

A look at Asia's changing youth population

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Over the past 50 years, every country in Asia has experienced a population boom. Across the region, rapid population growth was fueled by high fertility combined with a dramatic reduction in infant and child mortality. In some countries, population numbers began to grow right after World War II, while in others, growth was delayed by varying periods of political instability.

With the widespread acceptance of family planning, nearly every Asian country has also experienced a drop in birth rates. Again, the timing has varied. In rough chronological order, fertility began to decline in Japan and Singapore in the 1950s, followed in the 1960s by Hong Kong, South Korea, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Brunei, Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, and China and in the 1970s by Indonesia, India, and Myanmar. In Bangladesh, fertility was declining by the 1980s, and in Pakistan by the early 1990s. Everywhere, the decline in fertility appears to be a lasting feature.

A reduction in infant and child mortality followed by a drop in fertility produces, about 20 years later, a "youth bulge." This is defined as a significant increase in the absolute number of adolescents and young adults as well as a rise in the proportion of this age group in the population as a whole. In each country, the timing and magnitude of population growth and the ensuing fertility decline have been crucial factors governing the size and duration of the youth bulge. Thus the youth bulge

is much larger in some countries than in others. Some national populations no longer have a youth bulge, and in others the youth bulge has not yet appeared.

The youth bulge is of special concern to policymakers. Education, health, and employment programs need to expand to meet the needs of a growing youth population. Policymakers must keep in mind, however, that the excess number of young people may be short-lived.

Another policy concern stems from the fact that adolescents and young adults are in their prime reproductive years. Unusually large numbers in this age group will lead to unusually large numbers of births, even when fertility rates are low. The potential for population growth resulting from this temporary imbalance in the age structure is a phenomenon that demographers call "population momentum."

As John Bongaarts and Judith Bruce (1998) describe it, "...the largest generation of adolescents in history will soon enter the childbearing years. Even if each of these...[couples] has only two children, they will produce more than enough births to maintain population growth over the next few decades." Thus, although fertility has declined throughout Asia, because of population momentum national populations are expected to grow well into the next century.

This issue of *Asia-Pacific Population & Policy* highlights findings from a recent East-West Center study on demographic and social changes among young people in Asia. The project, supported

Table 1 Demographic and social trends among young people (age 15–24 except where otherwise noted) in 10 Asian countries, 1950–90

Country	Year	Youth population (in thousands)	Youth share of total population (%)	Percentage single		Percentage in school (ages 15–19 only)		Percentage in labor force		Percentage single and out-of-school	
				Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Bangladesh	1950	7,583	18	66	0	5	NE	86	4	63	0
	1970	11,308	17	75	12	25	5	81	5	57	8
	1990	22,847	21	82	30	31	20	76	76	59	18
India	1950	69,279	19	54	18	23	9	85	42	39	12
	1970	100,363	18	67	27	34	12	75	34	44	19
	1990	165,826	20	76	41	36	15	69	26	52	32
Pakistan	1950	7,440	19	56	30	15	2	89	8	47	29
	1970	12,109	18	81	47	18	6	79	8	68	43
	1990	22,415	20	80	59	22	10	75	11	65	52
Indonesia	1950	15,941	20	79	39	22	11	85	29	65	32
	1970	21,320	18	79	43	28	16	74	32	59	32
	1990	34,870	20	86	60	44	37	66	33	56	37
Philippines	1950	3,760	18	84	68	13	25	90	57	74	47
	1970	7,559	20	85	72	28	25	70	42	63	51
	1990	12,285	20	86	74	40	37	61	36	54	39

by the U.S. Agency for International Development through The Population Council, covered 17 countries in East, Southeast, and South Asia. It brought together information on the changing numbers of young people—age 15–24—and on trends in marriage, school enrollment, and workforce participation among youth populations in the region.

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE “YOUTH BULGE”?

Columns 3 and 4 of Table 1 show the number of adolescents and young adults and the proportion of this age group in the populations of 10 Asian nations. The analysis is based on United Nations population estimates.

