

Economists find carbon footprint grows with parenthood

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Increased time constraints and the need for convenience in raising children appear to offset parents' concerns about the future when it comes to their carbon footprints, according to new research by University of Wyoming economists and a colleague in Sweden.

UW's Jason Shogren and Linda Thunstrom, along with Jonas Nordstrom of the Lund University School of Economics and Management, have documented that two-adult households with children emit over 25 percent more [carbon dioxide](#) than two-adult households without

children. Their research appears April 15 in *PLOS One*.

"While having children makes people focus more on the future and, presumably, care more about the environment, our study suggests that parenthood does not cause people to become 'greener,'" Shogren and Thunstrom say. "In fact, the difference in CO2 emissions between parents and non-parents is substantial, and that's primarily because of increased transportation and food consumption changes."

The study involved an analysis of expenditures on goods and services by households in Sweden. The researchers found that parents with children at home consume goods and services that emit CO2 in the areas of food, such as meat, and transportation, such as gasoline, at higher rates than childless households.

The economists note that [time constraints](#) become more binding, and convenience may become more important, when people have children.

"Parents may need to be in more places in one day," resulting in people driving themselves instead of using public transportation or bicycling, the researchers wrote. "They also need to feed more people. Eating more pre-prepared, red meat carbon-intensive meals may add convenience and save time."

The disparity in the carbon footprints of Swedish households with and without children is particularly striking, as concerns about climate change are more pronounced in Sweden than most other developed countries. Most Swedes believe climate change is real and have accepted sizable CO2 taxes, and households with children are subsidized, which helps to alleviate some of the time crunch for parents. Sweden has generous parental leave and subsidized day care, and parents have a legal right to reduced [work hours](#).

"If we're finding these results in Sweden, it's pretty safe to assume that the disparity in [carbon footprints](#) between parents and nonparents is even bigger in most other Western countries," Thunstrom says—though she notes that Sweden also has one of the world's highest female labor participation rates, which may add to the time constraints of household with children.

"Becoming a parent can transform a person—he or she thinks more about the future and worries about future risks imposed on their children and progeny," Shogren says. "But, while having children might be transformational, our results suggest that [parents'](#) concerns about [climate change](#) do not cause them to be 'greener' than non-parent adults."

More information: *PLOS One* (2020). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0231105](#)

Provided by University of Wyoming

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