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The Demographics of Political Violence: Youth Bulges, Insecurity and Conflict

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YOUTH OFTEN PLAY a prominent role in political violence, and the existence of a "youth bulge" has historically been associated with times of political crisis.[1] Generally, it has been observed that young males are the main protagonists of criminal as well as political violence.

The question is whether countries with youthful age structures, or "youth bulges,"[2] are more likely to experience internal armed conflict, terrorism, and riots. The issue has received increasing attention during the past decade following the more general debate over security implications of population pressure and resource scarcity. In "The Coming Anarchy," Robert Kaplan argues that anarchy and the crumbling of nation-states will be attributed to demographic and environmental factors in the future.[3] More recently, youth bulges have become a popular explanation for current political instability in the Arab world and for recruitment to international terrorist networks. In a background article surveying the root causes of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, the *Newsweek* editor Fareed Zakaria argues that youth bulges combined with slow economic and social change have provided a foundation for an Islamic resurgence in the Arab world.[4] Samuel Huntington claims that youth bulges are the major reason for higher political violence levels in Muslim countries (box 6-1).

This chapter draws on two prominent theoretical perspectives concerning opportunity versus motive for civil war, as well as on recent advances in economic demography, to identify a possible causal explanation for why cohort size in itself and under particular conditions may cause political violence. The

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BOX 6-1
A Clash of Generations?

"I don't think Islam is any more violent than any other religions. . . . But the key factor is the demographic factor. Generally speaking, the people who go out and kill other people are males between the ages of 16 and 30. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, there were high birthrates in the Muslim world, and this has given rise to a huge youth bulge. But the bulge will fade. Muslim birthrates are going down; in fact, they have dropped dramatically in some countries." —Samuel P. Huntington, "So, Are Civilizations at War?" *The Observer,* October 21, 2001.

empirical results point to a clear statistical relationship between youth bulges and an increased risk of both internal armed conflict, terrorism, and riots.[5]

Youth Bulges and Political Violence: Greed and Grievance

The literature on youth bulges has focused in particular on spontaneous and low-intensity unrest, such as nonviolent protests, riots, and rebellions. It is argued here, however, that youth bulges may also increase the risk of more organized forms of political violence, such as internal armed conflict. The chapter draws on two of the dominant and competing theoretical traditions in the study of civil war, one focusing on opportunity and the other on the motive for conflict.

Both the opportunity and the motive perspectives are macro-level frameworks that attempt to explain events essentially consisting of a series of individual decisions—whether to join a rebel or terrorist organization or not—by focusing on economic, political, and social structural features. The opportunity literature, often termed the *greed perspective,* has its roots in economic theory and focuses on the structural conditions that provide opportunities for a rebel group to wage war against a government.[6] These are conditions that provide a rebel group with the financial means to fight, or factors that reduce the cost of rebellion, such as unusually low recruitment costs for rebel soldiers. The former World Bank economist Paul Collier has suggested that relatively large youth cohorts may be a factor that reduces recruitment costs through the abundant supply of rebel labor with low opportunity cost,

increasing the risk of armed conflict.[7] According to the opportunity perspective, rebellion is feasible only when the potential gain from joining is so high and the expected costs so low that rebel recruits will favor joining over alternative income-earning opportunities.

Although opportunity may be the most important determinant of civil war, this does not necessarily mean that actors cannot also have strong motives.[8] The motive-oriented tradition, or *grievance perspective,* has its origins in relative deprivation theory and tends to see the eruption of political violence as a rational means to redress economic or political grievances.[9] Motives for committing political violence can be economic—such as poverty, economic recession, or inequality—or political—such as a lack of democracy, absence of minority representation, or self-governance. Most of the literature on youth bulges and political violence falls into this tradition. It focuses on how large youth cohorts facing institutional bottlenecks and unemployment, a lack of political openness, and crowding in urban centers may become aggrieved, paving the way for political violence.[10] But in its simplest form, the motive perspective overpredicts political violence; the existence of serious grievances is not sufficient for collective violent action to erupt.[11] The likelihood that motives will be redressed through political violence increases when opportunity arises from the availability of financial means, low costs, or a weak state.

