

# As global temperatures rise, children must be central climate change debates

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Rising temperatures, rising sea levels and the increasing likelihood of extreme weather will all alter children's lives and the lives of their own children. And yet, children are largely left out of discussions about appropriate responses to climate change, according to a journal released by Princeton University and the Brookings Institution.

Forecasts suggest that by 2050, the world could see 200 million environmental migrants, many of whom would be children. For this reason and others, children should be central to such [climate change](#) debates. They—as well as future generations—have a much larger stake in the outcome than current generations, authors argue in the latest volume of *Future of Children*.

The joint Princeton-Brookings publication outlines how climate change is likely to affect children's health and wellbeing, identifying policies that could mitigate the harm that climate change will cause.

"Decision-making surrounding climate change is greatly complicated by the high degree of uncertainty involved in virtually all of its aspects. Yet waiting for uncertainty to be resolved before acting isn't a viable option, given the risk of allowing irreversible changes to the planet," said senior editor Janet Currie, Henry Putnam Professor of Economics and Public Affairs at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. "When we consider that people today must pay the price of efforts to mitigate climate change but people in the future will reap the benefits, all of these uncertainties make it harder to decide how

to balance future generations' wellbeing against our own."

Four interrelated themes emerge from the issue:

- Climate change will fundamentally alter Earth's climate system in many ways that threaten children's physical and mental wellbeing, both directly and indirectly.
- Today's children and future generations will bear a disproportionate share of the burden caused by climate change.
- Poor children, children in developing countries and countries with weak institutions face the greatest risks.
- The uncertainties associated with climate change and its mitigation—coupled with the fact that the costs of [climate change mitigation](#) policies need to be paid now, but the benefits will accrue in the future—make it difficult to enact appropriate policies.

The findings in this issue have clear implications for policymakers and researchers trying to tackle the many challenges that climate change poses:

- Establishing a large-scale international and coordinated policy response to climate change has proven difficult. Children and [future generations](#) lack a presence in the debate. The 2015 Paris Agreement, the positive outcome of more than 20 years of international climate negotiations, may prove to be a fundamental step in addressing the threat of climate change, but its effectiveness won't be known until two to three decades from now. This state of affairs highlights the fundamental uncertainty that characterizes the issue of climate change, as well as the need to find a way to act despite that uncertainty.
- Even as efforts to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases that cause climate change increase, the climate system will continue

to grow warmer for a significant period of time. Thus, policies must be developed to prepare and adapt in the face of inevitable climate change. States, cities and communities throughout the world must promote preparedness and resilience.

- Large-scale adaptive responses to climate change entail significant societal impacts. For example, countries and communities need to prepare for large-scale migration of poor and vulnerable populations. As previously noted, forecasts suggest that by 2050 we could see 200 million environmental migrants, many of whom would be children.
- Additional public health investments and interventions are needed to educate people about the risks climate change poses to children and to protect individuals and communities from its effects. Advance warning of excessive heat, outreach, and air-conditioned cooling shelters and community centers have succeeded in mitigating the impact of extreme heat. Education and warnings are especially important because the populations most vulnerable to the health effects of climate change are young [children](#) and the elderly. Climate change may therefore place increased demands on already financially-fragile public policies.
- More research across the entire spectrum of disciplines is needed, from improving [climate science](#) and [climate modeling](#) to better measuring [climate change impacts](#) and identifying possible adaptation strategies to developing new methods for effective decision making in the face of long time horizons and deep uncertainty.

Provided by Princeton University

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