

Intending to remain childless: Are concerns about climate change and overpopulation the cause?

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POLICY BRIEFING

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This policy briefing examines whether people who are concerned about the environment are more likely to intend to have no children, using the fertility intentions data collected in the 2022-23 UK Generations and Gender Survey (GGS). The richness of the UK GGS data allows researchers to examine factors associated with fertility intentions and declining birth rates, for example, economic uncertainty, escalating housing costs, and rising concerns about climate change and population growth. The study reported here focuses on environmental concerns.

The results suggest that today's young adults (Gen Z, currently aged 18-25) are much more likely to intend to remain childless compared to earlier generations at the same age. This indicates that fertility rates might fall further in the UK. However, concern for the environment is only associated with intentions to remain childless among older millennials (those currently aged 36-41), once other factors are taken into account. For younger adults, the decision to not have children doesn't appear to be linked to environmental concerns.

Key Points:

- *UK birth rates have been falling for the past decade, especially among young adults.*
- *Data from the UK GGS suggests that childless adults today are far less confident that they will have children and, compared with previous generations, are more likely to report that they will probably or definitely not have a child.*
- *More young adults planning to remain childless suggests the recent decline in fertility rates at young ages isn't just about individuals delaying parenthood until they are older. Instead, it suggests a growing trend of individuals not having children.*
- *Environmental concerns are a factor for older millennials (aged 36-41) intending to remain childless, but our study suggests this isn't the case for Gen Z individuals (aged 18-25).*

Introduction

Fertility rates have declined significantly in the UK over the past decade. In England and Wales, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) declined from 1.93 children per woman in 2012 to 1.55 in 2022 (ONS 2023). Part of the decline in overall fertility may be due to those who remain childless. Just under one in five women remain childless at age 45 in England and Wales.

By considering the fertility intentions of those who currently don't have children, we can get some insight as to whether the proportion who remain childless is likely to rise among future generations.

The study

This study uses fertility intentions data collected in the 2022-23 UK Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) – see box below for details.

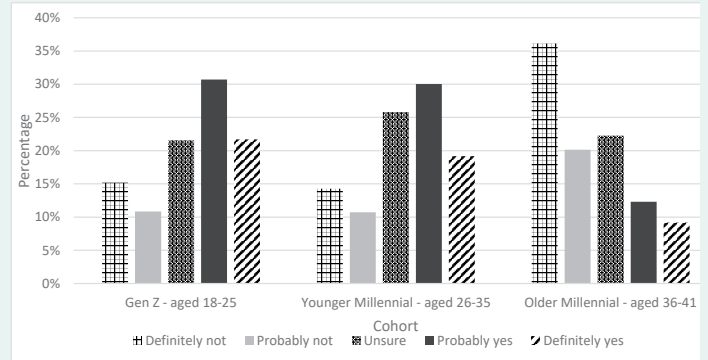
The richness of the UK GGS data allows researchers to examine factors associated with fertility intentions and declining birth rates, for example, economic uncertainty, escalating housing costs, and rising concerns about climate change and population growth. In this policy briefing we focus on the last of these: we report on whether survey respondents' intentions to remain childless have changed over historical time, and whether their intention to not have children is associated with their level of concern for the environment.

Main findings

What proportion intend to remain childless?

Data from the UK GGS suggests that childless adults today are far less confident that they will have children and more likely to report that they will probably or definitely not have a child. To investigate this further, we have compared three generations at different stages of the life course. Most of Gen Z, aged 18-25 at the time of the survey, have yet to enter parenthood. Younger millennials (those aged 26-35)

are at the peak ages for entry into parenthood. Childless older millennials (aged 36-41) are also common in our sample, representing those who have either postponed childbearing to later ages or who have decided not to have children at all (Figure 1).



Source: Authors' own analysis of UK GGS, 2022-23

Figure 1: Distribution of intentions to have at least one child among childless men and women in our sample, UK 2022/23

Among Gen Z, 15% report definitely not intending to have a child, whilst a further 11% said probably not and 22% were unsure (Figure 1). Just over half say they definitely or probably intend to have a child. The figures for younger millennials are similar, with 14% reporting that they definitely don't intend to have a child. Less than half of childless 26-35 year olds say that they definitely or probably intend to have a child. Among childless individuals aged 36-41 around a third report that they definitely will not have a child, with a further 20% saying that they probably will not. Differences by gender are not shown in Figure 1 as they are very small – younger men are slightly more likely than younger women to report that they definitely do not, or probably do not intend to have a child.

How has this changed over time?

A comparison with earlier data shows that today's Gen Z cohort have remarkably different intentions than

The UK Generations and Gender Survey 2022/23

- Online survey of a representative sample of UK individuals aged 18-59.
- Designed to capture information on the complexity and diversity of modern relationships and family life.
- Collects detailed information about contraceptive use, childbearing, economic issues, and work-life balance.
- Over 7,000 respondents. Weights are used to take account of sampling and non-response.
- Part of an international series of surveys: The Generations and Gender Programme: www.ggp-i.org
- Allows comparative analyses with other countries to examine the importance of country context.
- More information on the UK Generations and Gender Survey webpage: www.cpc.ac.uk/research_programme/generations_and_gender_survey

the younger millennials had 15 years earlier. In 2005–2007, younger millennials, who were also aged 18–25 at the time, were less likely to say that they would “definitely not” have a child (between 5% and 10%). Instead, they were much more likely to have positive intentions: over half said “definitely yes” (Ni Bhrolchain et al. 2010).