The Mere Size of Youth Cohorts

The mere existence of an extraordinarily large pool of youth is a factor that lowers the cost of recruitment because the opportunity cost for a young person generally is low.[12] This is an assumption that hinges on the extent of alternative income-earning opportunities. If young people are left with no alternative but unemployment and poverty, they are increasingly likely to join a rebellion as an alternative way of generating an income. Higher levels of education among men may act to reduce the risk of political violence. Because educated men have better income-earning opportunities than uneducated ones, they would have more to lose and hence be less likely to join a rebellion.[13] A recent study based on interviews with young soldiers presents strong micro-level support for the expectation that poverty, a lack of schooling, and low alternative income opportunities are important reasons for joining a rebel group.[14]

New research in economic demography even suggests that the alternative costs of individuals belonging to larger youth cohorts are generally lower

compared with members of smaller cohorts. According to the "cohort size" hypothesis, "other things being constant, the economic and social fortunes of a cohort (those born in a given year) tend to vary inversely with its relative size."[15] So not only do youth bulges provide an unusually high supply of individuals with low opportunity cost, but an individual belonging to a relatively large youth cohort generally also has a lower opportunity cost relative to a young person born into a smaller cohort.

The influence of the size of youth cohorts on unemployment is also emphasized in the motive-oriented literature on civil violence.[16] If the labor market cannot absorb a sudden surplus of young job seekers, a large pool of unemployed youths will generate strong frustration. In extreme cases, the challenge to employ large youth cohorts can appear overwhelming. In Saudi Arabia, approximately 4 million people will be added to the labor force during the next decade, equaling two-thirds of the current Saudi national workforce.[17] The socioeconomic problems associated with youth bulges may provide fertile ground for recruitment to terrorist organizations.[18]

The Demographic Dividend

Recent studies in economic demography suggest that the relationship between large youth cohorts and political violence may be muted if youth bulges precede significantly smaller cohorts. Economists and demographers have long discussed the allegedly negative impact of population growth rates on economic growth. Recently, this debate has been advanced by disaggregating the focus to look at the impact of growth among different age segments. Though high growth rates in the nonworking, or dependent, age groups are associated with lower economic growth, increases in the working-age population are positively associated with economic growth.[19] Thus, in areas where the demographic transition is well under way with sharply declining fertility rates, countries may experience a window of opportunity for economic development, often called a "demographic dividend," largely flowing from increased savings as the relative number of dependents decreases. Hence, the expectation is that youth bulges should be associated with less political violence in countries with declining fertility rates. This is consistent with the opportunity as well as the motive perspective. In countries with a lower dependency burden, the alternative cost of rebel labor will be higher. On the motive side of the coin, a reduction in the dependency burden implies greater employment and income prospects, reducing grievances.

Economic Growth

The overall economic performance of a society is an important factor determining the income forgone when a youth joins a rebel movement, and thus the opportunity for rebellion. Economic growth over a longer period may act as a proxy for new income opportunities.[20] For large youth cohorts, the economic climate at the time they enter into the labor market is particularly crucial. To the degree that income opportunities are determined by general economic performance, large youth cohorts are likely be rendered particularly susceptible to lower income opportunities when economic conditions generally deteriorate, reducing the income they forgo by signing up as a rebel. The motive-oriented literature also shares the concern over economic decline. Youth belonging to large cohorts will be especially vulnerable to unemployment if their entry into the labor force coincides with periods of serious economic decline. Such coincidences may generate despair among young people that moves them toward the use of violence.[21]

Rapid Expansion in Higher Education

A tool that countries can exploit in order to respond to youth bulges is the expansion of higher education. Can this serve as a strategy to reduce the risk of political violence? As argued above, education is generally expected to increase the opportunity cost of rebel labor. This implies that rebel recruitment is more costly and rebellion less likely the higher the level of education in a society.[22] This is not inconsistent with the motive-oriented literature. However, it has been suggested that when countries respond to large youth cohorts by expanding opportunities for higher education, this may produce a much larger group of highly educated youths than can be accommodated in the normal economy. Unless the government is able and willing to absorb a surplus of university graduates into the public sector, as was done by the Government of Egypt,[23] prevailing unemployment among highly educated youth segments may cause frustration and grievances that could motivate political violence. It has been argued that high unemployment among educated youth is one of the most destabilizing and potentially violent sociopolitical phenomena in any regime,[24] and that a rapid increase in the number of educated youths has preceded historical episodes of political upheaval.[25] It has been argued that the expansion of higher education in many countries in the Middle East, producing large classes of educated youth that the labor

market cannot absorb, has had a radicalizing effect and provided new recruits to militant organizations in the area.[26]

