

# Civil defense and the Cold War

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Following the second World War, many in the United States were concerned about the potential of a nuclear weapons attack. Some went so far as to build fallout shelters on their properties, but everyone was taught to “[duck and cover](#).”

The federal government also led efforts to establish community shelters and provided radiation monitoring kits and instructions on how to use them. A former location of the Bradbury Science Museum (back when the Lab was named the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory) also served as a civil defense registration site.

As part of our collection, we have several civil defense kits that include Geiger counters, ancillary equipment, and user manuals that include shortened “If you need to use them right away” instructions.

Thank goodness it never became necessary to use them.

As visitors to the Museum know from our radiation display (and perhaps other sources), Geiger counters are required to detect potentially harmful ionizing radiation after a nuclear explosion. While alpha particles are easily shielded against, beta and gamma particles could be more damaging to the human body, and none can be directly observed by our five senses. Hence the need for Geiger counters to determine the extent of possible radioactive contamination.

In total, the Museum has more than 100 civil defense items in its collections and several of them were recently on display in honor of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Museum's move from the Lab's Technical Area 3 to downtown Los Alamos ([See related article](#)).

To learn more about the civil defense history of the United States, check out the publication [American Civil Defense 1945–1984: The Evolution of Programs and Policies](#), that was put out by the Federal Emergency Management Agency in 1985.

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