

## WHY POPULATION MATTERS TO **SECURITY**



**Demographic trends influence political stability and security. Over the past several decades, countries in which at least 60 percent of the population is younger than 30 have been more likely to experience outbreaks of conflict than countries with a more even age distribution.<sup>1</sup> Countries with very young age structures, in which at least two-thirds of the population is younger than 30, have a consistently growing group of young people entering the labor market and seeking opportunities. With sound policies, this can be a benefit. But it can also challenge a government's capacity to provide sufficient jobs, education and resources for its population, and can increase the likelihood of conflict.**

### **The State of Human Security**

Of all forms of political violence, the greatest toll comes from civil conflicts. Low-level civil conflicts—those involving a country's government but resulting in fewer than 1,000 annual deaths—have increased in the last 60 years.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, many scholars and policymakers have adopted a broader framework of human security, which includes four elements: survival and physical safety; conditions for health and economic well-being; legitimate, trustworthy and capable governance; and individual dignity.<sup>3</sup> In 2004, the United Nations established a Human Security Unit promoting the protection and empowerment of people to achieve "survival, livelihood and dignity."<sup>4</sup> U.S. military and civilian defense agencies are also looking to move toward a "prevent-and-deter" approach, focused on "supporting and stabilizing fragile states" and "preventing human suffering."<sup>5</sup>

Security can be uneven across a population, with those who are poor and/or marginalized—including women—facing both higher risks of physical violence and greater difficulties in access to education, housing and jobs. When human security does not

exist, conflict is harder to prevent. Demographic trends can hinder the achievement of human security, and thus affect the security of a nation.

### **Links between Population and Security**

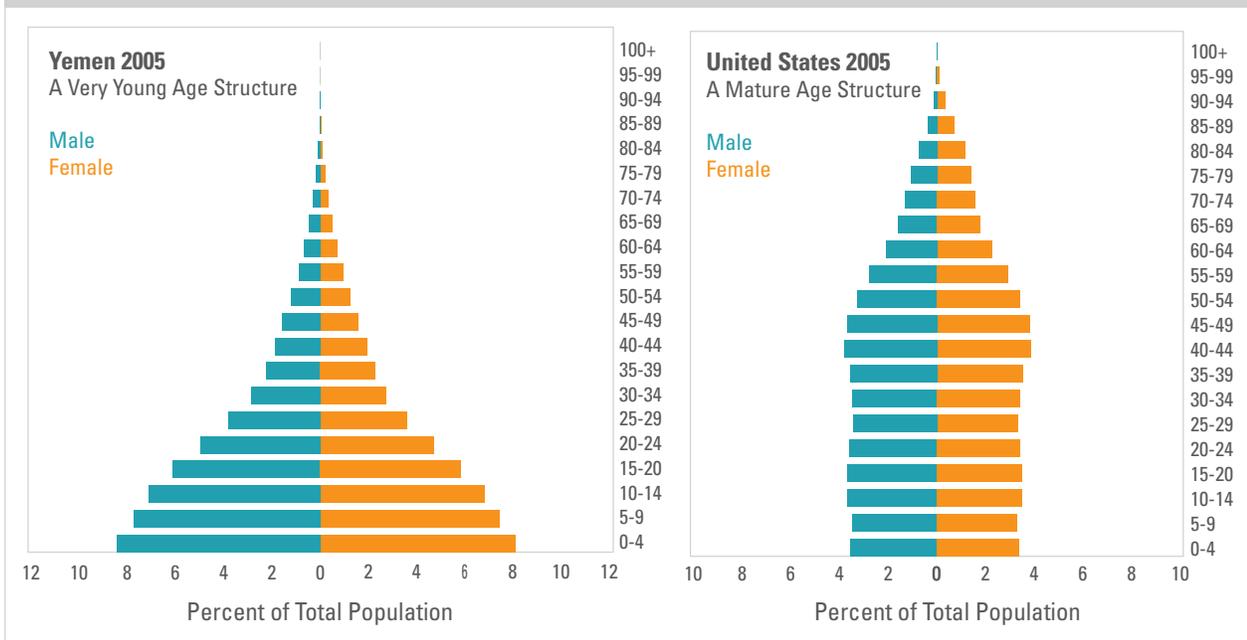
Many country governments have expressed concern about meeting the needs of their growing youthful populations. In Uganda, which had the youngest age structure in the world in the 2000s, a member of Parliament has noted that "We are growing at a very fast pace, and looking at the projections, it can't be sustained. We have a bank of young people who are dependent, unemployed or can't make a living."<sup>6</sup> In Yemen, where water supplies are already running short and the population is on track to nearly double in 20 years, an official has warned that "Population growth is putting pressure on the country's resources. If the situation remains as it is, the state would not be able to meet the demands of its people."<sup>7</sup>

Population is an underlying variable for conflict. Demographic changes alone are unlikely to spark political violence, but can influence other triggers of conflict. The social, economic,

political and environmental context matters, and there is no single formula to guarantee successful conflict prevention. Large numbers of young people in a population, when coupled with socioeconomic problems, can leave individuals more susceptible for recruitment into insurgencies. Few chances to find employment or otherwise improve lives can both generate grievances and make taking part in violent action seem less risky.<sup>8</sup> Where jobs are lacking or only available to the well-connected, a youthful age structure increases the number of job seekers and decreases the odds of employment.

