

# Overwhelming majority of young Americans worry about climate crisis

Survey of young people aged 16-25 from all US states shows concerns across political spectrum

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Thu 17 Oct 2024 23.31 BST

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Large majorities of both main political parties – 92% of Democrats and 73% of Republicans – said they worried about the climate. Photograph: Alex Kent/AFP/Getty Images

The overwhelming majority of young Americans worry about the climate crisis, and more than half say their concerns about the environment will affect where they decide to live and whether to have children, new research finds.

The study comes just weeks after back-to-back hurricanes, Helene and Milton, pummeled the south-eastern US. Flooding from Helene caused more than 600 miles of destruction, from Florida's west coast to the mountains of North Carolina, while Milton raked across the Florida peninsula less than two weeks later.

“One of the most striking findings of the survey was that this was across the political spectrum,” said the lead author, Eric Lewandowski, a clinical psychologist and associate professor at the NYU Grossman School of Medicine. “There was no state sample where the endorsement of climate anxiety came in less than 75%.”

The study was published in the Lancet Planetary Health, and follows a 2021 study covering 10 countries. Both the previous and current study were paid for by Avaaz, an advocacy group.

The new study was conducted by researchers from NYU School of Medicine, Stanford University, Utah State University, the University of Washington and George Washington University, among others.

In an online survey, researchers asked young people aged 16-25 from all 50 US states to rate their concerns, thoughts and emotions regarding the climate crisis; about their political affiliation and about who has responsibility for causing climate change. Researchers conducted the survey online from July to November 2023.

An overwhelming majority of young people said they were worried about the climate crisis – 85% said they were at least moderately worried, and more than half (57%) said they were “very or extremely” worried. Nearly two-thirds endorsed the statement: “Humanity is doomed,” and more than half of the sample (52%) endorsed: “I’m hesitant to have children.”

“I often hear adults say that our generation, gen Z, will fix what they have broken. What they may not understand is the pressure this puts on all of us,” said Zion Walker, a student and member of the Climate Mental Health Network’s Gen Z Advisory Board, in a statement. “Yes, we are taking steps and fighting for the future, but many of us are overwhelmed by the daily reality of climate disasters – waking up to news of wildfires engulfing homes and hurricanes taking lives.”

Large majorities of both main political parties – 92% of Democrats and 73% of Republicans – said they worried about the climate. Respondents also said they had negative thoughts about the climate and had planned action to respond to their concerns, including voting for political candidates who would pledge to support “aggressive” action.

Using a statistical technique called a regression model, researchers also found that young people who reported more exposure to more climate-related disasters were more likely to want a plan for action.

“One of the findings we talk about in the text was the proportion of people who want this to be talked about,” said Lewandowski. He added that more than 70% of young people want the climate to be a subject of discussion, “and for older generations to try to understand how they feel.”

The new research represents an emerging topic in mental health stressors. The relationship between mental health impacts and natural disasters – such as Helene, Milton and even Covid-19 – is well established. Researchers have even found a dose-response relationship, with more reported depression symptoms associated with greater exposure to disaster. Climate anxiety, such as worry about the future of the planet, is an area of emerging research.

“Stressors like divorce, unemployment, having your kids do poorly in school, having a hard time looking after your ageing parents are all associated with worse mental health,” said Dr Sandro Galea, dean of the Boston University School of Public Health, who was not involved in the research.

Although less studied, Galea said, “having stressors around climate, worsening of the planet, fear of things like conflict – those are all very plausibly associated with poor mental health.”