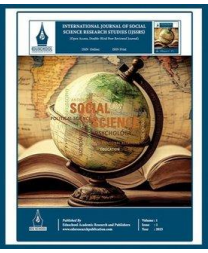
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH STUDIES (IJSSRS)
(Open Access, Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Journal)
ISSN Online: 3108-1932 ISSN Print: 3139-4566



Youth Climate Activism and Environmental Awareness: A Comprehensive Analysis of Young People's Role in Driving Climate Action and Social Change

Suresh. K

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science,
Panampilly Memorial Government College, Chalakudy India.

Article information

Received:10th November 2025
Received in revised form:13th December 2025
Accepted:14th January 2025
Available online:8th February 2026

Volume:2
Issue:1
DOI: https://doi.org/10.63090/IJSSRS/3108.1932.0010

Abstract

As the impacts of climate change intensify with each passing year, young people have emerged as powerful voices demanding urgent action and systemic transformation. This study examines the phenomenon of youth climate activism, exploring how young people engage in environmental advocacy, the psychological dimensions of their climate-related concerns, and the effectiveness of youth-led movements in driving policy change. Drawing upon research conducted between 2020 and 2025, including survey data from international organizations and qualitative studies of activist movements, this analysis reveals that by the end of 2024, initiatives such as UNICEF's The Green Rising had mobilized 11 million young people across 30 countries to join the climate movement. The research identifies key themes including eco-anxiety and climate distress affecting youth mental health, the evolution of activism strategies from school strikes to litigation and direct action, and the intersection of climate justice with broader social justice concerns. Findings indicate that most young people believe climate change is happening, is primarily caused by human activity, and poses significant risks. The study documents a strong association between coping strategies and pro-environmental behavior, with successful interventions promoting community engagement and collective action. These findings have implications for educators, policymakers, and environmental organizations seeking to support and amplify youth voices in climate discourse.

Keywords:- Youth Climate Activism, Environmental Awareness, Climate Anxiety, Fridays For Future, Climate Justice, Pro-Environmental Behavior, Eco-Anxiety, Sustainable Development

Introduction

The world is home to 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24, the largest generation of youth in history (United Nations 2024). These young people are increasingly aware of the challenges and risks presented by the climate crisis and the opportunity to achieve sustainable development through addressing climate change. Young people's unprecedented mobilization around the world demonstrates the significant power they possess to hold decision-makers accountable. Their message is clear: previous generations have failed, and it is the young who will bear the full consequences with their very futures.

The World Health Organization has declared climate change the greatest threat to global health, while the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has stated that it is "unequivocal" that human activities have warmed the planet by increasing greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (WHO 2015; IPCC 2021). Against this backdrop, the youth climate movement, exemplified by Fridays for Future and other activist organizations, has become the largest

and most globally diverse climate protest to date. Since 2018, these movements have been instrumental in shaping public perception of climate politics and elevating the urgency of environmental action.

Young people are particularly vulnerable to the physical and mental health impacts of climate change, making their engagement in climate activism both a response to existential threat and an assertion of agency in the face of uncertainty. Research has documented a range of affective responses among youth, including anxiety, worry, stress, sadness, despair, and even panic attacks related to climate change (Coffey et al. 2021; Lawrance et al. 2022; Léger-Goodes et al. 2022). These emotional responses, often termed "eco-anxiety" or "climate distress," reflect young people's deep engagement with environmental issues and their frustration with perceived inaction by older generations.

This research article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of youth climate activism and environmental awareness by examining the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of young people's engagement with climate issues. The study addresses several key questions:

- How do young people understand and respond to climate change?
- What psychological factors influence their engagement in pro-environmental behavior?
- How effective are youth-led movements in driving policy change?
- And what can be done to support and amplify youth voices in climate discourse?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Rise of Youth Climate Activism

The contemporary youth climate movement gained global visibility through the school strike for climate initiated by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg in August 2018. Thunberg has been credited with sparking the "Greta effect," influencing environmental awareness and youth engagement worldwide and receiving numerous honors including inclusion in Time's 100 Most Influential People and being named Person of the Year in 2019. Since then, Fridays for Future has grown into a global network of young activists advocating for immediate climate action through peaceful protest, advocacy, and increasingly, litigation.

