

Climate crisis: What to consider if you're questioning whether to have children

November 27 2023, by Jasmine Fledderjohann and Laura Sochas



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The warnings about the disastrous impact we are having on our planet are becoming more dire. The UN Environment Program's most recent [emissions gap report](#), which tracks our progress in limiting global

warming, revealed that the world is on course for a "hellish" 3°C of global heating before the end of this century.

How can you plan for a family when the outlook is so bleak? A recent [study](#), conducted by Hope Dillarstone, Laura Brown and Elaine Flores from University College London, has reviewed existing evidence to shed light on how the [climate crisis](#) is shaping decisions about whether to have children or not.

Analyzing research published between 2012 and 2022, the researchers found that people who were concerned about the climate [crisis](#) typically wanted to have few children or no children at all. Concerns about overpopulation and overconsumption, uncertainty about the future, and worries about meeting their family's needs were among the factors driving people's desire for smaller families.

Overpopulation and overconsumption

Do you feel guilty about your potential child's carbon footprint? Perhaps you're frustrated by the materialistic values of modern society and the inevitability of overconsumption? These issues also came up in several of the reviewed studies.

There is a long, problematic, and very political history behind the idea of overpopulation. In various forms, the idea has been floating around since at least the late 18th century. It has led to [unethical "population control" measures](#) in some countries.

Some (such as Paul Ehrlich, author of the controversial 1960's book "The Population Bomb") argue that there are already too many people living on our planet, and that the sheer number of people is causing our current environmental crisis. But what overpopulation arguments frequently miss is that it's not just about how many people are on the

planet, but also how sustainably we live that matters. Numbers cannot tell the full story.

The urgency with which we need to tackle the climate crisis also implies that opting not to have children for the sake of the climate would now prove insufficient and ineffective. Even with reduced fertility, the population will continue to grow because of population momentum. Even if the [fertility rate](#) is declining, there is still a large number of people of reproductive age in the global population, resulting in more births than deaths.

The participants of several studies pointed out that more structural solutions, such as drastic reductions in [carbon emissions](#), are urgently needed and promise to be more effective than reducing family size.

Uncertainty about the future

Are you worried your future children may not be able to enjoy nature due to damaged ecosystems? Perhaps you're concerned about a more catastrophic outcome, such as full societal collapse? The review shows that these are major themes influencing people's decision to have fewer children, particularly for those living in the US, Canada, Europe and New Zealand.

These concerns are understandable. The UN's recent [emissions gap report](#) concluded that there is only a 14% chance that the world will limit [global warming](#) to the maximum 1.5°C rise that is being called for by [climate scientists](#).

At the same time, hundreds of millions of people around the globe are already experiencing the catastrophic consequences of climate change in their [everyday lives](#). In Zambia and Ethiopia, for example, climate change concerns are having much more immediate impacts on

childbearing.

In a [study](#) from 2021, which explored the impact of droughts on Zambian women's social and financial well-being and their reproductive lives, one participant said, "The six children I desire to have may not have enough food to eat." But in order to have fewer children, people require access to contraception, the supply of which can be disrupted, particularly in times of crisis.

In parallel, other respondents in Zambia reported that they are considering having more children to provide financial and labor support. This highlights how the climate crisis is already and very directly impeding [reproductive justice](#)—the right to have children, to not have children, and to parent in safe and healthy environments—especially in the global south (lower income countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America).

Childbearing as a political choice

Ultimately, the climate crisis is a collective, and therefore political, crisis. We are much more likely to avoid the worst climate outcomes if we mandate our governments to drastically reduce the emissions generated by industry and consumers than if we concentrate on changing our own individual behaviors.

One [study](#) included in the review made this point by analyzing how environmental activists approached childbearing decisions. Some decided not to have children as a means of exerting political pressure and advocacy, for example, through the former [BirthStrike movement](#).

For others, not having children was a choice made to free up time and energy for political and advocacy activities centring on the [climate](#) crisis. Some people instead saw having [children](#) as a way of raising future

activists.

In the end, the choice is deeply personal. The only "right" answer is the one that is best for you. But we can all do more to make sure policies help everyone enact their own choices.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Climate crisis: What to consider if you're questioning whether to have children (2023, November 27) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-11-climate-crisis-youre-children.html>

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