As U.S. foreign policy has focused more on threats posed by states that cannot meet the needs of their people, policymakers have learned the importance of demographic factors in evaluating risk. The National Intelligence Council, in its *Global Trends 2025* assessment, characterized a demographic "arc of instability" that crosses much of sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and South Asia as a risk factor for civil conflict.<sup>9</sup> In a 2010 speech, the commander of the U.S. Africa Command noted the challenges that population growth poses to other aspects of development, including food security, health and environment.<sup>10</sup>

**FIGURE 1: Population Age Structures at the Beginning and End of the Demographic Transition**



Source: United Nations Population Division. 2009. *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision*. New York: UN Population Division.

**Population Age Structures**

Today, population trends are moving in different directions around the world, creating an unprecedented “demographic divide.” More than one billion people, including most of the population of sub-Saharan Africa, live in countries where the average woman has more than four children. A major cause of ongoing high fertility rates is the low use of family planning. Meanwhile, about 40 percent of the world’s population lives in countries where fertility rates are low enough to lead to aging and eventual decline.<sup>11</sup>

Countries where two-thirds or more of the total population are younger than age 30 have high fertility rates and very young age structures. When fertility rates begin to decline but are still fairly high, countries develop a youthful age structure, in which 60 to 67 percent of the population is younger than age 30. Countries where fertility rates have been in sustained decline and 45 to 60 percent of the population is younger than age 30 are classified as having a transitional age structure. When fertility rates reach two children per woman or below, countries have a mature age structure, with 45 percent or less of the population younger than age 30 and up to 25 percent of the population older than age 60. Because fertility

rates in some countries, including South Korea and parts of Eastern Europe, have reached levels near one child per woman, these countries may develop an aged age structure in the coming years, in which one-third or more of the population is older than age 60.<sup>12</sup>

**Age Structure and the Risk of Civil Conflict**

PAI research shows that between 1970 and 2007, 80 percent of all outbreaks of civil conflict occurred in countries with very young and youthful age structures, a group that includes 44 percent of the world’s population (Figure 2). Six of the nine outbreaks of new civil conflict between 2000 and 2007 occurred in countries where at least two-thirds of the population is younger than age 30.<sup>13</sup>

Research from the Peace Research Institute Oslo demonstrated that countries with a large youthful population were 1.5 times more likely to experience civil conflict in the second half of the 20th century than those with a more balanced age structure, especially when fertility rates remained high over time.<sup>14</sup> Countries with young age structures are more likely to experience conflict if they also face low rates of secondary education, showing the importance of broader development.<sup>15</sup>

The pattern also holds for measures of governance, including level of democracy, civil liberties and corruption. Between 1970 and 2007, just 13 percent of countries with very young age structures were rated as full democracies, while more than 80 percent of countries with mature age structures were rated that way.<sup>16</sup> When countries with youthful age structures do achieve democracy, it is less likely to be sustained.<sup>17</sup>

**Policy Considerations**

Very young and youthful age structures present opportunities as well as challenges. The outcome depends on a government’s capacity and willingness to address demographic factors through policies that strengthen human security. When addressing development in the short term, governments and their partners must prioritize the availability of education, jobs, and health care, including family planning and reproductive health care, for their growing numbers of young people.

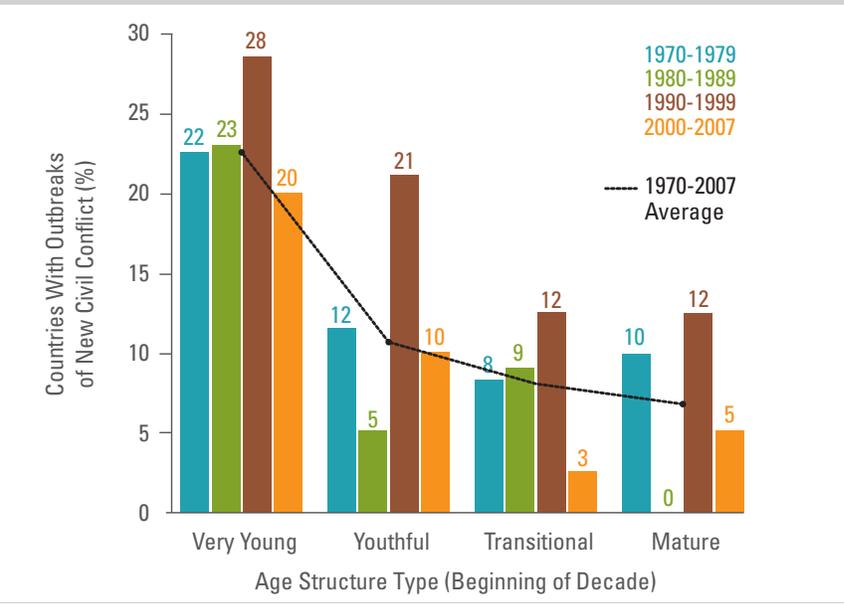
Age structure can change over time in response to new policies and government commitments. One example is Mexico, which in the early 1970s had 72 percent of the population younger than 30 and a fertility rate of

