

# Government inaction on climate change linked to psychological distress in young people

September 14 2021

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Nearly half of global youth surveyed (45 percent) say climate anxiety and distress is affecting their daily lives and functioning—according to results from the largest scientific study into climate anxiety in children and young people, to be presented at a special event today (Tuesday 14 September 2021)

The inaugural study, based on surveys with 10,000 [children](#) and [young people](#) (16–25) across 10 countries, found 75 percent of young respondents believe 'the future is frightening'—jumping to 81 percent of youth surveyed in Portugal and 92 percent in the Philippines. It found, for the first time, that [climate](#) distress and anxiety is significantly related to perceived [government](#) inaction and associated feelings of betrayal. 58 percent of children and young people surveyed said governments were "betraying me and/or future generations," while 64 percent said their governments are not doing enough to avoid a climate catastrophe.

The study found widespread psychological distress among children and young people globally and warns 'such high levels of distress, functional impact and feelings of betrayal will negatively affect the mental health of children and young people.' Experts warn that because continued government inaction on [climate change](#) is psychologically damaging, it potentially amounts to a violation of international human rights law.

Caroline Hickman, from the University of Bath, Climate Psychology Alliance and co-lead author on the study said: "This study paints a horrific picture of widespread climate anxiety in our children and young people. It suggests for the first time that high levels of psychological distress in youth is linked to government inaction. Our children's anxiety is a completely rational reaction given the inadequate responses to climate change they are seeing from governments. What more do governments need to hear to take action?"

Dr. Liz Marks, from the University of Bath's Department of Psychology and co-lead author on the study, said: "It's shocking to hear how so many young people from around the world feel betrayed by those who are supposed to protect them. Now is the time to face the truth, listen to young people, and take urgent action against climate change."

Mitzi Tan, 23-years-old, from the Philippines, said: "I grew up being

afraid of drowning in my own bedroom. Society tells me that this anxiety is an irrational fear that needs to be overcome—one that meditation and healthy coping mechanisms will 'fix." At its root, our climate anxiety comes from this deep-set feeling of betrayal because of government inaction. To truly address our growing climate anxiety, we need justice."

Beth Irving, a 19-year-old climate activist behind the Cardiff student climate strikes, said: "When I was 16... I went through phases of feeling utterly helpless in face of this immense problem, and then would launch myself into organizing protests or changing things within my school. To put so much energy into something and then see so little real life impact was exhausting; I had many occasions where I would hide myself away and think "None of this is enough." It's so damaging to put this problem on the shoulders of young people—hope needs to come instead from palpable structural action."

Additional findings from the study include:

- 59 percent of children and young people surveyed were very or extremely worried about climate change;
- More than half of respondents said they had felt afraid, sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and/or guilty;
- 55 percent of respondents felt they would have fewer opportunities than their parents;
- 65 percent felt governments were failing young people, while 61 percent said the way governments deal with climate change was not "protecting me, the planet and/or future generations";
- Almost half (48 percent) of those who said they talked with others about climate change felt ignored or dismissed.
- Young people surveyed from the Global South expressed more worry and a greater impact on functioning; while young people surveyed in Portugal (which has seen dramatic increases in wildfires since 2017) showed the highest level of worry amongst

those from the Global North.

The study concludes that governments must respond to 'protect the mental health of children and young people by engaging in ethical, collective, policy-based action against climate change.'

The research comes after UNICEF released a report into the physical threat climate change poses to children, with one billion children at 'extremely high risk' of the impacts of the climate crisis.

## **About the study**

- 10,000 young people (aged 16–25 years) were surveyed, using polling company Kantar, in ten countries:
- Australia, United States, United Kingdom, India, Nigeria, Philippines, Finland, Portugal, Brazil and France. Data was collected on their thoughts and feelings about climate change, and government response.
- The study was carried out by academics from a range of institutions: The University of Bath, the University of Helsinki, NYU Langone Health, University of East Anglia, Stanford Medicine Centre for Innovation in Global Health, and Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust, The College of Wooster, Climate Psychiatry Alliance.
- The costs of the survey were funded by AVAAZ. Avaaz is funded by small donations from citizens worldwide which allows it to finance urgently needed quantitative research in the emerging field of climate psychology. Avaaz has been campaigning on climate change for over a decade.

Provided by University of Bath

Citation: Government inaction on climate change linked to psychological distress in young people (2021, September 14) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-09-inaction-climate-linked-psychological-distress.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.