A Lack of Democracy

When being used to assess the role of democracy, the opportunity and motive perspectives yield opposite predictions. The opportunity literature suggests that the opportunity for political violence is greater the less autocratic a state is, whereas the motive-oriented literature argues that the greater the political oppression and the lack of political rights, the greater the motive for political violence. Several empirical studies of regime type and civil conflict have found a curvilinear "inverted U" relationship between democracy and conflict, suggesting that starkly autocratic regimes and highly democratic societies are the most peaceful.[27] This relationship is assumed to arise as a result of both opportunity and motive, because semidemocratic regimes may have greater openings for conflict compared with autocratic states.

At the same time, a lack of political rights may also constitute a motive for conflict. It has been suggested by proponents of the motive perspective that when large youth groups aspiring to political positions are excluded from participation in the political processes, they may engage in violent conflict behavior in an attempt to force democratic reform.[28] The potential for radical mobilization for terrorist organizations is argued to be greater when large educated youth cohorts are barred from social mobility by autocratic and patriarchal forms of governance.[29]

Urbanization

Although institutional crowding has been the major focus, geographic crowding has also been argued to generate motives for political violence.[30] Because terrorism is essentially an urban phenomenon, states undergoing rapid urbanization may be particularly likely to experience increased risks of terrorism.[31] If youth are abundant in a relatively small geographical area, this may increase the likelihood that grievances caused by crowding in the labor market or educational institutions arise. Historically, the coincidence of youth bulges with rapid urbanization, especially in the context of unemployment and poverty, has been an important contributor to political violence.[32] Youth often constitute a disproportionately large part of rural-to-urban migrants; hence, in the face of large youth cohorts, strong urbanization may

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be expected to lead to an extraordinary crowding of youth in urban centers, potentially increasing the risk of political violence.

An Empirical Examination

The results of my internal armed conflict models suggest that the presence of youth bulges increase the risk of conflict outbreak significantly.[33] The statistical relationship holds even when controlling for a number of other factors—such as the level of development, democracy, and conflict history—and are also robust to a variety of technical specifications. *For each percentage-point increase of youth in the adult population, the risk of conflict increases by more than 4 percent.* When youth make up more than 35 percent of the adult population, which they do in many developing countries, the risk of armed conflict is 150 percent higher than in countries with an age structure similar to most developed countries (see box 6-2).

A claim that youth bulges become particularly volatile when they pass a certain threshold does not seem to have any validity.[34] These bulges seem to be associated with a higher risk of conflict in countries with high dependency ratios, while countries that are well under way in their demographic transitions are likely to experience a "peace dividend."

If youth bulges increase the likelihood of armed conflict, how and why do they matter? Though the risk of conflict does not seem to increase when youth bulges coincide with long-term per capita economic decline, high dependency ratios, expansions in higher education, or strong urban growth, the results suggest that the effect of youth bulges appears to be greater in the most autocratic regimes as well as in the most democratic states. *This may indicate that youth bulges provide greater opportunities in autocracies and greater motives in democracies.*

Youth Bulges, Terrorism, and Riots

The terrorism and riot data analyzed in my original paper are qualitatively inferior to the armed-conflict data and should be interpreted with caution.[35] Youth bulges generally seem to increase the risk of both forms of political violence. Furthermore, when youth bulges interact with long-term economic decline and with expansion in tertiary education, this significantly increases the risk of terrorism. Regime type, dependency ratios, and urbanization do not seem to be important contextual factors for the relationship between youth bulges and terrorism. Youth bulges appear to particularly increase the

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BOX 6-2
The Significance of Youth Bulges

Countries with youth bulges making up at least 35 percent of the adult population run a risk of internal armed conflict that is 150 percent higher compared with the most developed countries if all other factors (including the level of development and democracy) are the same. In 2000, fifteen- to twenty-four-year-olds made up 17 percent or less of the total adult population in almost all developed countries, the median being 15 percent. The same year, forty-four developing countries experienced youth bulges of 35 percent or above.

risk of rioting in societies with high dependency burdens, indicating that the risk of such low-intensity violence may decrease when countries experience declining fertility rates.