6.5 children per woman (Figure 3).<sup>18</sup> At that time, the government launched a large-scale family planning program with widespread distribution of free services. The share of married women using contraception has nearly quintupled, and the share of women who want to delay or prevent pregnancy but are not using contraception has dropped to 12 percent.<sup>19</sup>

The dramatic change in Mexico has not been replicated in sub-Saharan Africa or parts of the Middle East and South Asia, where fertility rates remain high. Large numbers of women who want to avoid pregnancy do not have access to family planning are a major contributor to these rates and, in turn, to sustained very young and youthful age structures. Until family planning is prioritized and women and couples are able to have the number of children they desire, this will not change. In addition to the provision of services, gender barriers such as disempowerment and lower access to education are important drivers of fertility trends.

Reproductive health and family planning services need to be a priority in conflict or post-conflict countries. In Rwanda, for example, the rate of contraceptive use among married women fell by more than

**FIGURE 2: Young Age Structures are More Vulnerable to Conflict**



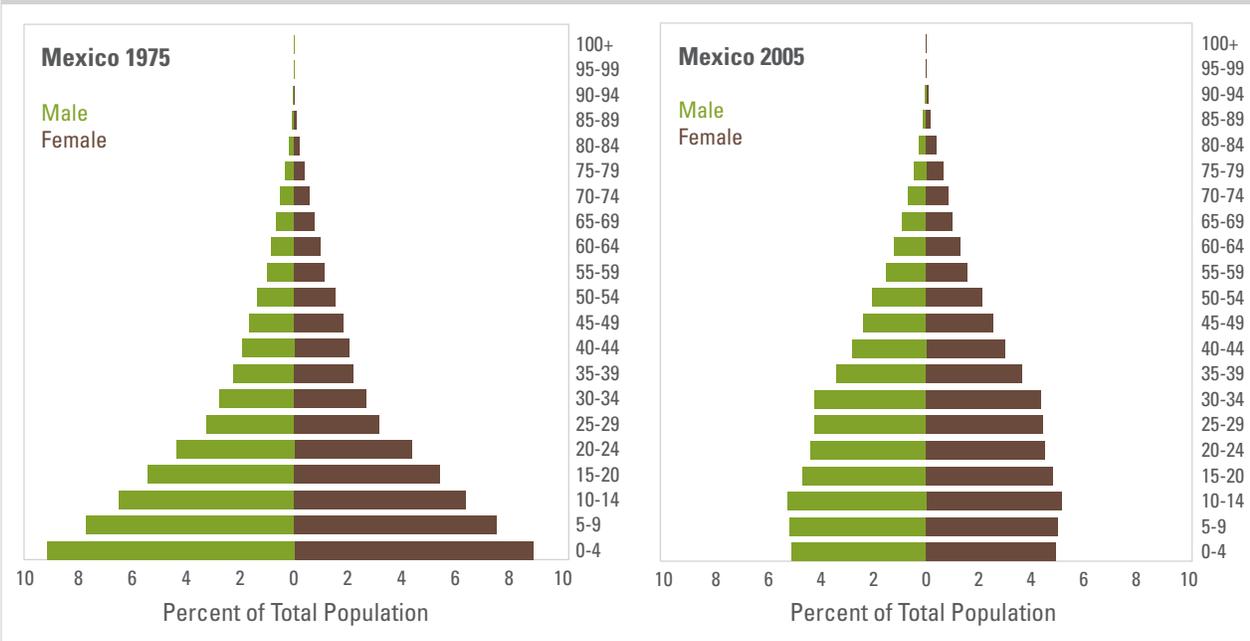
Source: Leahy Madsen, E, B Daumerie and K Hardee. 2010. *The Effects of Age Structure on Development*. Washington, DC: Population Action International.

two-thirds after the 1994 genocide, due in part to a decimated health system.<sup>20</sup> Yet countries affected by conflict, despite their weakened capacity, receive a smaller share of international assistance for reproductive health than countries with a more stable environment.<sup>21</sup>

Demographic trends and projections are an important part of foreign policy planning. Unlike most other

socioeconomic conditions, patterns in age structure can be fairly reliably projected in coming decades based on current levels of fertility, mortality and migration. These projections can help identify countries where population may affect a government's ability to provide human security for its people, increasing the likelihood of conflict and should be considered in larger plans and strategies to address global security and stability.

**FIGURE 3: Mexico's Changing Age Structure, 1975-2005**



Source: United Nations Population Division. 2009. *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision*. New York: UN Population Division.

**Endnotes**

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