

Why climate change is driving some to skip having kids

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When deciding whether to have children, there are many factors to consider: finances, support systems, personal values. For a growing number of people, climate change is also being added to the list of

considerations, says a University of Arizona researcher.

Sabrina Helm, an associate professor in the Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, is lead author of a new peer-reviewed study that looks at how [climate change](#) is affecting people's decisions about whether to have children.

"For many people, the question of whether to have children or not is one of the biggest they will face in their lives," Helm said. "If you are worried about what the future will look like because of climate change, obviously it will impact how you view this very important decision in your life."

Helm and her collaborators wanted to better understand the specific climate change-related reasons people have for not wanting to have children. They started by analyzing online comments posted in response to news articles written about the growing trend of people forgoing having children due to [climate change concerns](#).

They then sought out adults ages 18 to 35 who said climate change plays an important role in their reproductive decision-making. They interviewed 24 participants about their concerns.

The researchers' findings, published in the journal *Population and Environment*, identify three major themes that emerged in both the [online comments](#) and the interviews.

1) Overconsumption. This was the most common concern expressed by interviewees, Helm said. Almost all participants said they worried about how children would contribute to climate change through an increased carbon footprint and overuse of resources that could become more scarce in the future, such as food and water.

2) Overpopulation. Overpopulation was the prevailing concern among online commenters, and it often came up in interviews as well, Helm said. Some participants said they felt having more than two children would be problematic and even selfish, as they would be "over-replacing" themselves and their partner. Some said they saw adoption as a more responsible choice. "Adoption was seen as the low-carbon alternative," Helm said.

3) An uncertain future. Interviewees and online commenters also frequently expressed a sense of doom about the future if climate change continues unchecked. Many said they would feel guilty or as if they were doing something morally or ethically wrong if they brought a child into a world with such an uncertain future.

While the "doom" perspective was prevalent, it was also balanced with expressions of hope, Helm said. Some interviewees and commenters said the very idea of children gives hope for a better and brighter future. Others expressed hope that [future generations](#) could contribute to environmental improvement by increasing climate change awareness and action.

"There was a hope that future generations will get the job done and makes things better," Helm said. "But that puts a lot of burden on small [children](#)."

Understanding how climate change affects reproductive decision-making is part of a larger effort by Helm and other researchers to understand how climate change is impacting individuals mentally and emotionally overall. Helm noted that climate change anxiety is on the rise, especially in younger people.

"Many people now are severely affected in terms of mental health with regard to climate change concerns," she said. "Then you add this very

important decision about having kids, which very few take lightly, and this is an important topic from a public health perspective. It all ties into this bigger topic of how climate change affects people beyond the immediate effect of weather phenomena."

Helm said many study participants expressed anger and frustration that their concerns aren't taken seriously by family members and friends, who might dismissively tell them they will change their minds about having kids when they're older or meet the right person.

"It's still a bit taboo to even talk about this—about how worried they are—in an environment where there are still people who deny [climate change](#)," Helm said. "I think what's been lacking is the opportunity to talk about it and hear other people's voices. Maybe this research will help."

More information: Sabrina Helm et al, No future, no kids—no kids, no future?, *Population and Environment* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s11111-021-00379-5](#)

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