Conclusion

This chapter reports the findings of a recent empirical study suggesting that youth bulges may provide both a motive and an opportunity for political violence.[36] Though bulges were found to increase the risk of internal armed conflict, terrorism, and rioting, the conditions when they are most volatile seem to differ. Bulges seem to particularly increase the risk of terrorism and riots under conditions of educational and economic stress, but bulges appear to provide greater opportunities for armed conflict in autocracies and greater motives in democracies. The following five policy implications have been identified on the basis of this and other studies of youth bulges and political violence:

First, the importance of youth bulges in causing political violence is expected to fade in most parts of the world over the next decades because of declining fertility. But for states that will experience high youth shares for years to come, especially in the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Asia, age composition should still warrant some caution. Rapidly declining fertility may provide opportunities for an economic bonus, possibly also contributing to pacifying large youth cohorts.

Second, though fertility is also dropping in large parts of the Muslim world, youth bulges currently pose a challenge to many Muslim governments.

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In 2002, the *Arab Human Development Report* voiced concern over the widespread economic stagnation in the Arab world, and the consequences for the large youth groups.[37] A recent report on development cooperation as a means to fight terrorism concluded that "anti-terrorist development cooperation programming would be well advised to target the people who are most vulnerable to terrorist agitation, that is, well-educated young men who are frustrated about the lack of opportunities in the developing world."[38]

Third, a particular focus should be on providing employment or educational opportunities for youth in periods of economic decline, and on monitoring the employment situation of educated youth. Youth bulges may pose a greater security risk during times of economic decline and after expansions in higher education.

Fourth, limiting migration opportunities may increase the risk of violence in some countries with large youth bulges if not compensated for by increased domestic employment opportunities. Emigration may work as a safety valve in countries with large youth cohorts. In a recent survey, almost half of all Arab youth expressed a desire to emigrate as a result of concerns over job opportunities and education.[39] If migration opportunities are increasingly restricted without domestic initiatives in place to provide opportunities for youth, developing countries that previously relied on exporting surplus youth may experience increased pressures from youth bulges accompanied by a higher risk of political violence.

Fifth, more research is needed on the relationship between youth bulges and political violence, and on remedial policies. A particularly neglected aspect has been the role of these bulges in urban settings. Though the relationship between youth bulges, urbanization, and political violence does not show up strongly in global correlations, a more detailed analysis of youth and economic and social change in cities may provide important additional insights. Furthermore, no thorough review exists of the extent to which governments provide targeted programs aimed at muting the security risk posed by youth bulges, and whether such programs are effective.

Notes

1. Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (University of California Press, 1991); Jack A. Goldstone, "Demography, Environment, and Security," in *Environmental Conflict,* ed. Paul F. Diehl and Nils Petter Gleditsch (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2001).

2. These are defined as large cohorts in the ages fifteen to twenty-four years relative to the total adult population.

3. Robert D. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *Atlantic Monthly,* February 1994, 46.

4. Fareed Zakaria, "The Roots of Rage," *Newsweek,* October 15, 2001, 14–33.

5. These results are reported in full in Henrik Urdal, "A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence," *International Studies Quarterly* 50 (2006): 607–29.

6. Paul Collier, "Doing Well Out of War: An Economic Perspective," in *Greed & Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars,* ed. Mats Berdal and David M. Malone (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

7. Collier, "Doing Well Out of War," 94.

8. Nicholas Sambanis, "A Review of Recent Advances and Future Directions in the Quantitative Literature on Civil War," *Defense and Peace Economics* 13 (2002): 224.

9. Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton University Press, 1970); Sambanis, "Review of Recent Advances," 223.

10. For examples, see Nazli Choucri, *Population Dynamics and International Violence: Propositions, Insights and Evidence* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1974); Richard G. Braungart, "Historical and Generational Patterns of Youth Movements: A Global Perspective," *Comparative Social Research* 7 (1984): 3–62; Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion;* and Goldstone, "Demography, Environment, and Security."

