

September 27, 2016



Thousands gather at Science World for the November 16th #DefendOurClimate day of action, Vancouver's contribution to more than 130 gatherings of Canadians across the country standing up for science-based action on climate change, and an end to the fossil-fueled greed perpetrated by Harper and his embarrassing government. [Children Chalk](#) by [Chris Yakimov](#) | Flickr | CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Bioethicist: The climate crisis calls for fewer children

Travis N. Rieder

This post was originally published by [The Conversation](#) on September 11, 2016. The original article is available [here](#).

Earlier this summer, I found myself in the middle of a lively debate because of my work on climate change and the ethics of having children.

NPR correspondent Jennifer Ludden profiled some of my work in procreative ethics with an article entitled, "[Should we be having kids in the age of climate change?](#)," which summarized my published views that we ought to consider adopting a "[small family ethic](#)" and even pursuing [fertility reduction efforts](#) in response to the threat from climate change. Although environmentalists for decades have worried about overpopulation for many good reasons, I suggest the fast-upcoming thresholds in climate change provide uniquely powerful reasons to consider taking real action to slow population growth.

Clearly, this idea struck a nerve: I was overwhelmed by the response in my personal email inbox as well as op-eds in other media outlets and over 70,000 shares on Facebook. I am gratified that so many people took the time to read and reflect on the piece.

Having read and digested that discussion, I want to continue it by responding to some of the most vocal criticisms of my own work, which includes research on "[population engineering](#)" – the intentional manipulation of human population size and structure – I've done with my colleagues, Jake Earl and Colin Hickey.

In short, the varied arguments against my views – that I'm overreacting, that the economy will tank and others – haven't changed my conviction that we need to discuss the ethics of having children in this era of climate change.

How bad will things get?

Some comments – those claiming climate change is a hoax, devised by those who wish to control the world's resources – are not worth responding to. Since [97 percent of all relevant experts](#) cannot convince climate change skeptics of the basic scientific facts, then nothing I say will change their minds.

Other concerns, however, do require a response. Many people reacted to my work on procreation ethics by saying climate change will not be so bad, and so curbing individual desires, such as having children, in its name is unnecessary fear-mongering.

In my work, I suggest that 1.5-2 degrees Celsius warming over preindustrial levels will be "dangerous" and "very bad," while 4 degrees C will be "catastrophic" and will leave large segments of the Earth "largely uninhabitable by humans." Here is a very brief survey of the evidence for those claims based on what I consider reputable sources.

At [1.5-2 degrees C](#), a World Bank report predicts an increase in extreme weather events, deadly heat waves and severe water stress. Food production will decrease, and changing disease vectors will create unpredictable infectious disease outbreaks. Sea levels will rise, combining with increased storm severity to place coastal cities at risk. The World Health Organization (WHO) [estimates](#) that from the years 2030-2050 – as we reach this level of warming – at least 250,000 people will die every year from just some of the climate-related harms.



It's widely recognized that the global poor will disproportionately suffer the consequences of climate change. Here people displaced by flooding in Pakistan in 2010 line up for water. [Asian Development Bank, CC BY-NC-ND](#)

Perhaps many of us in rich countries (the "us" who might be reading this) will be largely protected from these early harms; but that doesn't make them less real to the vulnerable citizens of, say, [Bangladesh](#), [Kiribati](#) or [the Maldives](#). In fact, it [escalates the injustice](#), as the global wealthy have benefited from and contributed to climate change the most, while the global poor will be hurt first and worst.

At [4 degrees C warming](#), the World Bank predicts that every summer month will be hotter than any current record heat wave, making the Middle East, North Africa and the Mediterranean deadly during the summer months. Many coastal cities will be completely under water, and all low-lying island nations will likely have to be abandoned. Hundreds of millions, if not billions of people could become [climate refugees](#), as their homelands become uninhabitable.

Based on these descriptions, I stand by my predictions.

No, environmentalists don't hate babies

Other critics have argued that advocating for a lower birth rate = [hating babies](#) or being "[anti-life](#)."

Obviously I don't hate babies! I'm pretty wild about my own kid, and small humans in general.

This anti-life charge is more interesting, but equally wrong. The premise seems to be that those who wish to lower fertility rates must be misanthropic, or fail to see the value of humans. But that gets things exactly backwards: A radical concern for climate change is precisely motivated by a concern for human life – in particular, the human lives that will be affected by climate disruptions.

A valuable philosophical contribution here is [the distinction between “making people happy” and “making happy people.”](#) When I feed a hungry person, or prevent a harm from befalling someone, I improve a person’s well-being. But when I create a person whom I will then feed and prevent from harm, I make a person who will predictably be well off. In the first case, I added happiness to the world by helping an existing person; whereas in the second case, I added happiness by creating a person who will be happy. See the difference?

I, like many philosophers, believe that it’s morally better to make people happy than to make happy people. Those who exist already have needs and wants, and protecting and providing for them is motivated by respect for human life. It is not a harm to someone not to be created.

In fact, I would argue that it is more “anti-life” to prioritize creating new life over caring for, or even not harming, those who already exist.

Can the economy grow with lower population growth?

Another opposing argument: People are not only consumers – they are also [producers](#), and so will make the world better.

Yes, humans are producers, and many wonderful things have come from human genius. But each person, whatever else they are (genius or dunce, producer or drag on the economy) is also a consumer. And this is the only claim needed in order to be worried about climate change.

The problem here is that we have a finite resource – the ability of the Earth’s atmosphere to absorb greenhouse gases without violently disrupting the climate – and each additional person contributes to the total amount of greenhouse gas in the atmosphere. So although humans will hopefully save us (we do, in fact, desperately need brilliant people to develop scaleable technology to remove carbon from the air, for instance), the solution to this cannot be to have as many babies as possible, with the hope that this raises our probability of solving the problem. Because each baby is also an emitter, whether a genius or not.

Lastly, there’s the view that lowering fertility rates [will kill the economy](#).

Several commenters point to low-fertility countries like Japan, Italy and Germany, and argue that problems experienced by such countries are proof that the “real” population crisis is our dropping fertility rate. We need more babies to grow into healthy young producers to keep our economic engine humming.

The truth in this objection is the following: An economy that requires infinite growth to be healthy will be harmed in a world of finite resources. But if it's true that our economies can't survive slowing or even reversing population growth, then we're in some trouble no matter what.

Why? It's simple logic that we cannot grow our population forever. We can either reflect now on how to protect our economy while working toward a sustainable population, or we can ignore the problem until nature forces it on us, perhaps violently and unexpectedly.

I'll conclude with one, final thought: I don't enjoy arguing for a small family ethic, or a population engineering scheme. Despite snide accusations to the contrary, I get no research funds or any other incentive for making this case. I'm arguing these points because I'm genuinely worried about the future of our planet, and the people who will inherit it, and I believe difficult yet civil discussion is the crucial first step to making that future one we won't be condemned for creating.

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