

## **The Impact of Climate Anxiety in Family Formation What Do Young Adults Think about the ‘Climate Baby Dilemma’?**

In Celebration for the 30th Anniversary of the International Year of the Family

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The transition of youth into adulthood is characterized by a multifaceted and intricate landscape, particularly within the context of social and family dynamics. Across different regions, new generations face diverse challenges, rendering their seamless integration into society a complex endeavor. Paramount among these challenges are the attainment of suitable employment, the assurance of adequate incomes, and the establishment of families, which have become akin to navigating an obstacle course in many instances.

One notable demographic trend is the continual increase in the average age of mothers at child-birth. This trend has emerged alongside the initial resurgence of total fertility rates in the early decades of the 21st century, following significant declines in preceding years. However, it is noteworthy that total fertility rates experienced a notable decline subsequent to reaching their peak in 2008, prompting concerns regarding its implications for demographics, economics, and fiscal matters.

Recent research conducted on OECD countries<sup>1</sup>, utilizing panel data models and building upon previous studies, has elucidated a correlation between fluctuations in fertility rates and shifts in the labor market positions of both genders. Moreover, alterations in family policies, encompassing initiatives such as parental leave and early childhood education and care, have been identified as contributing factors. This research offers valuable insights into the intricate dynamics linking family policies, employment patterns, and fertility rates, thereby shedding light on the factors influencing overall population dynamics.

Debates surrounding the severity of consequences stemming from these demographic shifts are widespread. While an aging workforce may present economic challenges, it can potentially be offset by a declining young-age dependency ratio and an augmented female labor force participation rate.

### **Eco-anxiety**

However, another significant dimension poised to exert a profound influence in the forthcoming years is the anxiety induced by warnings about climate change and its ramifications for the fu-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/deliver/326844fo-en.pdf>

ture of our planet. A recent extensive study published by The Lancet<sup>2</sup> found that 40% of Generation Z individuals (born between 1990 and 2010) worldwide are hesitant to have children due to concerns about the climate crisis. Similar sentiments have been echoed in surveys of millennials.

The survey encompassed 10,000 participants aged between 16 and 25 years, distributed across ten countries: Australia, Brazil, Finland, France, India, Nigeria, Philippines, Portugal, the UK, and the USA, with 1000 participants from each nation. Administered via the Kantar platform, the survey was conducted from May 18 to June 7, 2021. Data collected included participants' sentiments and concerns regarding climate change, as well as perceptions of government actions. Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze various dimensions of climate anxiety, while Pearson's correlation analysis was employed to assess the relationship between climate-related distress, functioning, negative beliefs about climate change, and perceptions of government response.

Across all surveyed nations, respondents expressed significant apprehension concerning climate change, with 59% reporting being very or extremely worried and 84% expressing at least moderate levels of concern. Moreover, over 50% of participants reported experiencing emotions such as sadness, anxiety, anger, powerlessness, helplessness, and guilt. A substantial proportion (more than 45%) indicated that their emotions about climate change adversely impacted their daily lives and functioning. Additionally, many respondents harbored pessimistic views about the future, with 75% expressing fear and 83% feeling that society had neglected its responsibility to preserve the planet. Governmental responses to climate change were predominantly rated negatively, with respondents reporting feelings of betrayal outweighing reassurance. Notably, climate anxiety and distress were found to be positively correlated with perceptions of insufficient government action and associated feelings of betrayal.

The findings underscore the widespread prevalence of climate anxiety and dissatisfaction with governmental responses among children and young people globally, significantly influencing their daily functioning. The perceived inadequacy of government initiatives to address the climate crisis is linked to heightened distress levels. Consequently, there is an urgent imperative for further investigation into the emotional ramifications of climate change on this demographic and for governments to validate their concerns by taking immediate and decisive action to mitigate climate change.

Therefore, the intersection of climate change with reproductive decision-making has emerged as a consequential concern, evident in anecdotal accounts highlighting a growing inclination among individuals to incorporate climate change apprehensions into their family planning strategies.

## **Mental health**

Climate change will undoubtedly affect psychological wellbeing. Substantial research<sup>3</sup> has documented harmful impacts on physical health, mental health, and social relations from exposure to extreme weather events that are associated with climate change. Recently, attention has turned to the possible effects of climate change on mental health through emotional responses such as increased anxiety. This paper discusses the nature of climate anxiety and some evidence

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2542-5196%2821%2900278-3>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0887618520300773>

for its existence, and speculates about ways to address it. Although climate anxiety appears to be a real phenomenon that deserves clinical attention, it is important to distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive levels of anxiety. A focus on individual mental health should not distract attention from the societal response that is necessary to address climate change.

