

# Have fewer kids to fight climate change?



You don't need to weigh your children's contribution to  
global warming, argues Cal Beisner

**B**ecause “having one fewer child reduces one’s contribution to the harms of climate change,” Travis Rieder argues, “everyone on Earth ought to consider having fewer children.” Rieder confesses that “this is an uncomfortable discussion.” He says he’s “certainly not arguing that we should shame parents, or even that we’re obligated to have a certain number of children.”

But on his grounds, why shouldn’t we? If he thinks we’re morally obligated to limit our childbearing, shame would seem the least penalty appropriate. If having too many children is, as he implies, analogous to murder, why not criminalize it?

Does he really analogize childbearing with murder? Yes:

*If I release a murderer from prison, knowing full well that he intends to kill innocent people, then I bear some responsibility for those deaths .... Something similar is true, I think, when it comes to having children ....*

So we shouldn’t be surprised that he recommends an [article](#) justifying China’s one-child policy. There Sarah Conly says the world’s 7 billion people cause “soil depletion, lack of fresh water, overfishing, species extinction, and overcrowding in cities.” When we reach “9.7 billion by 2050,” the situation will be even worse.

That’s standard rhetoric for population-control advocates. More people = more consumption = resource depletion. Scholars like [Julian Simon](#) (a former advocate), [Ronald Bailey](#), [Indur Goklany](#), and even [myself](#) have rebutted that equation for decades.

Those who predict resource depletion as a consequence of population growth treat humans solely as consumers. They forget that we’re also producers. On average, we produce more than we consume. That’s why each generation

tends to be wealthier than its parents. And our productivity rises through mutual interaction. That means the more people there are in a given locale—including the whole world—the more, on average, each will produce.

They also forget that resources aren't natural. They're manmade. Petroleum was a nuisance until people figured out how to refine it into fuel, plastics, fertilizer, and medicines. Raw materials become resources when people relocate

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and refine them. With some substances, like clean air and fresh water, under most circumstances that's easy. With others, like uranium, it's extremely difficult. And even air and fresh water can require considerable relocation or refining under some circumstances. Ask any scuba diver or desert traveler!

The combination of rising human productivity and this understanding of resources explains why the long-term inflation-adjusted and wage-indexed price trend of all 'natural' resources is downward. That means resources are becoming less scarce. The truth is that more people = more production = more resources.

Nicholas Eberstadt, in a chapter in Bailey's *The True State of the Planet*, argues compellingly that 'overpopulation' can't even be defined by any empirical demographic criteria—not density, growth rate, birthrate, 'dependency ratios,' or anything else. He concludes, *"The images evoked by the term overpopulation—hungry families; squalid, overcrowded living conditions; early death—are real ... but ... are properly described as problems of poverty."* And poverty, in turn, doesn't hinge on demographic criteria.

And overcrowding in cities? 'Overcrowding' is subjective. Some people like living in high-density cities. Indeed, migration patterns show that more do than don't. At least, they consider the advantages to outweigh the disadvantages. Also, overcrowding correlates not with population density but with poverty. Household living space per person in cities is typically greater than in rural areas. That's because city life brings greater wealth. Wealthier people afford more living space.

But are cities bad for the environment? Edward Glaeser argues the opposite persuasively in *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier*. Cities concentrate human impact. They reduce habitat conversion. City dwellers tend to consume less energy and other resources per capita than rural dwellers—even as they produce more.

But Rieder and Conly's main argument against having children is that doing so will cause climate change. 'More people = more production = more resources' seems the opposite of what's needed to rebut this. Why? Because productivity depends on energy, some 85 percent of energy worldwide comes from fossil fuels, and using them adds carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) to the atmosphere. That in turn makes the atmosphere warmer. And that causes 'droughts, storms, rising sea levels, and heat.'

So, the argument seems conclusive. Because *"having a child is a major contributor to climate change ... everyone on Earth ought to consider having fewer children."*

*Unless human action isn't really a major contributor to climate change, or unless climate change isn't so self-evidently harmful as Rieder and many others think. Rieder, Conly, and others who argue similarly appeal to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). They consider it the world's most authoritative scientific body on the subject. Its 2013 [Fifth Assessment Report \(AR5\)](#) famously declared, "It is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century."*

Forget that the IPCC is more [political than scientific](#), riddled with [bias, conflicts of interest](#), and beset by serious [violations](#) of its own [scientific standards](#). Since AR5 it has become increasingly clear that the computer climate models on which the IPCC and many governments rely grossly exaggerate CO<sub>2</sub>'s warming effect. Two lines of evidence show this.

First, on average the [models predict](#) two to three times as much warming as observed over the relevant period. This means the models exaggerate CO<sub>2</sub>'s warming effect by *at least* double if not triple. Why 'at least'? Because, since Earth has warmed as much and as fast in the past as during the modeled period, it's impossible to rule out natural contributions to recent warming and blame it all—or even any particular portion of it—on CO<sub>2</sub>.

That leads to the second line of evidence. Past periods of comparable warming demonstrate that, contrary to AR5's claims, natural forces *could* have caused the observed warming during the modeled period. Recently, however, three researchers have provided a [convincing argument](#) that they *did*.

Climate scientists John R Christy and Joseph S D'Aleo and statistician James P Wallace III have analyzed the correlations of what they call 'Natural Factors'—solar, volcanic, and ocean current (especially El Niño/Southern Oscillation) variations—and human-induced atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentration, on the one hand, with global temperature, on the other. They [conclude](#) *"that once just the Natural Factor impacts on temperature data are accounted for, there is no 'record setting' warming to be concerned about. In fact, there is no Natural Factor Adjusted Warming at all."*

In short, not just your child's but all humans' future CO<sub>2</sub> emissions won't make a detectable contribution to climate change. And that means they won't make a detectable contribution to 'droughts, storms, rising sea levels,' or any other alleged harmful consequences of it.

Add to that the fact that, according to alarmists' most authoritative source, it's [not possible](#) to tie increasing frequency or intensity of severe weather events to global warming. Indeed, there's been no upward trend in either, as, for example, Ryan Maue shows for [hurricanes](#). It follows that global warming, insofar as it happens, and whatever causes it, isn't likely to be the disaster the alarmists think. So, whatever else you might weigh when considering how many children to have, you don't need to weigh their contribution to global warming. ■

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