

TECHNICAL BRIEF

YOUTH BULGES AND CONFLICT

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Introduction

There are approximately 1.3 billion people worldwide between the ages of 12 and 24—a figure set to increase to 1.5 billion by 2035. Developing countries in particular have booming populations which will double by the middle of the 21st century. So-called “youth bulges” have been for many years a key concern in development given the implications for labor markets, government budgets, cultural norms and overall economic growth in countries where economic stagnation and unemployment are already major problems (Jimenez and Murthi; World Bank).

In the early 1990s, awareness of the security dimensions of youth bulges took on a new prominence as policy makers worried about the potential turmoil to be caused by large numbers of unemployed young people—particularly young men—growing listless and alienated from their society. Wouldn't these youth be easy recruits from militias, criminal gangs and extremist organizations, warned some like journalist Robert Kaplan. Early quantitative research by scholars like Gary Fuller and Jack Goldstone seemed to confirm a link between youth bulges and conflict (Sommers 138-139; Beehner), but subsequent studies have repeatedly

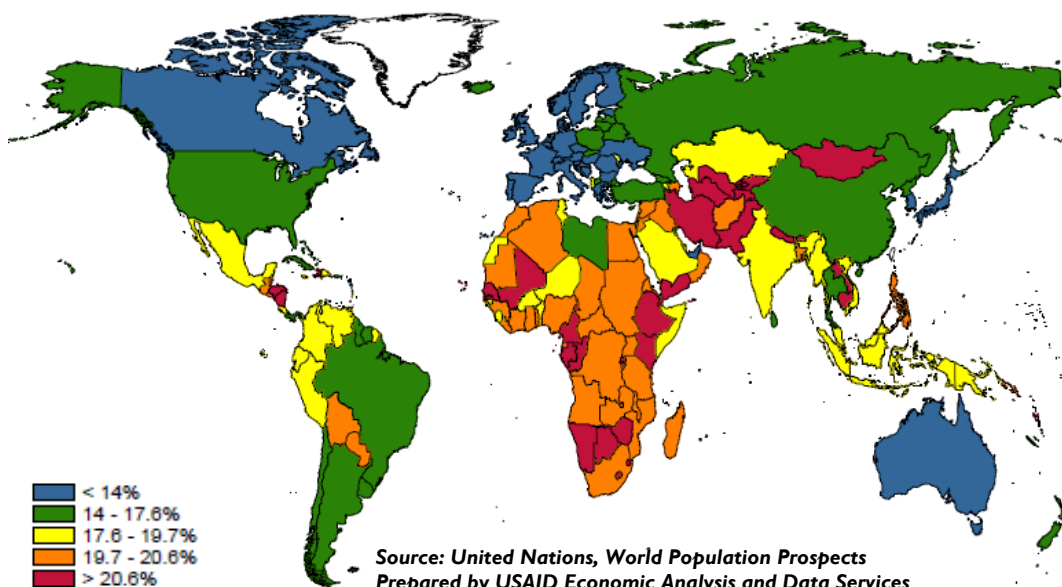
shown the relationship is more complex than a one-to-one relationship.

By the mid-2000s, all major development agencies, including USAID, as well as intelligence and security analysts, were paying attention to the role of youth in conflict. Numerous conflict resolution and prevention programs targeting youth were designed on this premise to provide a counterweight to extremism—some excellent, others less so.

Meanwhile, the empirical research has painted an increasingly nuanced picture of youth and conflict since the mid-1990s. Research consistently shows that political and economic conditions are more important determinants of conflict. Simply put, while youth bulges *can* exacerbate existing societal tensions and conflict causes, a large youth population does not by itself lead to instability (USAID 2007).

The Conflict Analysis Lens

USAID's 2005 Toolkit on *Youth & Conflict* was produced by the Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation (DCHA/CMM) to provide practical guidelines for conducting conflict analysis and programming focused on youth. Of course, not all issues involving young people and conflict



Source: United Nations, *World Population Prospects*
Prepared by USAID Economic Analysis and Data Services

Youth (15-24) Population Shares of Total Population in 2010

While youth bulges are not directly correlated with conflict, a casual glance at the map suggests a complex relationship between low levels of development, political instability and young demographics.

