

# Some young people planning fewer or no kids because of climate change

March 13 2024, by Nara Schoenberg, Chicago Tribune

---



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Collin Pearsall has friends who have started having children. But he has chosen a different path—due, in large part, to climate change.

Pearsall worries about the greenhouse gas emissions a child would add to a planet already experiencing the effects of rising temperatures.

And he is concerned about the impact climate change would have on the child: "the feeling of impending doom, every day, for their whole life."

When he and his wife discussed having kids, he said, they found they were on the same page: "Why would we want to bring a child into the world with no consent as to whether they want to (deal with) all these problems?"

Pearsall, 30, of Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood, is part of a large and increasingly visible group of Americans: people in their teens, 20s and 30s who cite climate change as a reason they are hesitating to have children, or choosing not to do so.

Data is scarce but a 2021 study [published](#) in the journal *Lancet Planet Health* found that 36% of teens and [young adults](#) were hesitant to have children due to climate change.

Famous millennials—from Miley Cyrus to Prince Harry—have said they are taking climate into account when planning their families.

This spring the University of Chicago will be offering a new course on the ethics of reproduction during the climate crisis, taught by divinity school doctoral candidate Kristi Del Vecchio, and there are at least four recent or upcoming books, including "The Conceivable Future: Planning Families and Taking Action in the Age of Climate Change," by Chicago activist Josephine Ferorelli and Rhode Island state Rep. Meghan Kallman.

The kids-and-climate issue "went basically from behind-closed-doors to conventional wisdom," said Ferorelli.

## Ashes raining down

When University of Chicago student Ellen Ma was growing up in Los Angeles, there were rolling blackouts and heat waves.

She remembers going outside after a particularly bad wildfire, and ash was falling from the sky.

"It looked like snow," she said.

"Even in [high school](#), I remember everyone just being hit with this sense of cynicism and hopelessness like, "What am I doing? How can I make any kind of positive impact, even with my own career?" And then thinking, why would I want to bring a child into a world that's so messed up?" she said.

Those feelings were triggered by concerns about climate change, as well as frustration with the way politicians were handling the issue, she said.

For Ma, the lack of action was "pretty terrifying."

Not every flood, heat wave, storm or wildfire is due to climate change, but scientists say that global temperatures are rising, and with them the risk of more—and more extreme—weather events.

Last year was the warmest on record by far, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the 10 warmest years since 1850 have all been in the past decade.

The worsening climate situation has fueled the rise of the climate-and-kids discussion, according to Ferorelli.

"You can't ignore it," Ferorelli said of climate change. "You can't tune it

out the way you could before, not just because more people are talking about it, but because I wore a tank top to the post office yesterday, and it was snowing this morning. This doesn't seem normal anymore."

In 2019, Cyrus declared she wouldn't have children until there was progress on climate change, and Prince Harry and Meghan Markle said they would limit themselves to two children because of climate change.

For some Chicagoans, a turning point came last summer, when wildfire smoke from Canada left the city with some of the worst air quality in the world.

"I just feel like that was one of the first times in my career that I have seen people really make the connection that the wildfires weren't happening here and yet we were so deeply impacted by them," said Sierra Club Illinois Chapter communications coordinator Hannah Flath.

"Folks were experiencing bad health outcomes," Flath said. "Even folks who don't have asthma or other respiratory issues, and are generally young and fit, were not wanting to go for a run because the air quality was so bad."

## **Fewer kids, or none**

Growing up, Flath wanted to have lots of kids—maybe six or seven.

In her mid-20s, she went through a period when she didn't want to have children due to climate change.

And now, at 28, she has reached a middle ground: She doesn't feel comfortable with having six or seven kids, but she would be open to having one or two biological children, or adopting.

"I do feel pretty comfortable with just leaving it a question, for now, but it's definitely something I think about," she said.

Flath's journey reflects the complexity and fluidity of responses to climate change, with some people limiting their families due to concerns for the planet, the child or both, some deciding not to have children, and many changing their minds.

Thirty-three percent of adults who said they had, or expect to have, fewer children than they would want cited climate change as a reason in a 2018 poll of more than 1,800 people ages 20 to 45, performed for The New York Times.

More recently, *The Lancet Planet Health* study found that 36% of Americans ages 16 to 25 were hesitant to have children due to climate change.

Co-author Caroline Hickman said the study, based on surveys of 10,000 people in 10 countries, also found that 68% of Americans reported the future was frightening because of climate change, and 67% said the government is not protecting them, the planet or future generations from the threat.

"I don't think this is just about climate change," said Hickman, a lecturer in social work at the University of Bath. "This is about a kind of intergenerational betrayal. This is, "The very people who are supposed to look after us, the very people we trust with our futures, with our lives, are doing the opposite of what they should do, while, at the same time, telling us that they care about us and we should trust them."

She said she saw climate distress increase dramatically among young people during the COVID-19 crisis, not because of the impact on the planet, but because governments responded to the pandemic with such

great urgency.

Young people asked Hickman, "If we can do that for COVID, why can't we do that for climate change?"

## An 'act of hope'

A lifelong environmentalist, Pearsall, the Humboldt Park resident, tries to live as sustainably as possible, composting food scraps, eating a low to moderate amount of meat, growing herbs on the balcony, and walking or skateboarding instead of driving.

All of those things can have an effect on a person's greenhouse gas emissions, or [carbon footprint](#), but Pearsall, a senior risk engineer at an [insurance company](#), notes that one of the most impactful individual decisions a person can make is whether or not to have children.

According to a 2017 analysis in the journal *Environmental Research Letters*, having one less child is associated with a reduction of 58.6 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents, which compares to 2.4 metric tons a year for living car-free.

Pearsall understands that a lot of people view the decision to have kids through a different lens, but he suspects that his perspective will become more popular.

"As the climate continues to change, with more extreme weather and loss of properties and livelihoods, here and around the world, it's only going to increase, in terms of the number of people who will consider (climate) as the factor that tips the balance in favor of not having kids," he said.

Early in her climate-and-kids journey, Flath also had concerns about her carbon footprint.

But as time went on, she began to push back against the idea that climate change is an individual responsibility, as opposed to a corporate, political or societal one.

"We are made to feel so individually guilty," she said. "If I use a plastic straw, I feel like I'm harming the world. I feel like we have all these messages about individuals and their impact on the planet, and I want the 100 companies that are responsible for the majority of the world's [greenhouse gas emissions](#) to be the ones to feel guilty."

She wants everyday people to be able to have children, if that's what they want, she said. And she wants to leave the door open to having a child of her own one day, without overwhelming climate guilt.

"I just really believe that having kids is an incredibly courageous thing to do. It feels like the ultimate act of hope, that you are willing to take that risk and raise children that hopefully will go on to be good to one another and good to the earth," she said.

Del Vecchio, the U. of C. instructor who is writing her doctoral dissertation about the ethics of having and raising kids during [climate change](#), said that people who decide not to have children, or to have fewer, are finding other ways to expand their family circle.

That can mean serving as godparents, mentors or foster parents.

"I do hear a great sense of loss and lament and frustration about their reproductive choices being minimized or complicated by the climate crisis, but I also want to emphasize that people are finding their way to create these meaningful relationships even if they aren't having more children," she said.

Pearsall said his generation, which came of age during the 2008 financial

crisis, has grown accustomed to living with scary headlines and global problems.

"Everybody has their own coping strategy to focus on other stuff and not get too bogged down," he said. "But when it's 75 degrees in February, it can bubble to the top."

2024 Chicago Tribune. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Some young people planning fewer or no kids because of climate change (2024, March 13) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-young-people-kids-climate.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.