11. Colin H. Kahl, "Population Growth, Environmental Degradation, and State-Sponsored Violence: The Case of Kenya, 1991–93," *International Security* 23 (1998): 80–119.

12. Collier, "Doing Well Out of War."

13. Ibid.

14. Rachel Brett and Irma Specht, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2004).

15. Richard Easterlin, quoted in Diane J. Machunovich, "Relative Cohort Size: Source of a Unifying Theory of Global Fertility Transition?" *Population and Development Review* 26 (2000): 235–61; the quotation here is on 236.

16. Herbert Moller, "Youth as a Force in the Modern World," *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 10 (1968): 238–60; Choucri, *Population Dynamics and International Violence;* Braungart, "Historical and Generational Patterns"; Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion;* Goldstone, "Demography, Environment, and Security"; Richard P. Cincotta, Robert Engelman, and Daniele Anastasion, *The Security Demographic: Population and Civil Conflict after the Cold War* (Washington: Population Action International, 2003).

17. Onn Winckler, "The Demographic Dilemma of the Arab World: The Employment Aspect," *Journal of Contemporary History* 37 (2002): 617–36; the citation here is on 621.

18. Brynjar Lia, *Globalisation and the Future of Terrorism: Patterns and Predictions* (London: Routledge, 2005), 141.

19. Allen C. Kelley and Robert M. Schmidt, "Economic and Demographic Change: A Synthesis of Models, Findings, and Perspectives," in *Population Matters: Demographic Change, Economic Growth, and Poverty in the Developing World,* ed. Nancy Birdsall, Allen C. Kelley, and Steven W. Sinding (Oxford University Press, 2001).

20. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56 (2004): 563–95; the citation here is on 569.

21. Choucri, *Population Dynamics and International Violence,* 73.

22. Collier and Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance."

23. Winckler, "Demographic Dilemma of the Arab World," 630.

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24. Choucri, *Population Dynamics and International Violence,* 73.

25. Goldstone, "Demography, Environment, and Security," 95.

26. Lia, *Globalisation and the Future of Terrorism,* 145–46.

27. Håvard Hegre, Tanja Ellingsen, Scott Gates, and Nils Petter Gleditsch, "Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816–1992," *American Political Science Review* 95 (2001): 33–48.

28. Goldstone, "Demography, Environment, and Security."

29. Lia, *Globalisation and the Future of Terrorism,* 147.

30. Ellen Brennan-Galvin, "Crime and Violence in an Urbanizing World," *Journal of International Affairs* 56 (2002): 123–46.

31. Lia, *Globalisation and the Future of Terrorism,* 141.

32. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion;* Goldstone, "Demography, Environment, and Security".

33. For the model results, see Urdal, "Clash of Generations?" This analysis is based on the PRIO/Uppsala data set of conflicts with at least twenty-five battle deaths per year; see Nils Petter Gleditsch, Petter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg, and Håvard Strand, "Armed Conflict 1946-2001: A New Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research,* 39 (2002): 615–37.

34. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). There is, on the contrary, strong support for the suspicion that two authoritative civil war studies; James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review,* 97 (2003): 75–90; and Collier and Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance," may have failed to find significant effects due to a flawed youth bulge measure. The State Failure Task Force Group found some effect of youth bulges on ethnic conflict; see Daniel C. Esty, Jack A. Goldstone, Ted Robert Gurr, Barbara Harff, Marc Levy, Geoffrey D. Dabelko, Pamela Surko, and Alan N. Unger, *State Failure Task Force Report: Phase II Findings* (McLean, Va.: Science Applications International, 1998).

35. The data were originally collected for the State Failure Task Force Project and are event (count) data collected from newspaper sources. For a discussion of data quality, see my original paper, Urdal, "Clash of Generations?"

36. The empirical study referred to is Urdal, "Clash of Generations?"

37. United Nations Development Program, *The Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations* (Amman, 2002), xv.

38. Timo Kivimäki, "Executive Summary," in *Development Cooperation as an Instrument in the Prevention of Terrorism,* ed. Timo Kivimäki (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs / Nordic Institute of Asia Studies, 2003).

39. United Nations Development Program, *Arab Human Development Report 2002.*