Following a general pattern, the youth share of total population rises from 16–18 percent to somewhere in the range of 20 percent about 20 years after the onset of fertility decline. Absolute numbers of young people generally reach a peak somewhat later. The number of young people then begins to

decline, and their share in total population drops to a much lower, stable level after several decades.

This pattern varies, however, with the pace and magnitude of fertility decline. The youth bulge tends to be large in countries where fertility drops quickly from a very high to a very low level, for instance in China. The speed of the transition also varies widely—from less than 20 years in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea to more than 50 years in the Philippines, where the youth share of the total population has remained near its peak of 20 percent for two decades.

A rapid transition can be disruptive in the short run because both the absolute number of young people and the youth share of the total population rise quickly to high levels. But this situation is temporary. A slower transition may be easier to deal with in some respects, but the total size of the youth population can become very large.

For example, in China where the transition was rapid, the youth population grew 2.5 times between 1950 and 1990. In the Philippines, by contrast, the

youth population grew 3.3 times over the same period. Given population momentum, such a large increase in the number of young people has important implications for future population growth.

WHAT ARE YOUNG PEOPLE DOING?

Marrying later. Policymakers have advanced various proposals to mitigate the effects of the youth bulge on population growth. One core notion is that delaying childbearing will reduce population growth even if the total fertility of couples remains the same.

Many governments have raised the legal age of marriage, and policymakers have encouraged young people to marry later, to lengthen the interval between marriage and first birth, and to extend intervals between births. Such changes should improve the health of mothers and children as well as helping nations achieve their demographic goals.

Government intervention may not always be necessary, however, because

Table 1, continued

Country	Year	Youth population (in thousands)	Youth share of total population (%)	Percentage single		Percentage in school (ages 15–19 only)		Percentage in labor force		Percentage single and out-of-school	
				Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Thailand	1950	4,092	20	77	56	8	4	86	89	72	53
	1970	6,530	18	83	63	15	10	80	78	72	57
	1990	12,249	22	82	68	28	27	76	70	64	51
China	1950	101,340	18	88	36	NE	5	92	77	NE	33
	1970	158,205	19	89	62	NE	7	87	80	NE	57
	1990	249,890	22	87	75	NE	10	84	81	NE	70
Japan	1950	16,396	20	92	77	41	46	74	58	66	52
	1970	19,831	19	94	84	64	64	62	55	56	51
	1990	18,948	15	96	92	80	82	45	44	42	42
South Korea	1950	3,786	19	70	47	30	11	81	43	51	40
	1970	5,688	18	97	79	40	27	65	49	71	63
	1990	8,815	21	98	90	67	64	57	50	55	50
Taiwan	1950	1,623	20	81	59	26	10	78	37	60	52
	1970	2,972	20	95	76	47	37	66	43	61	50
	1990	3,759	19	96	86	59	62	60	48	60	47

NE: Not estimated.

Source: Xenos with the assistance of Kabamalan 1998, appendix tables. These appendix tables also provide data for the region as a whole, the three subregions, and seven additional countries: Brunei, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Singapore, and Sri Lanka.

young people in Asia are already waiting later to marry. In 1950, 46 percent of Asian women age 15–19 were single; by 1990, this proportion had risen to 72 percent. (All regional figures exclude China.) Among women age 20–24, the proportion single rose over the same 40-year period from 16 to 31 percent. Although less dramatic, the proportion of young men who were single also rose across the region.

East Asia has led the trend toward late marriage. In this region, the proportion of women single in the full age range (15–24) rose from 70 percent in 1950 to 91 percent in 1990. Among men, the proportion single rose from 87 to 96 percent. In South Asia, the absolute levels were much lower, but the changes were even more dramatic: the proportion single rose from 18 to 42 percent for women and from 56 to 77 percent for men. Southeast Asia has been in an intermediate position.

Table 1 (columns 5 and 6) shows the trend clearly at the national level. It is important to appreciate the significance of delayed marriage in absolute numbers. Between 1950 and 1990, the number of single young women in Asia rose nearly fourfold—from 22 to 82 million. Somewhat more than half of this increase was due to delayed marriage.