Youth activists have employed diverse strategies to advance climate justice. Litigation has emerged as one method to hold polluting industries and governments accountable, with young people taking cases to courts around the world. During the 2019 UNFCCC COP25 in Madrid, young activists drafted the Intergovernmental Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action, which acknowledges young people's right to a healthy environment and their role as agents of change (PMC 2021). Universities have become growing platforms for youth participation in international climate decision-making, with students participating in observer delegations to climate conferences.

Climate Cognition, Affect, and Behavior

A scoping review by Tapia-Echanove et al. (2025) examining climate change cognition, affect, and behavior in youth found that research has heavily focused on cognitive dimensions, leaving important opportunities for further investigation into affective and behavioral responses. The review, which included 48 sources with most studies using survey methodologies and quantitative analyses, found that approximately two-thirds of reviewed studies examined cognitive concepts to explore the existence, causes, impacts of, and solutions to climate change. Findings consistently showed that most young people think climate change is happening, is mainly caused by humans, and are aware of its impacts.

The affective dimensions of young people's climate engagement have received increasing attention. Terms such as "eco-anxiety," "climate anxiety," and "climate distress" have become widely used in research, though no operational definition exists. These umbrella terms cover a broad range of responses including worry, stress, irritability, sadness, despair, and panic attacks. Other terms such as "solastalgia," which refers to chronic distress from environmental change, have also been developed to capture specific affective responses (Albrecht 2019; Pihkala 2022).

Individual versus Collective Action

An important debate in the literature concerns the relative effectiveness and psychological impacts of individual versus collective pro-environmental behavior. Research by Gienger et al. (2024) argues that individual actions such as recycling or saving energy can improve well-being only in the short term, while failing to address the systemic issues that perpetuate the climate crisis. Individual pro-environmental behavior may place the burden of responsibility on individuals, creating false hope that climate change can be solved without addressing structural factors.

On the other hand, promoting collective action to reduce climate distress in young people should involve adequate support and participation from adults. Scholars argue that if climate activism is not followed by societal and political change, the long-term impact on the health and well-being of young people should be assessed (Diffey et al. 2022; Martin et al. 2024). This tension between individual and collective approaches has important implications for how educators, parents, and organizations support young people's environmental engagement.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods systematic review to synthesize existing research on youth climate activism and environmental awareness. The review incorporated both quantitative studies examining relationships between variables and qualitative research exploring lived experiences of young activists.

Data Sources

Searches were conducted in multiple databases including Web of Science, Scopus, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. Grey literature from organizations including UNICEF, the United Nations, and the World Health Organization was also incorporated. Search terms included "youth climate activism," "environmental awareness," "eco-anxiety," "Fridays for Future," "pro-environmental behavior," and "climate justice." Studies were included if published between 2019 and 2025 and focused on youth aged 15 to 24 years as defined by the United Nations.

Analysis Approach

Data extraction focused on study characteristics, theoretical frameworks, key findings related to cognition, affect, and behavior, and reported outcomes of activism and interventions. Thematic analysis was used to identify consistent patterns across studies and to synthesize findings into coherent themes for presentation and discussion.

Results

Scale and Impact of Youth Mobilization

The review documented substantial youth mobilization around climate issues. UNICEF's Green Rising initiative, launched with the goal of mobilizing 10 million young people to take concrete climate actions in their communities and countries by 2025, exceeded its target by the end of 2024, effectively galvanizing 11 million young people across 30 countries to join the movement as volunteers, innovators, and change makers (UNICEF USA 2025). These efforts span diverse activities from community volunteerism to advocacy to skills development, jobs, and entrepreneurship.

Youth-led efforts documented in the research include young women in Burundi learning to manufacture environmentally friendly charcoal made from plant materials; a network of youth volunteers in India being trained in water conservation practices projected to be 1.1 million strong by 2025, reaching 4.4 million community members and saving up to 40 billion liters of water; young people in Mongolia using monitoring devices to capture air pollution data and run awareness campaigns; and youth groups in the Maldives working to address coral bleaching through reef restoration projects.

Psychological Dimensions

UNICEF USA's 15-country survey on eco-anxiety found that while more than half of young people surveyed reported feeling eco-anxious, nearly two-thirds described themselves as "eco-optimistic" or "eco-realistic," yet just 16% identified as eco-activists (UNICEF 2025). This finding suggests a significant gap between environmental concern and active engagement that represents both a challenge and an opportunity for mobilization efforts.