Despite the existing body of empirical research separately exploring climate change's impact on mental health and wellbeing, as well as the determinants of reproductive choices, a notable void persists in the literature regarding the nexus between these domains. To address this gap, a recent review published by PLOS<sup>4</sup> endeavors to amalgamate available evidence linking climate change-related anxieties with reproductive decision-making processes, delving into the underlying motivations and rationales.

Employing a systematic review methodology, the study scoured six databases to identify pertinent literature. Included studies encompassed quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods analyses pertaining to three focal areas: climate change, mental health and wellbeing considerations, and reproductive decision-making. Findings underwent a narrative synthesis utilizing a parallel-results convergent synthesis design, with the quality of studies evaluated using three validated assessment tools. From an initial screening of 446 documents against predefined inclusion criteria, thirteen studies were deemed relevant. Spanning the period between 2012 and 2022, the majority of these studies were conducted in Global North countries such as the USA, Canada, New Zealand, and various European nations.

Notably, climate change concerns correlated with diminished positivity towards reproduction and a propensity for fewer offspring or complete abstention from childbearing. Four overarching themes emerged elucidating this relationship: apprehension regarding the future well-being of prospective offspring, environmentalist ideologies centering on issues of overpopulation and resource depletion, the imperative to meet familial subsistence needs amidst environmental uncertainties, and the influence of broader environmental and political convictions.

## **Ethics**

The current evidence underscores the intricate interplay between climate change anxieties and reproductive decision-making, underpinned by ethical, environmental, livelihood, and political considerations. To comprehensively address this complex phenomenon, further research is imperative, particularly adopting an intercultural perspective to encompass the experiences of highly affected populations in the Global South, thus ensuring the attainment of comparability and generalizability in findings.

Experts consulted by the British Medical Journal (BMJ)<sup>5</sup> suggest that levels of eco-anxiety, characterized by a chronic fear of environmental doom, are on the rise, particularly among children and young people. According to Mala Rao and Richard Powell, neglecting the effects of increasing eco-anxiety may risk exacerbating health and social inequalities between individuals more or less vulnerable to these psychological impacts. Additionally, the socioeconomic effects, although currently hidden and unquantified, are anticipated to significantly contribute to the national costs associated with addressing the climate crisis.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://journals.plos.org/climate/article?id=10.1371/journal.pclm.0000236>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bmj.com/company/newsroom/growing-climate-anxiety-poses-significant-threat-to-individuals-and-society/>

Rao and Powell call upon leaders to recognize the challenges ahead, emphasizing the need for immediate action and commitment to forge a path toward a happier and healthier future, ensuring that no one is left behind. They reference a 2020 survey of child psychiatrists in England, revealing that over half are observing distress among children and young people concerning the climate crisis and environmental conditions. Furthermore, a recent international survey focusing on climate anxiety in individuals aged 16 to 25 underscores the profound psychological burdens of climate change experienced by a vast number of young people worldwide.

These findings shed light on the interconnection between young people's emotions and their feelings of betrayal and abandonment by governments and adults. Governments are perceived as inadequately responding to the climate crisis, leaving young people feeling hopeless about the future and questioning humanity's fate.

In addressing the escalating levels of climate anxiety, the experts advocate for ensuring access to reliable information on climate mitigation and adaptation, emphasizing the importance of fostering stronger connections with nature, promoting greener choices at an individual level, and fostering community engagement. They conclude by stressing the urgency of implementing a common united global strategy to tackle the root cause of the climate crisis, global warming, and instill hope for a better future, especially among the young and the most vulnerable communities.

## Europe

In the European context, Ilaria Pitti<sup>6</sup> highlights that the environmental commitment of young individuals transcends mere civic and political engagement; it is intertwined with their perception of transitions, which inherently involves notions of the future and adulthood. By scrutinizing the prevailing growth model and its environmental impact, youth also question the dominance of economic factors in defining adulthood. The standard model of transition to adulthood, by placing work and economic independence as a key step to achieve most of the other markers developed from and sustained the very modern illusion of achieving happiness through a continuous expansion of economy.

Climate awareness has witnessed a rapid surge within the French population in recent years. Presently, this heightened concern is substantiated by a study, reflecting a genuine expectation for change from economic actors and a call for governmental protection through the implementation of public policies. These expectations are now being translated into legal actions before French courts.

A staggering 70% of young people aged 16 to 25 express being “extremely worried” or “very worried” about climate change. The emergence of “eco-anxiety” is increasingly prevalent among young French citizens, with over two-thirds expressing deep apprehension regarding future climate challenges. These statistics resonate with the overarching interest that French citizens exhibit toward this issue, irrespective of age demographics. Notably, a recent study reveals that climate change ranks among the top three challenges perceived by the population: 46% for 15–29-year-olds (1st position); 44% for 30–64-year-olds (2nd position); and 58% of those aged 65 and above (2nd position).

