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Statistically Speaking:
**The Future is Frightening: High Levels of Climate Anxiety in Young
People Linked to Government Inaction**

*Helen Wu*¹

I. INTRODUCTION

The climate crisis is one of the defining human and children’s rights challenge of this generation and is already having a devastating impact on the physical and psychological well-being of young people globally. According to new research, young people all over the world are experiencing increasing anxiety over the fate of the planet – specifically climate change and how governments are handling the looming crisis. The ones who bear the burden of climate change are experiencing significant and alarming levels of distress.

This article contends that inadequate governmental response is endangering the well-being of young people and the realities of the climate crisis need to be swiftly confronted before conditions worsen. First, this article will address the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) report illustrating the extreme threat that climate change poses to the world’s children. It will then discuss the research finding a direct link between the emotional weight of climate change and government inaction. It will further discuss the global movements that young people have led and engaged in in hopes of raising awareness and pushing for government action, including school strikes and litigation. The article will conclude by calling for action to protect not only the physical but also the mental health of young people.

II. THE EXTREME RISKS YOUNG PEOPLE FACE FROM CLIMATE IMPACTS

A 2021 report from UNICEF found that nearly every child on earth is exposed to at least one climate and environmental hazard, shock, or stress such as heatwaves, cyclones, air pollution, flooding, and water scarcity. Approximately 1 billion children – nearly half the world’s 2.2 billion children – live in countries that are at an “extremely high-risk” from the impacts of climate change. Astoundingly, 850 million children – approximately one-third of all children – are exposed to four or more stresses. These children face a deadly combination of exposure to multiple climate and environmental shocks with a high vulnerability due to inadequate essential services, such as water and sanitation, healthcare, and education.

The report emphasized that children are uniquely vulnerable to climate hazards as children are less able to survive extreme weather events and are more susceptible to toxic chemicals, temperature changes and diseases. Without the urgent action required to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, children will continue to suffer the most. It called for

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increased investment in climate adaptation and in key services for children, providing children with climate education and greens skills, the inclusion of young people in all climate negotiations and decisions, and ensuring the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is green, low-carbon and inclusive.

The results of the report strongly suggest that young people face disproportionate and cascading forms of climate harm. They are and will continue to be adversely affected by the health effects of climate change.

III. THE RESEARCH ON CLIMATE ANXIETY

A new study published in September 2021 in the scientific journal *The Lancet*² found that the majority of young people ages sixteen to twenty-five³ suffer from high levels of climate anxiety. The landmark study aimed to better understand the feelings, thoughts, and functional impacts associated with climate change among young people. The global study surveyed 10,000 young adults across ten countries (Australia, Brazil, Finland, France, India, Nigeria, the Philippines, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and found “widespread psychological distress” among them.

Participants reported a wide range of negative emotions. Six in ten young people feel “very” or “extremely” worried about the climate crisis. More than half of respondents said they had felt afraid, sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and/or guilty. Nearly half of all young people surveyed said their feelings about climate change negatively affect their daily life and functioning. Three-quarters agreed with the statement “the future is frightening.” These emotions are even leading more than one-third of young people to be hesitant about the idea of having children of their own, citing the unstable climate and the added carbon footprint of having kids as reasons.

Most notably, the research discovered for the first time that the climate anxiety these young people were experiencing was significantly related to perceived government inaction: 64% of those surveyed said governments are not doing enough to avoid a climate catastrophe; 61% said governments are not protecting them, the planet, or future generations; 58% said governments are betraying them. On every dimension of trust in authority figures and confidence that those in power were taking the climate crisis seriously, a majority of those surveyed expressed serious doubts that those with the power to address the climate emergency were willing, or able, to do so. The failure of governments to adequately address climate change and the impact on younger generations potentially constitutes moral injury – significant psychological distress caused by witnessing a traumatic event that runs against the viewer’s morals, that they are powerless to stop. Not only can moral injury further increase mental health risks, the authors say, but it could also open the door to lawsuits based on psychological harm. The

² The article has been released on a pre-publication basis while it is under the peer review process.

