

Stop Shopping - America needs you to buy less junk.

By [Amanda Mull](#)

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Lately, news stories about the supply chain tend to start in similar ways. The reader is dropped into an American container port, maybe in [Long Beach, California](#), or [Savannah, Georgia](#), full to bursting with trailer-size steel boxes loaded with toilet paper and exercise bikes and future Christmas presents. Some of the containers have gone untouched for weeks or months, waiting for their contents to be trucked to distribution centers. On the horizon, dozens of additional vessels are anchored and idle, waiting for their turn in the port. More ships keep arriving. Everyone involved—sailors, longshoremen, customs clerks, truckers—works as fast and hard as they possibly can. It's not fast or hard enough.

The supply chain, as you know, is having a bad time. That's been true [since the pandemic began](#). Shortages in consumer goods have [persisted far beyond](#) analysts' initial expectations, then beyond their subsequent revisions. At the moment, for most types of goods, shelves aren't exactly bare yet. For the relatively well-off Americans accustomed to the [astonishing abundance](#) of big-box retail and grocery stores and the [near-instant gratification of online shopping](#), it's more a matter of having to settle for your third-favorite brand of Greek yogurt or wait six weeks for back-ordered jeans. But what's already a [genuine crisis](#) for people who work in the global supply chain could very well turn into one for all of us; the manufacturing and distribution of necessities such as food and medicine require many of the same resources as the consumer economy's various conveniences and diversions.

What news stories generally don't show you is where all of this stuff is going. At least anecdotally, much of it seems to be headed directly into the overflowing package room in my apartment building. As *Slate's* Jordan Weissmann recently [pointed out](#), it's not as though the volume of goods getting through this mess and to retailers has slowed to a trickle; imports last month were actually at an all-time high, eclipsing the same period in 2019 by 17 percent. Rather, Americans are buying an extraordinary amount of stuff. Especially in the past six months, the system has been rocked by explosive demand.

When you dig down into the numbers of just how much people are purchasing, the way that the supply-chain crisis gets talked about starts to feel a little uncanny. As the holidays approach, many people have begun to worry that shortages will worsen, not just for kids' toys and other popular gifts, but for holiday decorations, seasonal clothing, and even food—the things that make the end of the year special. Despite those concerns, few seem willing to acknowledge that the record amount of stuff being brought into the country isn't merely *disappearing* off store shelves. We know where it's going, and we know who's buying it all up. They—and maybe you—could simply knock it off.

I'm not proposing that you or anyone else boycott commerce on a conceptual level. That would be impossible, and it would ignore how human life in this country works. It would also be the sort of killjoy self-righteous proposal that doesn't gain much traction. Shopping is fun—novelty and possibility are *fun*—and it's often how people access the tools and materials to do things that bring them genuine comfort or joy, which everyone needs. But even a quick glance at America's credit-card statements begins to explain the mess we're in. A lot of people buy things for the sake of it, stuff they don't need or even particularly want and in many cases won't use, as a salve for boredom or anxiety or insecurity. On the whole, consumer expenditures, which encompass both necessity spending (rent, gas, groceries) and discretionary spending (whatever you ordered from an Instagram ad after three glasses of happy-hour wine last Friday), account for about 70 percent of the country's economy, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. But that spending is not distributed equally. In a typical year, the most affluent 20 percent of people account for nearly 40 percent of the country's consumer spending, and this wealthier group's purchases are disproportionately discretionary.

Through the course of the pandemic, the situation has become even more lopsided. The affluent group spent much of 2020 working from home, largely insulated from mass unemployment and socking away the lion's share of what *Bloomberg Economics* estimates as [\\$2.3 trillion in extra cash](#) that this group's members might have otherwise spent on vacations or restaurant meals. Population-wide gains in spending power largely haven't accrued to people with

the most quality of life to gain from buying a few more things—they've gone to people for whom shopping is already a way of life. After taking a dive in the first months of a pandemic, spending from this group began to rebound relatively quickly as fears of white-collar layoffs dissipated and people began sprucing up their houses and yards and wardrobes. Since this summer, the group's shopping has [escalated further](#), even as spending among people with lower incomes has [fallen](#). The relatively well-off have returned to stores with money burning a hole in their pockets, gobbling up [designer handbags](#), [fine champagne](#), [new cars](#), [teeth whiteners](#), and pretty much anything else you can think of.

The problem with the explosion of this kind of discretionary shopping is that the same logistical resources that make this spike possible are also needed in other parts of the economy. The goods necessary to make school lunches—a vitally important civic function—[might not be available](#) for reasons that have nothing to do with how much food is theoretically available. Experienced workers and truck space and loading docks and time itself are not limitless resources. In a system asked to function beyond its capacity, if the distributor of hundred-dollar throw pillows can pay more for access to trucking capacity than a local food distributor that serves schools can, then their pillows go on the truck.

