

Take that junk and stuff it -- in the storage bin

Even as houses grow larger and families grow smaller, Americans are turning to storage to hold their things.

By [Pam Louwagie](#), Star Tribune

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The house in Brooklyn Park where Mike Coffin lives is tidy, he says. But a self-storage unit that he has rented for the past seven years? Not so much.

With nine fishing nets scattered about, a broken TV, toilet repair kits and an old can of Comet cleanser, his 10- by 30-foot space in Blaine has become a dumping ground for things he doesn't want to throw away, but doesn't need at the moment.

"The majority of stuff I would never use, I don't even know why I kept it. But I've got places to put it, so I just don't do anything with it," Coffin said. "It's just a black hole that you can throw things into and never have to deal with them anymore."

The self-storage business is booming even as American houses get bigger and families get smaller. And a load of that has to do with people like Coffin, who want less clutter in their living spaces but can't seem to part with their stuff.

In Minnesota, locally owned Acorn Mini Storage has expanded its space by an average of 10 percent each year for the past five years and now offers a half-million square feet of storage, said Ellis Gottlieb, vice president of planning and development.

Meanwhile, Storage Mart, a national company, entered the Minnesota market a year ago by opening 40,000 square feet of space in Hopkins and is still looking to add more, as are other companies.

Then there's this remarkable fact: It took more than 25 years starting in the early 1970s for the first 1 billion square feet of storage to be built in the United States, according to the Self Storage Association, an industry group. The second billion square feet was added in about eight years after that.

"We're the super-sized nation now where there is literally the buy-one-get-one free or buy-one-get-one 50 percent off," said Laura Leist, a professional organizer who does

seminars for the retailer Ikea. "And people think that because they're getting it at such a deal, you know, you might as well buy more."

In transition

Most people who need storage space are in a life transition -- moving or getting married or divorced, industry officials say. Businesses are also turning to mini-storage to keep records and inventory, from Sheetrock to vintage items they can sell on eBay.

But some people just want more room to put things in and close the door.

Some say they are finding storage lots so convenient they will probably keep using them for the rest of their lives, regardless of how many closets or garage stalls they have at home.

"People are a lot like snakes: You grow into the size of your cage," said Casey Deedon, who rents a storage space because he, his wife and child are outgrowing their Chaska townhouse.

The storage space, where they're stashing outgrown baby toys and clothes, extra golf clubs and Christmas decorations, is allowing them to put off buying a bigger home, he said. "I am extremely glad that I have it," Deedon said.

Storage units also can create more domestic harmony.

"I like clean lines and not cluttered. But my husband also likes not throwing anything out," said St. Paul resident Kelly Finstrom, who rents a storage space near the house they share with their four children. Their organized unit contains her husband's model train collection, scrap lumber, paycheck stubs and receipts from hotels and things they've bought.

She and her husband joke about it, she said. "I said when you die, I'm going to bury you with all your crap."

Though the family is planning to move to South Dakota, Finstrom said she and her husband will probably rent a space there, too, no matter how big their house.

"It makes us much happier," she said. "It helps our marriage quite a bit that I don't have to see it."

Empty drawer syndrome

Leist, the professional organizer, said storage units can be helpful if they're used for the right reasons: things that have a monetary value that people will use again or use seasonally, for instance. But she said she also sees a lot of clients using storage to put off making decisions on whether to keep stuff or get rid of it.

"Some have a fear of letting things go," said Leist, who has written a book about organizing. "They feel that, you know, they spent good money on it, they might need it someday, they don't have a place to store it in their home, and so this is the next best solution is to get a public storage facility." "Who has empty drawers?" noted Jody Lee, an Acorn Mini Storage facility manager in Chaska.

Coffin's storage space has become a joke among his friends. He rented it originally after a tree fell on a vacation mobile home and he needed a place to store what was there. He has kept it ever since. He offers to store things for friends. And while he keeps a canoe and a kayak and a few other higher-value items in the unit, he says most of what's in there isn't worth keeping.

"It's really embarrassing," he said. "It's junk."

But when he buys things such as Styrofoam minnow buckets, he doesn't throw them away, he says, because he can put them in storage.

"It's just too much work to get rid of it," he said. "You quit renting the storage unit, now you have to rent a Dumpster."