The research identified a strong association between coping strategies and pro-environmental behavior. Interventions that were successful in changing behavior promoted engagement in environmental actions and work within communities. This suggests that providing young people with constructive outlets for their climate concerns may both improve psychological well-being and increase positive environmental outcomes.

Activist Strategies and Rhetoric

Analysis of Fridays for Future's Instagram posts, observations at protests, and interviews with global activists by researchers examining dissensus rhetoric revealed three main lines of conflict positions articulated by the movement: between children and adults, between those most affected by climate change and those most responsible for it, and between the people and the elite (Tandfonline 2025). The largest category (46%) of posts framed the conflict in terms of "the people" versus political elites who fail to act on climate change.

The research also documented growing attention to intersectionality within the climate movement, with activists highlighting how climate injustice disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups including people with disabilities, internally displaced persons, Indigenous peoples, and communities in the Global South. The Most Affected Peoples and Areas (MAPA) group within Fridays for Future specifically works to amplify voices of those facing the greatest climate impacts with the fewest resources to adapt.

Challenges and Barriers

The research identified several challenges facing youth climate activists. The UN Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders has documented concerning trends of state repression of environmental protest and civil disobedience, which poses major threats to human rights and democracy (Forst 2024). Young activists increasingly face legal consequences for their activism, with scholars arguing that the shrinking of civic space and funding limitations are putting activists at risk and hindering meaningful youth engagement in climate efforts.

Another challenge identified is "greenwashing" by governments and companies, which young activists have called out as a threat to genuine climate action. Youth advocates have called for governments and companies to sign conflict of interest policies ensuring disclosure of investments in fossil fuel industries and for the establishment of mandatory climate-related disclosures in corporate filings.

Discussion

The findings of this review demonstrate that youth climate activism has become a significant social and political force with the potential to influence policy and public attitudes. The scale of mobilization documented, with 11 million young people engaged across 30 countries through just one initiative, represents an unprecedented level of youth engagement in environmental issues.

The psychological dimensions of youth climate engagement require careful attention. The finding that over half of young people report eco-anxiety, combined with evidence that constructive engagement can serve as a coping mechanism, suggests that channeling climate concerns into meaningful action may benefit both environmental outcomes and youth mental health. However, the research also cautions that activism not followed by societal and political change may have negative long-term impacts on young people's well-being.

The intersectional framing increasingly adopted by youth climate movements reflects a sophisticated understanding of how climate change connects with broader systems of inequality and injustice. This framing both strengthens alliances with other social movements and ensures that climate solutions address the needs of the most vulnerable communities. However, it also creates tensions with those who prefer to frame climate change as a purely environmental or scientific issue.

The documented barriers facing young activists, including state repression and greenwashing, highlight the importance of creating protected spaces for youth participation in climate governance. The expansion of the UN Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change from seven to fourteen members in 2025 represents one response to these challenges, though more systemic changes may be needed to ensure young voices are genuinely incorporated into decision-making processes.

Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis of youth climate activism and environmental awareness reveals that young people are playing an increasingly important role in driving climate action and shaping public discourse on environmental issues. The evidence demonstrates that youth-led movements have achieved remarkable scale and impact, with millions of young people engaged in climate action across diverse contexts and through varied strategies.

Key findings include documentation that most young people understand climate change is happening and is primarily caused by human activity; evidence that eco-anxiety is widespread but can be addressed through constructive engagement in climate action; recognition that youth movements have adopted sophisticated intersectional analyses linking climate justice with broader social justice concerns; and identification of barriers including state repression and greenwashing that require attention from policymakers and civil society.

For educators, the findings suggest the importance of integrating climate education across curricula and providing students with opportunities for meaningful engagement. For policymakers, the research underscores the need to create formal mechanisms for youth participation in climate governance and to protect the civic space necessary for youth activism. For environmental organizations, the findings highlight opportunities to support and amplify youth voices while ensuring that young activists receive adequate support for their mental health and well-being.

Future research should continue to examine the long-term impacts of climate activism on youth well-being, the effectiveness of different activist strategies in achieving policy change, and how to best support young people in translating their environmental concerns into constructive action. As the climate crisis intensifies, young people's engagement will remain crucial for driving the transformations necessary to achieve a sustainable future.

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