

New Study Reveals: 12 Risks That Threaten Human Existence

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“Apocalypse Taipei.”
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Extreme climate change. Global pandemic. Major asteroid impact. The rise of artificial intelligence.

These are just a few of the potentially world-ending events that threaten civilization as we know it, according to a new report from researchers at Oxford University.

The study, “[Global Challenges](#)” (pdf), urges readers to consider a new category of global risks—low-probability, high-impact scenarios that hover at the extreme end of the spectrum.

“This report has, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, created the first list of global risks with impacts that for all practical purposes can be called infinite.” However, the authors note, “the real focus is not on the almost unimaginable impacts of the risks the report outlines. Its fundamental purpose is to encourage global collaboration and to use this new category of risk as a driver for innovation.”

The report looks only at events that could trigger a civilization’s collapse—“defined as a drastic decrease in

human population size and political/economic/social complexity, globally for an extended time.”

In the case of extreme climate change, for example:

Mass deaths and famines, social collapse and mass migration are certainly possible in this scenario. Combined with shocks to the agriculture and biosphere-dependent industries of the more developed countries, this could lead to global conflict and possibly civilization collapse. Further evidence of the risk comes from signs that past civilization collapses have been driven by climate change.

According to the researchers, the 12 global risks that threaten human civilization are:

Current risks

- 1. Extreme Climate Change*
- 2. Nuclear War*
- 3. Ecological Catastrophe*
- 4. Global Pandemic*
- 5. Global System Collapse*

Exogenic risks

- 6. Major Asteroid Impact*
- 7. Supervolcano*

Emerging risks

- 8. Synthetic Biology*
- 9. Nanotechnology*
- 10. Artificial Intelligence*
- 11. Uncertain Risks*

Global policy risk

- 12. Future Bad Global Governance*

Total oblivion is not a foregone conclusion, however.

For each scenario, the authors lay out both the worst-case outcomes and factors influencing those outcomes.

“There are remedies, including technological and institutional, for all risks,” reads the report. “But they will require collaboration of a sort humanity has not achieved before, and the creation of systems which can deal with problems preemptively.”

To that end, *Global Challenges* identifies 10 strategies to “help mitigate immediate threats while also contributing to a future global governance system capable of addressing global risks with a potential infinite impact.”

That list includes:

- Better quality risk assessment for global challenges
- Development of early warning systems
- Encouraging visualization of complex systems
- Increasing the focus on the probability of extreme events
- Establishing a Global Risk and Opportunity Indicator to guide governance
- Explore the possibility of establishing a Global Risk Organization

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