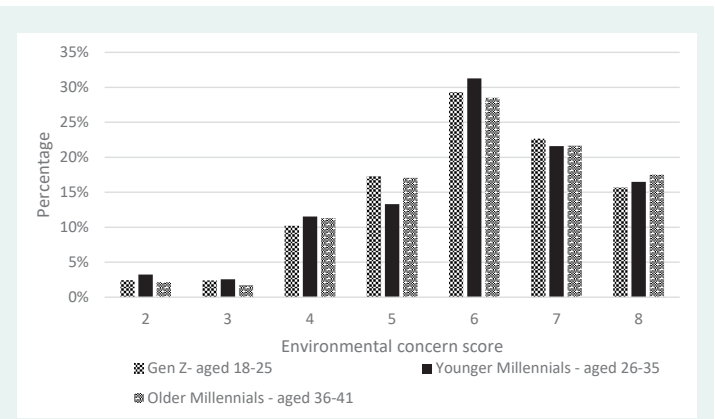
Who is more likely to intend to remain childless?

Fertility intentions are strongly influenced by factors such as a person’s age, their partnership and health status, their level of education and employment situation. It’s important to take account of these factors when identifying an independent relationship between concerns for the environment and childbearing intentions. We use a multinomial regression model which controls for these other variables. The model estimates the likelihood of a person being in one of the three outcome categories i.e. they “definitely or probably do not intend to have a child”, they are “unsure”, or they “probably or definitely intend to have a child”.

Are young people concerned about the environment?

The GGS survey includes a series of questions asking respondents how much they are concerned about global events. They are asked “Thinking about the future, how much does the following worry you?”. Answer categories range from 1 - “not at all worrying” to 4 - “very worrying”. We combine the two questions on climate change and overpopulation to create a scale which ranges from 2 (not at all worried) to 8 (very worried).

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the score according to cohort. Among childless individuals, concern for the environment was similarly high among all the cohorts. Relatively few individuals had a low score meaning that most people are worried to some extent about the environment.



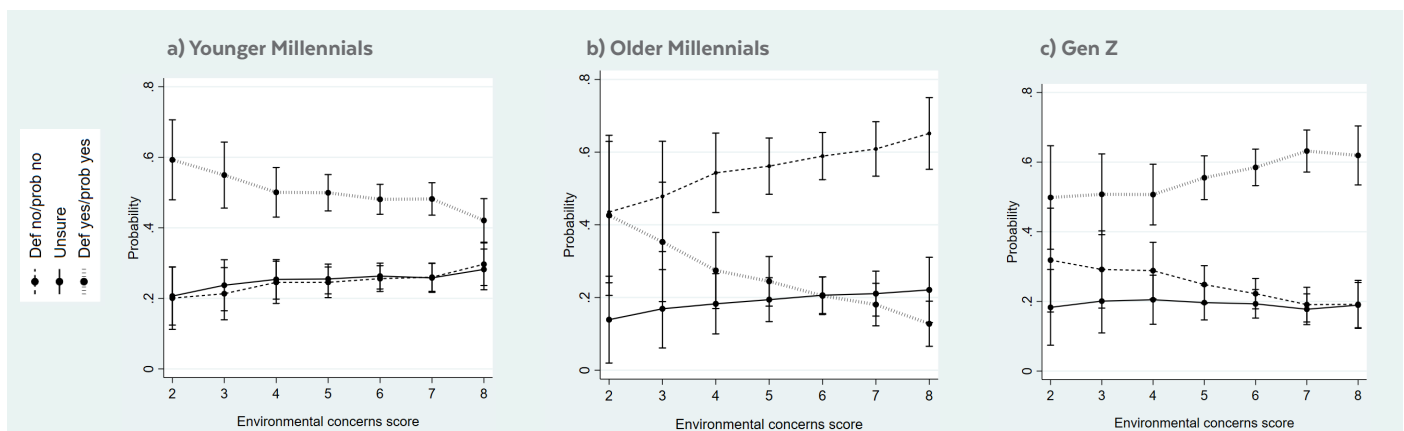
Source: Authors’ own analysis of UK GGS, 2022–23

Figure 2. Distribution of environmental concerns score by cohort among childless men and women, UK 2022/23

Among the whole sample, the mean score was significantly ($p < 0.05$) higher for females (6.23) than for males (5.92). It was also significantly higher for degree-educated respondents (6.08) than those with secondary-or-below-level qualifications (5.61).

Are concerns about the environment associated with intentions to remain childless?

Results from the multinomial regression model suggest that the association between worries about climate change, population growth, and intentions to remain childless differ across the cohorts. Among childless millennials (Figure 3) those with stronger environmental concerns are less likely to intend to have a child. The association is stronger and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) among those who remain childless at ages 36–41. Among Gen Z (aged 18–25) we find no statistically significant association, and the pattern shown (Figure 3) suggests the opposite of that found for the older cohorts.



Source: Authors’ own analysis of UK GGS, 2022–23

Note: Control variables: sex, partnership status, education, employment status, general health, religious denomination

Figure 3: Intentions to ever have a child among childless men and women according to reported concern for overpopulation and climate change

Those who were more worried about climate change and population pressures were also more likely to intend to have a child. At first sight this might seem counter intuitive. However, it could be that those who do want children are particularly concerned about the environment their future children will grow up in.

Policy implications

More young adults planning to remain childless suggests the recent decline in fertility rates at young ages isn't just about individuals delaying parenthood until they are older. Instead, it suggests a growing trend of individuals intending not to have children. If this is the case, then we can expect UK birth rates to decline further from their current level.

A popular reason given for why young people do not want to have children is because of their concern about climate change and the future of the planet. However, our data do not show a straightforward relationship between worries about the environment and childbearing intentions.

Whilst we found that environmental concerns are a factor for older millennials intending to remain childless, our study suggests this isn't the case for Gen Z individuals.

This may be because some younger people do not intend to have children for other reasons. Or it could be that Gen Z individuals who say they would like to have children are even more worried about the planet that their children will inherit.

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