

Youth Bulge in Pakistan: Dividend or Disaster?

1- Introduction

1.1 Attention Grabber

1.2 General Statement

1.3 Thesis Statement: Pakistan's youth bulge is more a liability than an asset due to unemployment, weak education, radicalization, and poor governance. While some claim it can be a dividend, the ground realities prove otherwise.

2- Understanding The Youth Bulge

2.1 Definition: A disproportionately large share of youth in the population.

2.2 Demographic Transition Theory: Youth Bulge can bring prosperity (East Asia's industrial boom) or disaster (Middle East unrest).

2.3 Pakistan's Reality: Large youth population, but weak state institutions to absorb them.

3- Why The Youth Bulge is a Disaster for Pakistan?

3.1 Economic Disaster

3.1.1 Youth unemployment stands at 11.3% (Labour Force Survey, 2021) compared to national unemployment of 6.3%.

3.1.2 About 1.3 million youth enter the job market each year, but the economy creates fewer than 500,000 jobs (State Bank of Pakistan, 2020).

3.1.3 Overproduction of degrees → 31% graduates unemployed (HEC report 2022).

3.2 Political Instability

3.2.1 Youth exploited as "street power" by political parties.

3.2.2 2023 political protests leads a large numbers of frustrated youth clashed with state institutions, destabilizing the country.

3.3 Social changes.

- 3.3.1 **Brain drain:** Over 800,000 educated Pakistanis migrated abroad in 2022 alone (Bureau of Emigration)
- 3.3.2 **Drug abuse:** UNODC 2021 report estimates 7.6 million Pakistanis use drugs, most of them youth
- 3.3.3 **Mental health crisis:** WHO notes 24 million Pakistanis suffer psychological issues, majority being young adults.

3.4 Radicalization and Extremism

- 3.4.1 Youth constitute the majority of militant recruits (Nacta and Dawn reports)
- 3.4.2 Madrassa-educated unemployed youth historically fueled militancy in FATA and KP.

3.5 Institutional Weaknesses.

- 3.5.1 Outdated curricula with 44% dropout rate at primary level (Pakistan Education Statistics 2021)
- 3.5.2 Only 6% of youth enrolled in technical/vocational training programs

4. Counter - Arguments: Youth as a Dividend

4.1 Economic Growth Potential:

A young workforce can accelerate GDP.

4.2 Digital Revolution

Pakistan ranks 4th in the world for freelancing (Payoneer Report 2020).

4.3 Political Participation

Youth engagement strengthens democracy.

4.4 Global Examples

East Asia's industrial growth was youth-driven.

5- Rebuttal to Counter-Arguments.

5.1 Economic Growth Potential?

Pakistan's weak economy cannot absorb them. GDP growth fell from 5.8% in 2018 to 0.5% in 2023 (IMF). Without growth, youth remain unemployed.

5.2 Digital Revolution?

Freelancing benefits a tiny fraction. Only 7% of youth have digital literacy (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2022). The majority lack internet access or IT skills.

5.3 Political Participation?

Instead of constructive politics, youth are exploited. According to PILDAT, less than 6% of parliamentarians are under 30, leaving youth politically underrepresented. Street agitation, not policy-making, becomes their role.

5.4 Global Example (East Asia)?

Unlike Pakistan, East Asia invested heavily in universal education, industrialization, and governance reforms. Pakistan spends only 1.7% of GDP on education (World Bank 2023), far below the global average of 4.5%. Hence comparison is misleading.

6- Way Forward to prevent disaster.

6.1 Job creation via SMEs, agriculture modernization, and CPEC projects.

6.2 Invest in mental health, sports and social activities to channel youth energy.

6.3 Promote civic education and political awareness programs.

7- Conclusion.

The Essay

Pakistan is one of the youngest countries in the world, but instead of being a blessing, this large youth population is fast becoming a burden. According to the (UNDP) Human Development Report (2018), around 64 percent of Pakistan's population is below the age of 30, and nearly 29 percent falls between 15 and 29 years. This gives Pakistan one of the largest youth populations in the world. In theory, such a demographic structure could act as a great national asset by providing a strong labour force, increasing innovation, and supporting economic growth. However, in practice, this potential is being wasted due to poor governance, weak education systems, and limited job opportunities. A large number of educated young people remain unemployed and frustrated, while others are leaving the country in search of better futures. As a result, Pakistan's youth bulge, instead of becoming a demographic dividend, is gradually turning into a demographic disaster that fuels social unrest, political instability, and economic stagnation. Yet, this crisis can be turned into an opportunity through effective education reforms, skill development, and youth-centered employment policies.