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324110289\\_Young\\_People\\_and\\_Unconventional\\_Political\\_Engagement](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324110289_Young_People_and_Unconventional_Political_Engagement)

Only 14% of French citizens believe that companies are actively combatting global warming. This percentage underscores the widespread sentiment among the French populace that companies are not adequately addressing the pressing issues of global warming and pollution. Conversely, there is acknowledgment that 44% of individual actions by citizens and 31% by NGOs have an impact. However, confidence in the actions taken by the State remains low, with only 26% of respondents believing that governmental measures are effectively combating global warming.

A striking 85% of respondents feel that brands and companies encourage overconsumption, which is often criticized for its significant contribution to pollution. Overconsumption is condemned as a cornerstone of the contemporary economic model in Western countries, with little regard for environmental consequences. There is now a widespread call for a new economic paradigm based on a circular economy to curb overconsumption.

Additionally, 83% of French citizens believe it is imperative to ban the advertising of products with high environmental impacts. A study conducted by the French national agency for ecological transition (ADEME)<sup>7</sup> highlighted that the average weight of all equipment, furniture, and household appliances in a home amounts to 2.5 tonnes, necessitating the extraction of 45 tonnes of raw materials and resulting in the release of 6 tonnes of carbon dioxide during the manufacturing process.

## **America**

Across various age demographics in the United States, there is observable public concern regarding global warming, with both younger and older cohorts expressing significant apprehension towards the issue. However, the extent to which Americans perceive global warming as a serious matter and hold concerns about its implications varies notably among age groups. Individuals under the age of 35 tend to demonstrate a higher level of engagement with the issue compared to those aged 55 and above.

The most prominent generational contrast lies in the perception of whether global warming will pose a substantial threat within one's lifetime. This discrepancy is largely attributable to the differing temporal perspectives inherent to each age group; as individuals age, their perception of the timeframe for experiencing the effects of global warming diminishes.

Another notable disparity among age groups relates to the attribution of global warming to human activities. Younger adults are notably more likely than their older counterparts to attribute the phenomenon to anthropogenic causes. Additionally, younger adults exhibit a greater inclination to believe that news reports on global warming underestimate the severity of the issue. They also demonstrate a higher propensity to express concerns about global warming and to endorse the notion of a scientific consensus regarding its occurrence.

Despite these disparities, younger and older Americans converge most closely in their acknowledgment of the onset of the effects of global warming and in self-reported levels of comprehension regarding the phenomenon.

These findings are drawn from aggregated data spanning Gallup's annual Environment polls conducted from 2015 to 2018.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://librairie.ademe.fr/consommer-autrement/5996-lettre-ademe-strategie-n-65-janvier-2023.html>

## The BirthStrike movement

Especially noteworthy is the BirthStrike Movement<sup>8</sup>, a significant social and environmental endeavor predominantly embraced by individuals, particularly women, who commit to abstaining from having children out of concerns for the planet's future, particularly in the context of climate change and environmental degradation. This movement has gained prominence in response to growing concerns about the long-term viability of human existence on Earth amid worsening environmental crises.

Participants in it articulate profound concerns about bringing children into a world perceived as increasingly unstable, environmentally compromised, and potentially inhospitable due to climate change, pollution, habitat destruction, and other ecological challenges. While it lacks centralized organization or hierarchical structure, it has garnered attention through social media, public declarations, and advocacy endeavors aimed at initiating discussions about the ethical and moral implications of procreation in a swiftly changing and environmentally endangered world.

Critics of the BirthStrike Movement contend that individual decisions to forgo parenthood may have limited impact on broader environmental issues and may overlook the potential for positive change through collective action, policy reform, and technological innovation. Additionally, some critics express concerns about the repercussions of declining birth rates on societal demographics and economic stability.

## A pivotal topic

The resolution A/RES/77/19<sup>9</sup>, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 30, 2022, acknowledges the significant influence of climate change trends on families, recognizing it as a pivotal research and awareness-raising topic at various levels—national, regional, and international. This acknowledgment coincides with the preparations for the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2024 and will feature prominently in the observance of the International Day of Families on May 15.

Emmanuel Pont, author of 'Faut-il arrêter de faire des enfants pour sauver la planète?'<sup>10</sup> ('Should We Stop Having Children in Order to Save the Planet?'), challenges the efficacy and acceptability of population control measures. Pont argues against implementing stringent policies, such as a one-child limit akin to that proposed for France, citing their minimal impact on emissions reduction compared to other measures like phasing out coal-fired power stations. He also challenges commonly held beliefs regarding the carbon footprint associated with childbearing.

