

Having Children as the Climate Changes¹

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) recently posed a difficult question in an Instagram live stream: “Basically, there’s a scientific consensus that the lives of children are going to be very difficult [due to climate change]. And it does lead, I think, young people to have a legitimate question: Is it okay to still have children?”²

Politically conservative commentators quickly characterized Ocasio-Cortez's comments as a "nochild policy." They deemed her view ugly, frightening, and "disturbingly authoritarian, even fascistic." One commentator suggested that she may have been having a mental breakdown. As one news show host put it, "She's saying, 'don't have kids' because it's going to hurt our country. So if you don't believe in kids, and families, and the flag, then you're effectively admitting to civilizational suicide."³

But many young people share 29-year-old Ocasio-Cortez's worry. In a recent poll by Business Insider, approximately 38% of people between the ages of 18 and 29 and 34% of people between 30 and 44 agreed that climate change should be factored into the decision to have children or not. Similarly, in a 2018 New York Times survey of people between 20 and 45, 11% of respondents indicated that they did not want children or were unsure about having children because of the threat of climate change. A full 33% of respondents stated that they were having fewer children than they wanted to have because they were concerned about climate change.⁴⁵ Indeed, the United States birthrate has hit record lows for the past several years.⁶

Recent reports on climate change paint a dire picture. "The impacts and costs of climate change are already being felt in the United States, and changes in the likelihood or severity of some recent extreme weather events can now be attributed with increasingly higher confidence to human-caused warming."⁷ According to the world's leading scientists, we have twelve years left

¹ © Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, 2019. Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl case, Fall 2019 Regional competition.

² Umair Irfan, "We need to talk about the ethics of having children in a warming world," Vox, Mar. 11, , <https://www.vox.com/2019/3/11/18256166/climate-change-having-kids>

³ Eliza Relman, "Fox News hosts accuse Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of 'admitting to civilization suicide' after the congresswoman asks if it's 'okay to still have children' with the threat of climate change," Business Insider, Feb. 26, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/fox-news-hosts-say-alexandria-ocasiocortez-wants-to-get-rid-of-kids-2019-2>

⁴ Eliza Relman & Walt Hickey, "More than a third of millennials share Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's worry about having kids while the threat of climate change looms," Business Insider, March 4, 2019, [https://www.businessinsider.com/millennials-americans-worry-about-kids-children-climate-change-poll-](https://www.businessinsider.com/millennials-americans-worry-about-kids-children-climate-change-poll-3?r=US&IR=T)

⁵ [-3?r=US&IR=T](https://www.businessinsider.com/millennials-americans-worry-about-kids-children-climate-change-poll-3?r=US&IR=T)

⁶ Bill Chappell, "U.S. Births Fell To A 32-Year Low in 2018; CDC Says Birthrate Is In Record Slump," NPR, May 15, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/15/723518379/u-s-births-fell-to-a-32-year-low-in-2018cdc-says-birthrate-is-at-record-level>

⁷ Umair Irfan, "3 big takeaways from the major new US climate report," Vox, Nov. 24, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/11/24/18109883/climate-report-2018-national-assessment>

to reverse course and prevent the worst consequences of climate change. But mustering the political will to make the required changes will be difficult.⁸

Concerns over procreating in the face of climate change fall into two broad categories: **that today's children will suffer the brunt of the consequences of climate change**, and that **having more children will make the problem of climate change worse by increasing the burden on the planet**. As Travis Rieder, ethics professor and father of one, explains: "Procreating both contributes to climate change and creates a new victim of climate change, . . . I don't know whether people should have kids, or whether they should have a big family, but I do believe that climate change should be part of their deliberation, because the consequences of bringing a new person into a changing world are really morally serious."⁹

Another factor to consider is whether today's children will be the ones to find the solution to climate change. Your child may grow up to be a leading scientist, an environmental advocate, or at least vote for political solutions to climate change.¹⁰ Erle Ellis, a geography and environmental systems professor, puts it this way: **"People who are so concerned they would even consider not having children are the very kind of people who can be part of the solution. By having children they have doubled down on the future. They are motivated.** Because they know if they don't succeed, they are failing not only themselves but this new generation they have brought into the world."³⁸

⁸ Jonathan Watts, "We have 12 years to limit climate change catastrophe, warns UN," The Guardian, Oct. 8, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed15c-warns-landmark-un-report>

⁹ James Rainey, "For some millennials, climate change clock ticks louder than biological one," NBC News, April 21, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/some-millennials-climate-change-clockticks-louder-biological-one-n993331>; see also Alexis Papazoglou, "Is It Cruel to Have Kids in the Era of Climate Change?" The New Republic, Feb. 25, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/153149/cruel-kidsera-climate-change>

¹⁰ Tyler Cowen, "Want to Help Fight Climate Change? Have More Children," Bloomberg Opinion, March 14, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-03-14/want-to-help-fight-climate-changehave-more-children> ³⁸ Rainey, supra.

Case Analysis

Metzger, E. and Curren, R., 2020. Using Case Studies to Investigate the Socioeconomic and Ethical Dimensions of Sustainability. *Earth Educator's Rendezvous Abstracts*.

Here are some ethically significant aspects of this case:

- ***Do not obstruct transparency and cooperation with regard to sustainability.*** This principle is violated by the commentators who grossly misrepresented and ridiculed what Rep A. O.-C. said. Undermining honest and well-informed attempts to *seek and accept fair terms of cooperation* conducive to sustainability is unethical.
- ***Do not subject individuals or collectivities to detrimental reliance.*** This principle is violated with respect to *today's children [who] will suffer the brunt of the consequences of climate change*, since they are being born into a civilization that *relies on systems or resources that cannot be relied on without exposure to unreasonable risk*. The risk is growing because the systems are being damaged by overreliance while too little is being done to reduce excessive reliance. *A growing population is one aspect of growing impact on natural systems.*
- ***A human rights perspective is also relevant to ethically evaluating family size.*** E.g., a key aspect of climate change is diminishing availability of freshwater. The UN recognizes universal access to safe and affordable water for personal uses as a human right, and population pressures are one relevant factor in governments' ability to secure water rights for everyone.
- ***Take care to ensure that the human attributes, practices, institutions, systems, and policies within your control, authority, or influence are conducive to ecological and throughput sustainability.*** *The suggestion that having more children is a way to address climate change is confused.* Perpetuating the practice of having unsustainably large families is a violation of the basic principle that people should live sustainably or *do their part to not diminish the opportunities for everyone to live well in the future.* “**Doubling down on the future**” amounts to either: **(a)** expecting today's children to solve an even bigger problem than the one that today's adults have failed to solve, while facing more risk; or **(b)** speculating that the extra motivation of having more of one's own vulnerable children to worry about is likely to make a decisive difference in addressing the problem. This is like giving terrorists more hostages in the hope that it will lead to strategies to prevent future hostage crises. Either way, “doubling down on the future” violates the principle that it is wrong to subject people to *detrimental reliance*.