This map was prepared by USAID Economic Analysis and Data Services (EADS), which maintains an extensive database of development-related statistics at <http://eads.usaidallnet.gov>.

are related to youth bulges *per se*. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, for example, must address child soldiers in the course of program implementation, just as economic programs often address education on their own terms. However, conflict analysis and conflict prevention/mitigation programming is likely to examine youth bulges and, in the course of doing so, USAID program staff should evaluate the strength of the underlying casual assumptions (USAID Theories of Change, forthcoming).

Grievances and Resiliencies

The current best practice from the Inter-Agency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF) calls for conflict analysts to examine the grievances and social resiliencies that inform a particular conflict dynamic. Pundits frequently allege that a surge in the number of young people could severely strain a developing country's economy and state institutions, as schools, universities, hospitals, housing markets and so on may not have the capacity to accommodate larger populations. Even in those states which manage to provide adequate education, such as in the Middle East and North Africa, students may grow radicalized if they are being prepared for jobs which do not exist (USAID 2005, 3). As with society at large, unequal or insufficient access to services and economic activity may instill grievances within marginalized youth. Meanwhile, in failed states that already lack functioning institutions, a youth bulge may cause a generation to grow into adulthood never gaining meaningful skills through work or school.

Yet, a youth bulge is not always so dire. Some researchers ask, for instance, why there is not more violence in developing countries “in the face of truly wretched conditions and a strong sense of hopelessness” (Sommers 155). Societies clearly also harbor special resiliencies embedded in both formal and informal institutions, including traditional justice mechanisms or religious practices. Nor do bulges always negatively impact the system. In the 1990s, for example, young people provided a “demographic gift” to the growth economies of the Asian Tigers (Jimenez and Murthy).

Conflict Drivers and Mitigating Factors

Another reason youth bulges do not always erupt into conflict is a lack of means and opportunities. As the USAID CAF and ICAF posit, grievances alone do not produce conflict; key actors, trends, triggers and context all play inter-related roles.

Indeed, it has been duly noted that youth bulges may not only make conflict more desirable to some, but also more feasible (Collier 2007; Fearon & Laitin 2003). Beyond simply fermenting discontent, widespread unemployment low-

ers the “cost” of recruitment, as many young men have nowhere to turn for income. Militias and terrorist groups, however, can offer immediate economic benefits in the form of looting, patronage or payment. Even in extremist groups, where the leadership is typically well-off and educated, the vast majority of new recruits are low-to-middle class young men between the ages of 15 and 29 (USAID 2005, 5).

On the issue of feasibility, young people may simply be more impressionable; this implicit logic underwrites many conflict resolution programs that hope to instill positive values and attitudes in youth “before it is too late.” Unfortunately, if this is true, it also suggests that extremist groups may also be able to catch recruits while they're young. Peer influence appears to exert a strong influence on young people who join terrorist groups, for instance (USAID 2005).

Moments for Increasing or Decreasing Conflict

Trends such as mass urbanization, growth in diasporas and disruptive climate change could interact destructively with youth bulges, as traditional social and economic patterns are disrupted. But not necessarily. For example, one recent study on youth bulges and urbanization notes that young people migrating from the countryside to the cities could lead to greater inclusion as the urban centers afford more potential for earning income (Urdal & Hoelscher, 17). Likewise, the triggers that set off most crises—elections, assassinations, legislative acts, etc.—are not likely to be tied *per se* to youth bulges. That said, this is an area that remains under-studied at present in the research literature.

Context

Perhaps one of the reasons such trends and triggers are difficult to study in the aggregate is their contextual specificity. After all, even the definition of “youth” varies by culture; it is not simply a matter of age, but also responsibility and status (USAID 2005, 3). Who wields power and through which channels varies across time and geography. A robust conflict analysis will attempt to chart how youth fit into the social structure and social patterns.

Gender in particular is deeply culturally embedded and contextually important. Researchers occasionally note that the fears about youth bulges are really fears of young *men*. The best studies use sex disaggregated data to capture this point, but the quality and availability of such data, especially for conflict, is embarrassingly sparse.

Furthermore, gender is not merely a matter of men's and women's bodies, nor the fact that men make up the bulk of

recruits in armed groups, but also that youth bulges, social trends and the experience of conflict can upset traditional gender roles and expressions of masculinity and femininity. When traditional ways of life and livelihood are upset, young people often find themselves unable to earn income, apply skills or marry. This in turn may exacerbate the grievances, humiliation and alienation felt by young men whose status depends on such activities, leading in turn to violence. As young women are forced into new survival strategies and non-traditional forms of work, including in some cases sex work, they may become the objects of social opprobrium and even domestic or communal violence.