Staying longer in school. As with percentages single, school enrollment has increased throughout the region (Table 1, columns 7 and 8). In many countries, the upward trend has been stronger for women than for men, resulting in some convergence between male and female percentages enrolled in school. The trend has also been stronger for young people in the 15–19-year-old age group, as featured in this portion of the table.

In Asia as a whole, the proportion of girls age 15–19 who were enrolled in school rose from 14 percent in 1950 to

26 percent in 1990. For boys, the proportion rose from 23 to 39 percent. The rise in enrollment levels was much smaller for the 20–24 age group. By 1990, 12 percent of men and 6 percent of women in this age group were enrolled in school.

East Asia had the highest levels of school enrollment for both sexes and the greatest increase over the 40-year period: In 1990, 74 percent of girls and 73 percent of boys age 15–19 were enrolled in school. In Southeast Asia, enrollment levels were much lower, and the level for girls (34 percent) was a bit below the level for boys (39 percent). In South Asia, school enrollment was lower for boys (34 percent) and much lower for girls (16 percent).

Again, it is important to consider what this means in absolute numbers. In South Korea, for example, the total number of young people in the full age range of 15–24 rose from 3.8 million in 1950 to 8.8 million in 1990, an increase

of 132 percent. Over the same period the number of young people enrolled in school rose from 0.5 million to 3.7 million, an increase of 653 percent. This increase has placed heavy demands on South Korea's education system.

Although the proportion of young people in school should rise a bit higher in South Korea, the absolute number in school is projected to drop to 3.0 million by 2025 due to the decrease in the total youth population. This pattern of sharp rise and then decline in the numbers in school has already occurred or can be anticipated in every country of the region.

The projected decline in South Korea's total youth population combined with a rise in the proportion in school will result in a dramatic drop in the number of young people out of school—from 5.1 million in 1990 to 3.6 million in 2025.

More or less likely to participate in the labor force. For young men, labor force participation has declined steadily throughout the region (Table 1, column 9). This undoubtedly reflects the steadily increasing proportions of young men enrolled in school.

For women, however, the pattern is more complex (column 10) and much harder to measure, clearly affected by cultural factors as well as levels of economic development. Even countries in the same region show contrasting patterns. In Southeast Asia, for example, female labor force participation rates have gone up in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore but have gone down in Myanmar, Brunei, Thailand, and the Philippines.

A FOCUS ON THOSE AT RISK AND HARD TO REACH

Available statistics do not allow a precise identification of young people most in need of reproductive health

services. It would be useful, for instance, to identify young people who are single, out of school, out of work, sexually active, and living away from their families.

Information on the number of young people who are single has important implications for health policy and programs because single people may be particularly likely to engage in high-risk behavior. Survey data from the Philippines suggest that “the longer men remain single, the greater their risk of exposure to HIV infection” (Balk et al. 1997). Single women, who may be living away from their parents to pursue education or a career, also have important reproductive health needs.

Young people who are both single and out of school (Table 1, columns 11 and 12) are one of the most difficult groups to reach with reproductive health and family planning programs. The numbers in this group result from a kind of race over time between rising percentages single and rising enrollment rates. In much of the region, there have been major shifts toward later marriage, particularly for women, but enrollment rates for girls have not moved upward to the same extent. Between 1950 and 1990, the percentage of young women single and out of school rose in every country except Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Trends for young men have been quite different. Up to 1990, only two of the countries covered here had major increases in the percentage of young men single and out of school—India and Pakistan. Several other countries had decreases, with the upward movement of enrollment rates easily outpacing male marriage delay.

Despite strenuous government efforts to expand educational facilities, the proportion of young people single and out of school is projected to increase in all but the most economically advanced countries of the region—particularly among women.

In many countries, policies and programs in family planning and reproductive health will have to be redesigned or expanded to meet the needs of this burgeoning population group. Policy-makers could also make use of additional information to identify more specific segments of youth populations. Certainly a more detailed examination of urban youth would be useful, particularly of young people who have recently migrated to urban areas and are living apart from their families. In addition, policies and programs can benefit from the growing number of surveys in the region that are measuring the rates of risk-taking behavior among various categories of young people.

FURTHER READING

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