³ As longitudinal neuroimaging studies demonstrate that the adolescent brain continues to mature well into the 20s, it is important to open up this discussion of the mental health impact of climate change to those we would otherwise consider to be young adults.

study concludes that governments must respond to protect the mental health of young people by engaging in ethical, collective, policy-based action against climate change.

To remedy climate change's negative mental health impacts, the authors propose increased psychosocial resources, coping skills, and agency. This would include having one's feelings and views heard, validated, respected, and acted upon, particularly by those in positions of power, accompanied by collective pro-environmental actions.

IV. OVERVIEW OF YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE CLIMATE FIGHT

Young people have been at the forefront of the climate fight for some years. Eighteen-year-old environmental activist Greta Thunberg became a household name in 2018 when she began skipping school to protest outside the Swedish parliament to pressure the government to meet carbon emissions targets. After the Swedish election, Thunberg returned to school but continued to skip classes on Fridays to strike, and these days were called "Fridays for Future." Thanks to social media, her small campaign had a global effect, inspiring thousands of young people across the world to organize their own strikes. By December 2018, more than 20,000 students had joined her in at least 270 cities. The passion and activism of the global movements of Fridays For Future climate strikes have helped to catapult young people's concerns into the political arena.

Youth are not only striking and turning out in the streets, but they are also turning up in court – suing their governments to prioritize their claim to a future. Young people in the Netherlands sued their government in 2013 for inaction on climate change and the court ordered the government to curb carbon emissions by at least 25% by 2020. This was the most pivotal climate lawsuit in the past decade because it was the first tort case taken against a government challenging climate change aspects based on a human rights foundation, and the first such successful climate justice case. The case effectively argued that the government was putting citizens in "unacceptable danger" by setting an insufficient emissions reduction goal of 14-17% and sparked a wave of human rights lawsuits around the world.

Another ground-breaking success emerged in Colombia, where twenty-five young people won their lawsuit against the government in 2018 for failing to protect the Amazon rainforest. The plaintiffs successfully argued that the government's failure to curb deforestation threatened their rights and those of future generations, who will be the ones to suffer the worst climate change effects. The court agreed and ordered the government to come up with a plan to reduce deforestation. What made this case unique was that it recognized the Amazon rainforest as an entity with its own rights. The case had a similar impact as the Netherlands case in that it became a model for similarly fashioned lawsuits in other countries.

In the United States, where judges are traditionally immune from influence from international cases, twenty-one youths aged nine to twenty brought a federal lawsuit in 2015 accusing the government of failing to adequately combat climate change. The plaintiffs in *Juliana v. United States* sought to hold the U.S. accountable for its role in the climate crisis, charging it to work rapidly to reverse and mitigate the crisis by creating policies that phase out carbon dioxide emissions, among other things. In January 2020, a

Ninth Circuit panel dismissed the case on the grounds that that the plaintiffs lacked standing to sue. In February 2021, the *en banc* Ninth Circuit issued an order without written dissents denying the appeal, but lawyers representing the plaintiffs filed a motion in March to amend their complaint. The case is now pending in U.S. District Court, awaiting a ruling on that motion.

V. CONCLUSION

The research sends a very clear – and very worrying – message about young people’s valid climate fears. For young people, climate change is the one of the greatest threats to their futures. The generation that is the least responsible for this unfolding crisis bears the brunt of climate-related consequences while possessing the fewest resources to react. Climate change is about not only the health of the planet, but also the health of those who will soon inherit it.

There is now firm evidence that climate anxiety isn’t simply caused by ecological catastrophe spurred by human activity – it is just as much related to government inaction. Greater levels of response and commitment by governments can not only help limit the effects of global warming, but they can also have the potential to improve the mental wellbeing of young people around the world. Young people deserve a livable planet and governments, businesses, and other relevant actors must treat climate change like the crisis it is and act with urgency.

It is undeniably past time for decisive and consequential action on the climate crisis. Inaction on the climate crisis is having a severe and damaging impact on young people. Public discourse should move from derogatory terms such as “climate hysteria” to encouraging the expressions of feelings that young people have described. Society must also reject the popular narrative of blaming climate change on individual behaviors and call on governments and powerful entities to act to combat climate change. Young people are alerting to their fears for the future and the world must listen to them and take action.

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