vehicle that's still running, you'll eventually need these fluids to keep it going.

Draining fluids is as easy as loosening the nut in the oil pan or the transmission pan. You just need some containers to collect it, transport it and store it.

The oil you harvest can also be added to any gas you salvaged to create a gas/oil mix for two-cycle engines on any gas powered tools.

✓ Light Bulbs

Replacing a headlight or tail light is easy, unless you can't buy replacements. Different bulbs vary from one vehicle to the next, but they're so easy to remove on most models it's worth taking the time to collect them –even if it's just for possible barter.

There are other uses for lights that we'll get into but if you're still driving you may definitely need to replace a headlight bulb someday.

✓ Tires

If you find a vehicle with tires and rims that match the vehicle you're still driving –get those tires! You don't have to overdo it but tires are not easy to manufacture and if gas is unavailable or in very short supply it's a good bet other things like tires may be hard to find or unaffordable.

There are [other uses for tires](#) but so much can happen to your tires if you're still driving in desperate times that you'll definitely be at an advantage if you have backups.

✓ Alternator, Starter, Spark Plugs

These are often make and sometimes model specific parts but they're also easy to remove if you have some tools, and invaluable if you need a replacement. There's a second and very clever use for an alternator we'll get into in a bit, but if your car is still running these are some of the things you'll definitely need someday.

✓ Hoses, Fan Belts, Filters, Wiper Blades

These items aren't always model-specific but worth salvaging so you'll have basic replacement parts for your vehicle down the road. They're small items that we often take for granted, but if your radiator hose bursts or a fan belt shreds you'll be glad you have some alternatives.

✓ The Jack, Lug Wrench and Any Other Tools

After you take the spare tire, grab the lug wrench and jack if it's still there. They're usually stored under the floor of the trunk or in some vehicles, in a compartment behind the front seat.

If In Doubt, Take It

If your car is still running it's going to be a constant challenge to keep it on the road. If you come across a part that you're not sure that you'll need, take it anyway. If there's one thing we all know about cars it's that lots of things can go wrong. That's why some of the other possibilities we're about to cover are also worth considering.

STAGE 2: The Collapse is Getting Worse and Your Vehicle is Not Running, but You are Actively Engaged in a Barter Economy

At this stage, things haven't improved. For one, your vehicle isn't running for any number of reasons. Then again, most people in your neighborhood aren't driving anymore and it has become a pedestrian/bicycle lifestyle like many 3rd world nations today.

However, cars are still on the road and [a barter economy](#) has emerged. Currency for any number of reasons has become worthless and the trade of goods for goods has become the most dependable form of commerce.

It's in this barter marketplace where many things that can be salvaged from a vehicle will have enhanced value. You can start with everything we've already identified back when you still had a vehicle, but anything you salvaged, collected and saved now has a new value as barter.

In addition to those previous items, here are some other parts and pieces of a vehicle that could have good value in a barter marketplace.

√ Any Spark Plug

If vehicles are still out there and they [still have spark plugs](#), bag 'em up. You may have ignored some cars in the past because it wasn't your make and model but in a barter marketplace you can always find someone who needs what you have.

√ Lug Nuts

Even if you don't need the tires, the lug nuts can have value to someone who has the tires but no way to attach them. These aren't hard to find and anyone can salvage them but some people would rather not hit the streets with a lug wrench.

√ Any Light Bulbs

It may not have fit in your old vehicle but it fits for someone. This includes headlights, tail lights, backup lights, even dome lights, trunk lights and the light in the glove compartment.

√ Glove Compartment and Other Compartments

There are small compartments in many vehicles from glove compartments to center and rear consoles. Some vehicles also have compartments in the trunk. Look at them closely and see if any tools or other items have been left behind. You may be able to use them or trade them as barter.

STAGE 3: Collapse Continues but You Have the Tools and the Skills to Upcycle Found Materials

We're now at a stage where things have gotten worse. Few

vehicles are still running and driving your vehicle is a distant memory. Common goods and everyday items are no longer showing up in stores (assuming most stores are still open).

This is a scenario where your ability to upcycle and repurpose things can make a difference. Vehicles offer many possibilities if you think about how certain parts can be reused or repurposed in some way shape or form. Here are some possibilities:

√ The Alternator and the Battery

An alternator is a generator that recharges a battery when the car is running. The [hack is to find a way to turn the pulley wheel on an alternator](#) without a car engine to spin it and to recharge the 12-volt battery you also salvaged. Here's a link to a video that describes one way to do that.

√ Leather Seats

If you come across a vehicle with leather seats, use a razor knife to strip the leather. [Leather crafting is easy](#) and sheets of leather will let you make everything from [moccasins](#) to satchels, belts, knife and axe sheaths, and anything else you might need made from leather.

√ Floor and Trunk Mats

Most vehicles have small to large mats to cover and protect the floors and trunk. These typically are waterproof with rubber at the bottom of a piece of carpet, or just rubber throughout.

These can be used to help keep things waterproof; folded into a funnel to [collect rainwater](#), or used as soles for those moccasins you're making from the leather seats.

✓ Mirrors

All vehicles have mirrors. They can be used for signaling, simply as a mirror, and some people claim that a convex mirror can be [used to start a fire](#). That's actually a long-shot but give it a try.

✓ Hub Caps

Hub caps are often reused in a variety of ways. They can also be used for open-fire cooking and even as a catchall for various pieces of hardware and small parts in a garage or shed.

Hub caps are essentially metal bowls (although some are plastic), so think about how you would use a bowl or even use a metal one to heat something.