Currently, these resources get allocated according to little other than profit. Thinking about how necessary something is in the lives of everyday Americans, or how helpful its replenishment would be to people in genuine need, is the kind of resource triage that generally happens only after a natural disaster, and sometimes not even then. Somewhere along the line, powerful people in both business and government decided that the weaknesses that have caused the near-collapse of the supply chain are things Americans should just live with. For example, even before the pandemic, many truckers looked for work elsewhere instead of hauling goods out of container ports, because port trucking is [particularly brutal and poorly compensated](#) work. Instead of directly addressing this type of obvious problem in how goods are moved, America's government and media so often have simply pleaded with Americans to spend more money—to [create jobs](#), to [revitalize the economy](#), to [save the country](#).

It's no surprise we've obliged. Shopping has been [marketed as a civic responsibility](#) in America for more than a century. According to Tim Kasser, a psychologist and professor emeritus at Knox College who has spent decades studying materialism, the word *citizen* has slowly come to be replaced by the word *consumer* in newspapers and books. "It's become more and more a sort of a default, to think of people as consumers instead of the myriad other roles that they play," he told me. That's also how people are socialized to think of themselves. For Americans, shopping isn't just an activity about collecting the resources necessary for safe, happy lives. Over time, it's become an expression of personal identity, a form of entertainment, and a way in which some believe they can effectively participate in politics—people rush to buy from or boycott companies on the basis of their [public stances on social issues](#), and brands have begun to run [extensive get-out-the-vote campaigns](#) among their customers.

Kasser points out that a person's propensity toward materialism—which his research [defines](#) as "a set of values and goals focused on wealth, possessions, image, and status"—tends to increase when they're feeling threatened, insecure, or unsure of themselves. Research has shown that society-level threats can [reproduce that effect](#) at population scale. The pandemic threw people out of their normal routines; it severed people from the habits, settings, and relationships that undergird their self-conceptions; it made people fear for their lives. Of course those with resources responded by getting back to shopping for things they don't need as quickly and voraciously as they could. The structure of American consumerism ensures that buying more of whatever sounds good in the moment is the primary way most people are able to cope with uncertainty. "The logic of the system requires people to come to believe that what's important in life is to make a lot of money and to buy a lot of stuff," Kasser told me. Once you do, "it's very difficult to change your beliefs."

Difficult—but not impossible. The shock of the pandemic can create at least one opportunity, Kasser said. It provides a relatively rare opening for people, shaken out of the day-to-day inertia of existence, to reevaluate their lives and their values en masse. Kasser has found that an honest appraisal of those things generally leads people to less materialism and more investment in their families and communities. In recent months, many people have already done these reappraisals in their professional lives, [as my colleague Derek Thompson has chronicled](#), quitting jobs in enormous numbers in pursuit of better wages or improved quality of life.

If you're currently stewing in consumer hell, frustrated at shipping times and fearful of what holiday shopping will look like, it might be time to take a step back. You can stop. Not stop buying things entirely—you have to keep being a person, of course, and no one will begrudge you things that bring you joy, or begrudge your kids their Christmas presents. Some people will need to buy more or order more or get more deliveries than others, because the circumstances of their lives genuinely require it. But if you find yourself idly filling online shopping carts with mediocre sweaters or new golf equipment you won't use until next spring anyway, you can just close the tab.

As America slogs through its protracted supply-chain woes, we can be honest with ourselves about what the need to constantly shop has done to the country and our own lives. Big-box retail (not to mention Amazon) was made possible by [deregulating trucking](#) and [sending manufacturing overseas](#), which keeps the cost of consumer goods low but has replaced millions of opportunities for good, stable employment with customer-service jobs so crappy that workers are doing [everything in their power](#) to find another way to make a living. And the personal insult added to that societal injury? As a coping mechanism for the existential problems of American life, all that spending almost certainly doesn't even make you happy. [Abundant research](#) has shown that it doesn't really make *anyone* happy, [especially around the holidays](#).

As it stands, America's central organizing principle is thoughtless consumption, acquiring things for yourself and letting everyone else pick over what you left behind on the shelves. You can decide you don't like that. You can decide that people—your family, your friends, the people in your community, the port truckers and Amazon warehouse workers running themselves ragged—are more important to you than another box of miscellaneous stuff. You can take a bit of pressure, however tiny, off a system so overburdened that it threatens to grind everyone in it to dust. American shopping is a runaway train, gliding smooth and frictionless down the tracks toward God knows what over the horizon. Your brakes are small, but you can throw them whenever you want.

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