

## Who are climate activists and why do they risk so much?

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[Polling in the UK suggests growing public concern about climate change](#). For some of us, this concern may feel relatively abstract; we puzzle through, trying to make sense of ever more common stories – or direct experience – of heatwaves, flooding and loss of habitats, set against a dogged focus on economic growth and [the issuing of new licences for oil and gas](#) (when the [IPCC tells us cutting fossil fuel use is essential](#)). [Controversies surrounding the COP28 presidency](#) may have generated similar confusion. Alongside this, we have mainstream media cultivating a particular and negative stereotype around climate activists and engagement in non-violent direct action (NVDA). Our research, however, shows that these activists are not who the media would have us think they are.

Here in the UK, peaceful daily protests and actions around the climate and ecological crisis continue. [While some of these climate protests make the local newspapers](#), it seems [they are rarely deemed newsworthy by the national media unless there is a story to be sensationalised](#). Meanwhile, much of the narrative around those who engage in NVDA about the climate and ecological crisis would have us believe they represent [a particular demographic of \(allegedly rich, privileged and bored\) whining, sanctimonious eco-zealots](#).

For climate activists, there is a threat much greater than this media condemnation: penalties that lead to arrest ([with reported use of so-called pain compliance tactics](#)), injunctions, prison sentences and considerable personal, financial, and reputational damage are becoming increasingly common. So, who does participate in climate action, why do they put themselves in such an undesirable position, and what do they hope to achieve?

We explored some of these and related questions through one-to-one interviews with a nationally representative sample of respondents to our research call asking to talk to those who engage in NVDA about the climate. Here are some of the broad-stroke impressions emerging from the early analysis of this work.

Firstly, reviewing our demographic data, climate activists come from all age groups, all walks of life in terms of socio-economic status, all occupations and from all over the country. In fact, we found that in terms of a typical profile, there isn't one. These activists are not tree-huggers, communing with nature at every opportunity (although many do feel a deep connection to the natural world), nor are they doomists that overegg a situation to put themselves in the limelight. Nor are they conspiracy-theorists ready to buy into any story that might hit the media.

People engaging in NVDA about the climate are quite simply representative of many of us – from baristas to CEOs, healthcare professionals, youth workers, and secretaries. In many ways, they are the most ordinary of people, but what they have in common is that they have taken notice of what is happening to the environment around them, have considered what this might mean for the future of our planet, and have felt compelled to do something about it. They are typically well-informed about the climate and ecological crisis: they have

read peer-reviewed scientific papers, listened to respected scientists, and acknowledged changes happening in the environment. They are engaged and aware. They look beyond the mainstream headlines and are mindful of the largely unreported consequences of climate change unfolding across the globe.

In our interviews, we discovered that they are a group of people fuelled by compassion, a shared concern about the effects of human-driven climate change, and motivated by a sense of responsibility to raise the alarm on the unfolding emergency. Having read and understood the science, they cannot understand why our government is not making the systemic changes needed. Many have never engaged in any protest before and certainly not in potentially arrestable action. They have lived ordinary lives, followed the rules and yet they are unwavering in their commitment to continue to engage in this social movement that puts them physically and emotionally in harm's way.

There is no mistaking the considerable toll that their activism has on them. Whilst many speak of a kinship felt amongst fellow activists and some of the empowerment – and even hope – achieved through engaging in an action, the emotional exhaustion is also often visible. For some, this emotional drain is due to the acute knowledge about the effects of the climate crisis; for others it is due to the effort to engage in actions that can take them to the very edge of themselves. Moreover, for many who engage in arrestable (albeit peaceful, non-violent) action, the weight of arrest, injunctions and possible imprisonment is leading to high levels of stress and anxiety. There is no doubt that actions designed to be disruptive are seen to take courage, particularly in light of the [increasingly punitive approach of the current government towards climate protesters](#).

Resoundingly, there is one clear message that stands out from these interviews: the only hope to avert the worst of catastrophes is through a social movement that acts as a catalyst for the systemic change needed. This is why activists engage in non-violent direct action and this is why they have no intention of stopping.