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The changing demographic and social profile of youth in Asia

Peter Xenos and Midea Kabamalan

Asia has undergone sweeping demographic and social change in recent decades, much of it involving youth. In part because of the dramatic growth in their numbers and in part because they can be a source of problems as well as a major resource for national development, young people have become the focus of intense interest to policymakers. This report assembles data on demographic and social changes affecting youth—defined as the 15–24 age group—in 17 Asian countries over the period from 1950 to 1990. It also projects trends in key demographic and social indicators to 2025.

The Asian data describe how a permanent demographic transition from high to low fertility gives rise to a transitional, temporary, but quite predictable youth bulge. The youth share of total population grows from about 16–18 percent to somewhere in the range of 20–24 percent before subsiding to the pre-transitional level some 30 years after the onset of fertility decline and finally to a post-transitional, stable level of about 12 percent many decades later. The characteristics of the mid-transitional youth bulge vary with the tempo and magnitude of fertility decline.

Social elements of the youth transition examined here are the transitions from early to later marriage and rising school enrollment, with enrollment levels increasing particularly within the 15–19 age group. Data for South Korea are used to illustrate the relationship between a rapid demographic youth transition and these key social transitions. The report also explores changes in the labor force participation of youth. Changes in labor force participation can vary depending upon the cultural and social context. They are not necessarily permanent, but they are nonetheless important corollaries of the youth transition. Other important changes that may be permanent but are difficult to measure include age at menarche and changes in the sexual system.

The pace at which the youth transition occurs has implications for social policy. An especially rapid transition produces rapid peaks and then declines in the number of youth. The rate of growth of the youth population and its share in the overall population can reach high levels. These extremes can cause disruptions in labor markets and can complicate planning for schooling and health care. A slower transition avoids such extremes but allows considerable growth in the numbers of youth before the transition process is completed. Policymakers should be aware of these tradeoffs.

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