



A woman and a girl hold hands while watching wildfires burning in Köyceğiz district in Turkey in 2021. Photograph: Yasin Akgül/AFP/Getty Images

Climate crisis

More people not having children due to climate breakdown fears, finds research

Analysis finds concerns about environment key factor in having fewer or no children – but reasons differ around world

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It was just over a decade ago that Emma Smart and her husband, Andy, first decided they would not have children. Back then, her friends and family did not understand.

“When you tell people you didn’t want to have children, that was a big social no-no,” she recalled. “And then when they asked you why, and you said for environmental reasons, that was completely unheard of.

“Like, I remember, my brother-in-law laughed when I said that.”

But what had seemed an eccentric decision a decade ago is, with growing awareness of the parlous state of our biosphere, becoming an increasingly common sentiment. New research has found many people are now basing their decisions not to have children on their fears of climate breakdown.



Children at 'existential risk' from climate crisis, UK's top paediatrician says

The study, by a team of academics at University College London, is believed to be the first systematic review to explore how and why climate-related concerns may be affecting reproductive decision-making.

Their analysis found that, in 12 of 13 studies, stronger concerns about climate breakdown were associated with a desire for fewer children, or none at all.

Smart says the reasons for her decision were twofold. "It was, one, that moral responsibility of do you bring a child into a world where potentially they might not have a pleasant, even livable future," she told the Guardian.

"But then there is the secondary moral dilemma of the kinds of emissions behind having a child. And that sounds cold and sort of more [like] data than emotion, but that was a big factor for us."

Uncertainty about the future and concerns about the ecological impact of the growing human population were key factors also identified by research,

according to Hope Dillarstone, lead author on the study published in the journal PLOS Climate. Dillarstone and her colleagues found that concerns such as those outlined by Smart were by no means unusual.

But concerns also differed in different parts of the world, Dillarstone said. “There was a concern that came out only in Zambia and Ethiopia, which was about a family’s ability to subsist and acquire resources,” she said.

“So people were concerned, if they had too many children, that then that would diminish the chances of children being able to survive, ultimately, because they would have too many mouths to feed.”

Dillarstone’s research also found political reasons people were choosing not to have children – another finding that resonated with Smart’s feelings. Over the past decade, Smart has shifted from working in wildlife conservation to full-time environmental activism, a calling which requires sacrifices incompatible with the responsibilities of having children to look after.

“We love being an aunt and uncle, and also being in a position to be able to actively fight and take risks and make sacrifices,” Smart said. “Whether that be [getting] arrested or going to prison, or sacrifices of our time, to ensure that our nieces do have a better future.”

Dillarstone said she hoped a greater understanding of how people make reproductive choices in the knowledge of the climate crisis would help shape public policy. But she said her findings also showed reasons that people gave were complex, and could not be generalised across the whole world.