Moreover, the question arises: Is climate anxiety solely justified, or does it reflect a broader apprehension about the future prevalent among young generations? According to Nick Luxmoore<sup>11</sup>, the core concern regarding the future extends beyond specific challenges like climate

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<sup>8</sup> <https://birthstrikemovement.org/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://undocs.org/A/RES/77/191>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.emmanuelpont.fr/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/young-people-close/201902/why-young-people-fear-the-future>

change, war, or unemployment. It encompasses a deeper existential anxiety often underestimated in the youth. Older generations may inadvertently contribute to this issue by idealizing youth and their potential.

## **Conclusions**

In summary, eco-anxiety, characterized by chronic apprehension about environmental degradation and climate change, has emerged as a significant factor influencing reproductive decision-making. Individuals experiencing eco-anxiety may harbor concerns about bringing children into a world they perceive as increasingly unstable and environmentally compromised. These concerns stem from fears about the future well-being of potential offspring, worries about the impact of environmental crises such as climate change, pollution, and habitat destruction, and a sense of responsibility to mitigate their carbon footprint.

Moreover, eco-anxiety can influence fertility decisions indirectly by shaping attitudes towards the future and perceptions of the world's sustainability. Individuals experiencing eco-anxiety may question the wisdom of bringing children into a world facing environmental challenges, leading them to delay or reconsider their reproductive plans. This can contribute to a decline in fertility rates, particularly in regions where environmental concerns are widespread.

However, it's essential to recognize that the relationship between eco-anxiety and fertility is complex and multifaceted. While some individuals may choose to limit their family size or refrain from having children due to environmental concerns, others may respond by advocating for environmental conservation and sustainability measures, hoping to create a better world for future generations. Additionally, broader societal factors, such as access to contraception, economic stability, and cultural norms, also play significant roles in shaping fertility decisions alongside eco-anxiety.

The transitions undergone by young individuals are profoundly influenced by a multitude of factors spanning economic, demographic, and environmental realms. These transitions display complex and multifaceted dynamics, necessitating a thorough and nuanced approach. A critical component of this approach involves prioritizing the future framework of family policies. This emphasis is crucial for ensuring that families achieve the necessary level of well-being to fulfill their crucial societal functions.

## **Recommendations**

Addressing declining birth rates requires a nuanced understanding of various factors, including climate change anxiety and shifts towards individualism in society.

There's no one-size-fits-all solution, and potential secondary effects of simplistic approaches must be considered. Economic challenges and climate anxiety undermine the family's role in social development. Restoring confidence in ourselves and our roots is crucial to overcoming fear and approaching the future with realism and courage.

More effective policies focusing on promoting family values are needed, countering information overload, and fostering a commitment to building a future through family life. Practical

measures, such as policies with economic incentives, equal job opportunities, and recognizing motherhood as a full-time job, can boost youth confidence in investing in a family.

Political entities should prioritize awareness campaigns for genuine sustainable living instead of endorsing unnecessary production.

Governments should develop plans at all levels, fostering critical thinking, reframing narratives, addressing negative psychological impacts, creating supportive environments for parents, and providing economic compensations for families reducing their consumption.

\* In previous months, eight student groups from various European universities across six countries investigated the impact of climate anxiety on family planning as part of their contribution to the 30th anniversary preparations for the International Year of the Family and contributed with background information to this paper. The participants were Raphaël Bompuy (France), María Cámara Echevarría (Spain), Valentina Caro Lopez (Spain), Augustin Chassang (France), Briac de Cambourg (France), Klaudia Drągowska (Poland), Marie-Sondès Dumontet (France), Natalia Filipkowska (Poland), Robin Fraiche (France), Miguel García-Nates (Spain), María Garnacho Isasi (Spain), Teresa Gerns (Germany), Álvaro Herrero-Tejedor (Spain), Filip Jurczak (Poland), Maciej Kuliś (Poland), Louis Maupetit (France), Zofia Miedzik (Poland), Levente Orémusz (Hungary), Ana Paula Perez Hernández (United Kingdom), Gabriel Perez Ibiricu (Spain), Alberto Prada Diaz-Villabella (Spain), Stefan Pytel (Poland), Rocío Ramos (Spain), Carla Rodríguez Gutiérrez (United Kingdom), Corentin Rouxel (France), Jaime Sanciñena (Spain), Bence Szabó (Hungary), Jakub Touré (Poland), Zoltan Arpad Trencsenyi (Hungary), Zofia Tymińska (Poland), Agathe Vaillant (France), Grégoire Vassy (France), Maria Waszkiewicz (Poland), and Franciszek Wiącek (Poland),