These familiar concerns highlight the importance of considering the wider conflict context when examining youth bulges. Studies show that countries are more at risk of violence when there is a recent history of war or war in neighboring states. A youth bulge in such a country could increase the associated risk level. Furthermore, once a conflict is in motion, youth are an important group with special needs and experiences in communities of displaced persons, demobilized soldiers, victims and perpetrators, and others.

Summary of Statistical Findings

The 2000s have been an exciting time for quantitative studies of conflict, and the methodology for such research has improved since early reports linked youth bulges to conflict (Goldstone 1991; Fuller and Pitts 1990; Esty et al 1998). The common thread across the latest research is that youth bulges alone do not cause conflict. Rather, when unstable politics and social deterioration are combined with large numbers of disadvantaged young men, then new problems arise.

Perhaps the best known of the statistical studies is that of Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler (1998, 2004, 2007). The findings on youth bulges here have been mixed: their early papers failed to support the hypothesis that youth bulges lead to conflict (although they flagged secondary education of male youth as influential in 2004), but an updated methodology in the 2007 paper led to a new finding that a doubling of the population of young males aged 15-29 would increase the risk of conflict from 4.7 per cent to 31.9 per cent (2007, 16).

Other important studies, however, have not produced this result. For example, Fearon and Laitin found the significant drivers to be poverty, political instability, rough terrain and large populations, although they did point out that low GDP per capita *would* increase the feasibility of rebellion by lowering the cost of recruiting young men to militias (Fearon and Laitin, 15).

Arguably the most comprehensive and reliable findings in this field have come from the Political Instability Task Force (PITF), which has been supported by the USG and a wide network of academics. The latest findings here emphasize regime type and factionalism, poverty/development, “bad neighbors,” and the level of state discrimination. Youth bulges appeared significant in the PITF’s early attempts at modeling, but when measures of regime characteristics were included, the significance dropped away (Goldstone et al 2005, 12-13).

Henrik Urdal at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo, Norway, (PRIO) has published several papers on youth bulges and conflict, consistently showing that other factors, such as low economic growth, economic hardship and levels of political participation pose greater conflict risks than youth bulges (USAID 2007; Urdal & Hoelscher 2009). Urdal has found no correlation between youth bulges, urbanization and violence, although the caveat here is that other factors, such as absence of democratic institutions, low economic growth and low levels of secondary educational school *are* associated with disturbance (Urdal & Hoelscher, 1).

Further research remains to be done. Follow-up studies will likely explore in more depth the role of education, the dynamics of gender and culture, and the interplay of youth bulges and other trends. For instance, both Urdal and Hoelscher and Collier and Hoeffler have produced data to suggest male secondary school enrollment appears to be a significant variable, possibly as a metric of some more nuanced reading of the youth bulge hypothesis. Or, research making more of a distinction between population growth (change) versus demographic balances (levels), may also yield new findings or interpretations (e.g. Urdal & Hoelscher, 17). Lastly, the analytical model employed in this technical brief and in the statistical models presented are essentially models of political conflict and insurgency. The role of youth and youth bulges within the context of certain strains of violent extremism could present exceptions to the findings outlined here.

Lessons

Youth bulges do not lead inexorably to conflict. Rather, large numbers of young people create special challenges and opportunities for societies. The role they play depends on a host of factors related to society's structure and context and the state's legitimacy and effectiveness. Missions should conduct a conflict analysis to determine if and how the youth demographic affects their country's conflict dynamics, designing their programs accordingly. Research suggests that the most effective peacebuilding projects for youth will be those which connect individual-level change with socio-political change for young people, the larger community and their key people. In other words, traditional youth programs based on sports or vocational training may provide some value, but absent political reform such activities are not enough to prevent conflict or achieve lasting peace. Program managers are encouraged to consult CMM's Toolkit on *Youth and Conflict* and its Supplement on the intranet for more information.

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* Due to space considerations, additional citations are available upon request or can be found in the USAID 2005 and 2007 publications listed above.

** CMM continues to add to its technical expertise on youth and conflict. Contact the office for more information, and look for new publications on this topic in the future.

This Technical Brief is the first in a series to be produced by the Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation in USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Affairs. Each brief sketches the state of the latest research in some area of development, applying a conflict lens. For more information on these topics, refer to CMM's *Youth & Conflict Toolkit* (USAID 2005; 2007). For more information, contact CMM at conflict@usaid.gov or visit [CMM's intranet page](#).