✓ Rubber Tire Raised Beds

A group of tires off the rims can make instant raised beds in the backyard or patio. Just fill them with soil and plant what you have. Here's a link to an article and a video on how people are using rubber tires for gardening even today.

You could also use the metal tire rim to [improvise a charcoal grill](#).

✓ A Multiple Battery Power Bank

If you manage to salvage more than one car battery, you can join them together to [make a powerful power bank](#). You'll still need a way to recharge the batteries and here are some ideas including a way to make [solar panels from old CD's](#).

The batteries will run anything that works off of 12-volt, DC power but if you had the presence of mind to stockpile some inverters you'll have AC power. While you're at it, make sure you salvage the battery cables from vehicles so you can

connect the batteries to make a more powerful, power bank. Just make sure you know how to connect the cables.

✓ Improvising Lighting from Vehicle Lights

This isn't about replacing a headlight or trading bulbs for barter, this is about using car headlights, tail lights and even the small dome lights in the vehicle for everyday lighting.

Car lights run off of 12-volt, DC power so make sure you salvage the light sockets or the whole headlight or tail light assembly. If you can't remove the whole assembly, even the bulb and wired bulb socket will illuminate when directly connected to the car battery.

✓ Seat Belts

Seat belts are heavy duty straps that can be used to bundle items, as tie-downs, as emergency backpack straps, as a replacement for any belt on your pants; cut into strips for cordage, stripped into threads for fishing line, sewing and even emergency sutures.

Grab the buckles too so you can easily connect and disconnect them no matter how you're using them.

✓ Radio and Aerial

Radios in vehicles also run off 12-volt, DC power. If you don't have a radio to monitor events, a car radio can give you at least some basic information on what's going on assuming you have a battery that still functions.

Just make sure you [remove the radio](#) with as much of the wires as possible so you can reconnect it. It may require some demolition on the dashboard so try to avoid damaging the

radio.

✓ Hardware

Vehicles are loaded with nuts, bolts, screws, washers and other hardware that you can use to build, rebuild or upcycle anything. At a time when hardware stores are a thing of the past, it's worth gathering something as basic as hardware for a variety of uses. Even today the cost of basic nuts and bolts seems out of line.

If you see a random nut, bolt or screw –take it and save it. You'll definitely need it someday.

STAGE 4: You are in a Pure Survival Situation

This is a situation where someone has lost most everything. The Collapse won't quit. Their home is gone for a variety of reasons ranging from natural disaster to economic collapse. Their possessions are few and far between. They are essentially living in a homeless environment and simply trying to survive the times.

It's at times like this that many parts of vehicle have new and necessary possibilities to simply ensure basic survival. Here are few:

✓ The Vehicle as Shelter

In a desperate collapse situation you may find yourself on the road either trying to find your way home, walking to a distant relatives house, or simply homeless. This is when you can use an abandoned vehicle as a temporary shelter from weather, wildlife or as some protection from unexpected visitors at night.

✓ Car Seat Furniture

You don't have to be in the car to sit in the seats. Pull them out and you'll at least be able to sit on something other than the ground. The rear bench seats can actually function as a couch.

✓ Car Seat Interior Stuffing

The padding inside a car seat can be salvaged and also used to improvise bedding for a mattress or even insulation for an improvised vest or hat using the seat material or leather.

✓ Car Floor Rugs

The rugs can be stripped with a razor knife and screwdriver from the floor and trunk of a vehicle. They can be used as bedding on the ground or even as emergency blankets on a winter night.

✓ The Hood, Trunk Lid and Fenders

If you can get some of these parts off the vehicle you can use them to improvise a shelter at another location. Transporting them will be a challenge, but a vehicle's hood makes a quick roof for an improvised shelter. The other parts off of the exterior can also reinforce the walls or sides of a shelter.

✓ And Anything Else...

If you're struggling to survive you need to look at everything in the vehicle and consider all the possibilities. Even the head rests can provide you with a removable fabric covering that could be used as a small pouch to carry things.

Windows are another possibility for a shelter and many people talk about using the top of a [vehicle window to sharpen a knife](#). Don't break them –they just shatter in hundreds of

pieces unless you need a sharp piece for cutting.

Tools for Vehicle Salvage

If you're on a mission to salvage parts and pieces from vehicles, it helps to have some tools unique to cars and trucks. It's even better if you have both metric and standard sizes. Here's the list of possible tools you will hopefully have in hand:

- [Assorted wrenches of various sizes](#)
- [Adjustable Crescent wrenches](#)
- [Socket wrench set](#)
- [Various screwdrivers](#)
- [Wire cutters](#)
- [Tin snips](#)
- [Hammer and small sledge](#)
- [Vise-Grips](#)
- [Channel Locks](#)
- [Razor knife](#)
- [Hacksaw](#)
- [Vehicle Jack and lug wrench](#)
- [Heavy Duty wagon to transport tools and salvage](#)

Whether or not you have all of these tools available depends a lot on your situation. Even without tools you can salvage a lot from a vehicle but tools will not only make it easier but give you access to more possibilities.

And Don't Forget...

...check the vehicle for keys. Many people put them under the visor for some reason. They might also be in a compartment. Finding keys for a vehicle is a long shot, but if you do –try and start the vehicle. It might be out of gas but if the engine at least turns over you'll know that the battery still

has some juice.

Hopefully, all we'll ever need to salvage from an old vehicle are spare parts to keep our car running and save a little money. If the worst happens, or events spiral out of control, understanding how to salvage parts from a vehicle could make things a little better.

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