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2018

# EDITORIAL: Children and Youth in the Era of Climate Change

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## Citation Details

Published as: Kiaras Gharabaghi & Ben Anderson-Nathe (2018) Children and youth in the era of climate change, *Child & Youth Services*, 39:4, 207-210, DOI: 10.1080/0145935X.2018.1557882

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*Author manuscript*

Published in final edited form as: *Child & Youth Services*, 39:4, 207-210.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2018.1557882>

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### **Editorial: Children and Youth in the Era of Climate Change**

Global warming and climate change have an enormous impact on human life, social relations, economic prospects and ecological health. These forces affect everything from food availability and associated famines, public health, the spread of diseases, employment patterns, building design, community planning, evacuation and crisis strategic design, and so many other things. Climate change is a central discussion topic at local, national and international levels. Almost everyone recognizes that we are confronted with the greatest challenge to humanity, indeed the greatest threat to the very survival of the planet, that we have ever encountered. And yet, while we have produced research and policy papers, media reports and social sector documents about children and war, children and poverty, children and education, children and health, we have not really engaged the issue of climate change and what it might mean for how we think about child and youth services at all.

Why should we think about climate change in the context of child and youth services? One obvious reason is that children and youth have access to the apocalyptic prognoses provided almost daily by scientists, international organizations, on every newscast, and on social media. Thinking about the consequences of climate change, the imminent flooding of coastal areas, the expectation of more wildfires of greater ferocity, more hurricanes and tsunamis of greater strength, the disappearance of fertile lands, the shortages of drinking water is anxiety-provoking for us, generally well-heeled, socio-economically stable and well educated academics and researchers. How much anxiety are climate change and its forecasted consequences causing young people? How do young people feel about being told that their planet may not be around, at least in habitable form, for too much longer? Why are we not concerned about 'climate-generated anxiety disorder'? Some of these questions have been taken up in the academic and research literatures (e.g., Ojala, 2012; Sanson, Wachs, Koller, & Salmela, 2018), but interestingly much of the conversation has emerged in other disciplines such as development or environmental science. What accounts for child and youth care research to be so late to this conversation?

How are child and youth services responsive to climate change? For example, in the context of young people transitioning out of care, we have seen enormous efforts to

engage young people in employment preparation programs. If we look more closely at those programs, we notice that many are related to some of the most unsustainable industries in relation to climate change. We regularly encounter such programs in the context of unsustainable fast food industries, unsustainable automotive industries, ecologically destructive tourism industries, and waste generating service industries. Why are we preparing young people to enter precisely those industries the rest of the world is trying to eliminate? Why are we not exploring the opportunities presenting themselves through green industries, technology-driven industries seeking to reduce carbon footprints, or rural industries seeking to find respectful ways of living with the land?

In the context of migration, to what extent do our services acknowledge the increasing number of young people and families who are climate refugees? How do we deal with the trauma related to having one's homeland rendered uninhabitable by the forces of climate change? Is this the same as the consequences of war or economic hardship? Are there cultural and spiritual dimensions to the experience of homeland loss as a result of climate change that are unique in their form and implications? In some areas of the world, child and youth services are emerging in response to massive urbanization resulting from massive desertification. In Cairo, for example, the influx of climate refugees resulting from desertification has resulted in children and youth living in un-serviced urban camps without education and health care, and subject to the resultant spread of disease. In Canada's far North, climate change has changed the roaming patterns of polar bears, and that in turn has resulted in new safety concerns for children and youth simply playing in their communities. In Brazil, rapid deforestation has rendered entire cultures, including children and youth, nomadic, in search of new homelands. In Europe, unusual summer heat waves have interrupted youth recreational routines and opportunities. And most recently in the United States, wildfires in the West have led to displacements and forced relocations of thousands of families.

The reality is that the lifespace context of young people is changing rapidly as climate change increasingly transitions from a scientific observation to a real, everyday phenomenon changing the way we live (or die). Child and youth services have always sought to take account of young people's lifespace. These services are specifically geared to ensuring that helping systems are responsive to how and where young people live their lives. It seems negligent to continue developing child and youth services without a direct engagement of climate change and its implications. We believe that the time to engage climate change and its relationship to child and youth services is now. There are many avenues for doing so, starting with an increased focus on climate change in child and youth services related research, including asking these kinds of questions:

1. How are young people living in precarious circumstances experiencing the symptoms of climate change? What geographic, social and political factors might serve to either further marginalize young people as climate change

- progresses, or unleash young people as a resource and added capacity to both fight and adapt to the climate change?
2. How does climate change fit in the broader discourse of child and youth rights? To what extent do the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and national or local child and youth rights regimes take account of climate change as a rights issue, and what are the potential avenues to ensure that young people have a voice and opportunities for direct participation in the fight against climate change? In what ways are young people implicated in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal 13 which attends to "urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts" (United Nations, n.d.)?
  3. As climate change begins to impact at the local level, including in the context of transportation, energy, water, food and housing infrastructures, how are child and youth services designing their futures to be responsive to what will undoubtedly become urgent needs for adaptation and response?
  4. Who is particularly impacted by the forces of climate change and how? Given that virtually all major phenomena of great social consequence have generally impacted some groups more so than others, what are the implications for Indigenous communities; queer, two-spirit, and trans people; people with disabilities; racialized people; and so on? How do young people within and at the intersections of these groups experience contemporary movements around climate change?
  5. How do human service professions take charge of their roles within the responses to climate change? We know that engineers are designing buildings and bridges resistant to high winds and floods; we know that doctors are working to contain the spread of disease unleashed by climate change; security professionals are redrawing their security system and process designs. What are social workers doing? How about psychiatrists, child and youth care practitioners or youth employment counsellors?
  6. And perhaps even more importantly, what are young people themselves doing now to combat climate change? It is dangerous and antithetical to our commitments to children and youth to think they are merely victims of their circumstance. Indeed, in the United States, a coalition of young people has brought a lawsuit against the federal government on the grounds that policies promoting fossil fuel use violate the youth plaintiffs' constitutional rights (CITE). In El Salvador and the Philippines, youth are organizing responses to climate disasters (Haynes & Tanner, 2013; Tanner 2010). Where are we, as child and youth care researchers partnering with, working alongside, and elevating the publicity of this youth activism?

It may seem somewhat unusual to challenge the child and youth serving communities, including its researchers, to take up the challenge of climate change. It certainly falls outside of the everyday pursuits of research interests that generally take account of local, urgent, and tangible needs. But once we realize that child and youth services are not immune to the impacts of climate change, and that the systems and infrastructure we have built over many decades are not always suitable

for the impacts of climate change, we will have no excuses for not having engaged these issues earlier. Further, when we recognize that young people are *already* leading the movement for climate justice, we must question the relative absence of child and youth care researchers and practitioners working alongside them. The political sector has engaged through its admittedly not very effective international meetings and climate accords; the economic sector has engaged through its promotion of green industries; the technology sector has engaged by mapping global warming and developing technologies to reduce the carbon footprints of post-industrial economic life. What has the social sector done?

We ask our researchers to mobilize around issues of climate change. Children and youth are impacted by climate change more than adults, with less agency to respond proactively or even reactively. They will have to live with the consequences of climate change for longer; or they will have to find dignified ways of dying from our complacency or irrational hope that we can just continue with our work as we always have.

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December 2018

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