

Most young people today are born into smaller families than their parents, but there are many more of them than in their parents' generation. The developing world as a whole and many countries are seeing a peak in the numbers of youth because population momentum—the inertia in population growth related to the large size of the childbearing population—is being gradually overtaken by falling fertility. Now at 1.3 billion, the population of young people is expected to grow slowly into the foreseeable future because the continuing growth in youth populations in Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia will counter the slow declines in East Asia and Europe and Central Asia.

Why youth populations are approaching a peak

Why are youth populations so large? Recall the main elements of the demographic transition. Before the demographic transition, death rates and birth rates are high and in balance, implying low rates of population growth. The demographic transition begins with a decline in death rates. With death rates falling, birth rates typically remain high for some period, accelerating population growth. Eventually birth rates also fall, slowing population growth. The transition ends when birth rates and death rates have both stabilized at a new low level, implying a return to low (or zero) population growth.

High-income countries went through a demographic transition in the 1800s and early 1900s and had a long and slow decline in mortality. The gap between birth rates and death rates was never very large, and population growth rates rarely exceeded 1 percent a year.

The demographic transition in developing countries is quantitatively very different. Death rates declined very fast in the 1950s

and 1960s, generating population growth rates in excess of 4 percent a year in some countries. The timing of fertility decline has varied, but it occurred in many developing countries in the 1960s, when world population growth hit a peak of around 2 percent a year. The rapid population growth of the 1960s—the “population explosion”—is the origin of today's large youth cohorts. Today's youth are the children of the population explosion generation.

Consider Brazil (figure 1).¹ The demographic transition was already well under way by 1950, with the death rate having fallen to 15 per 1,000, while the birth rate was almost 45 per 1,000. Population growth was about 2.8 percent a year, higher than ever experienced by high-income countries when they went through the demographic transition. Although the birth rate was falling in the 1950s, death rates were falling faster, causing a peak population growth rate of 3.0 percent in 1960–65. This was also when world population growth rates reached their historic peak.

Birth cohorts grew rapidly in the 1950s in response to the rapid decline in death rates (figure 2), driven largely by declines in infant and child mortality. Cohort size leveled off in the late 1960s and early 1970s,

reflecting the rapid decline in fertility rates that began in the 1960s. Cohort size then grew rapidly again in the late 1970s, reaching a peak in 1982, driven by what demographers call population momentum—the increase in the size of the childbearing population as the birth cohorts of the 1950s reached childbearing age.

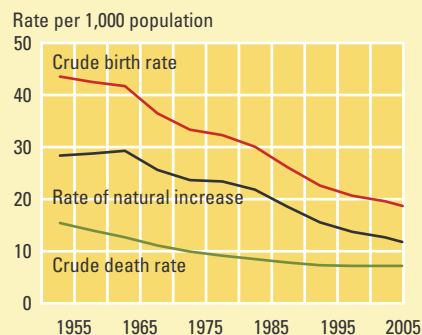
The experience for other developing countries is similar to Brazil's, with differences only in the timing of the largest surviving birth cohort. With the large declines in fertility starting around the 1960s, the developing world as a whole is now approaching a plateau in youth numbers. There are now 1.3 billion young people ages 12–24 in the developing world, a number expected to grow to 1.5 billion in 2035 and begin declining thereafter.

Country patterns are distinct

Depending on the timing and speed of fertility decline, countries can expect to see different trajectories of number of youth (figure 3). Four distinct patterns are the result of a complex interaction between fertility, mortality, and population momentum.

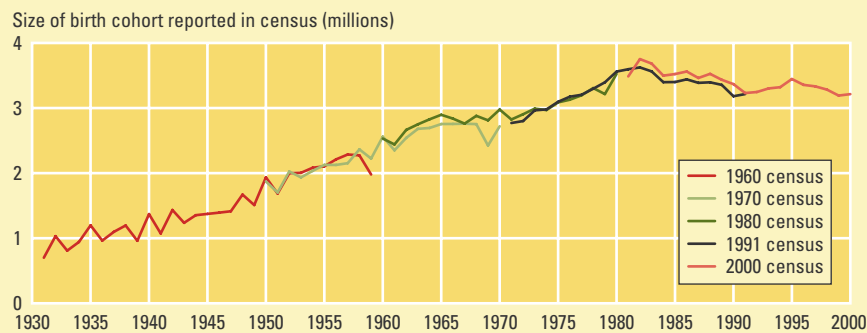
Group 1. Countries in this group typically experienced an early transition to low

Figure 1 The demographic transition in Brazil led to a peak in population growth during 1960–65



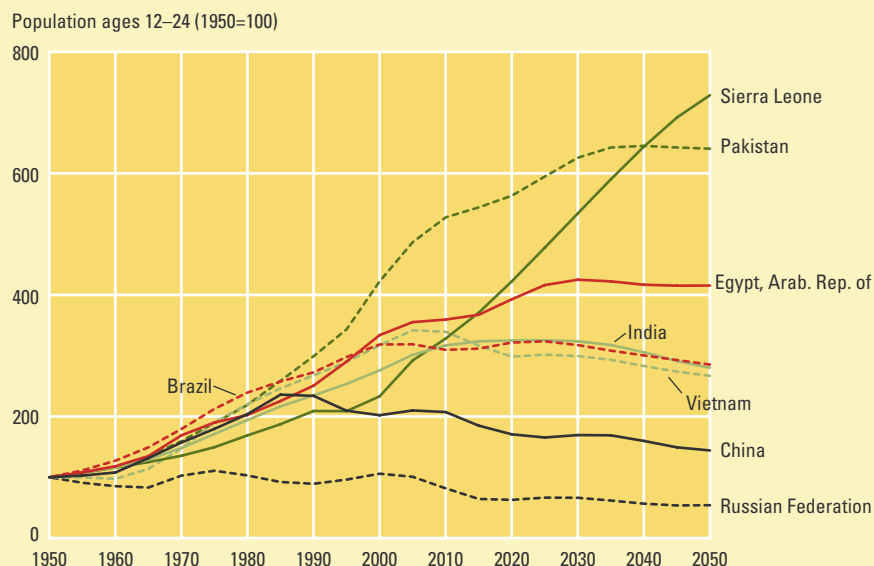
Source: United Nations (2005b), medium variant.

Figure 2 The largest surviving birth cohort in Brazil was born in 1982



Source: Lam (2006)



Figure 3 Country trends in youth population vary significantly

Source: United Nations (2005b), medium variant.

fertility and have seen a peak in their youth numbers (China, Russia). Other countries in this group include Albania, Armenia, Cuba, Georgia, Mauritius, Poland, and Thailand.

Group 2. Countries in this group experienced the fertility transition somewhat later than the first group and are seeing a peak about now (2000–10). In some cases the peak is relatively sharp (Vietnam). In others there is a long plateau, with countries projected to experience 20 to 30 years of relatively constant youth populations after they reach their peak (Brazil).² Other

countries in this group include Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Indonesia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Turkey.

Group 3. Countries in this group will experience a peak between 2010 and 2030, for some relatively sharp (India) and for others long drawn (the Arab Republic of Egypt).³ Other countries in this group include Bangladesh, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Peru, and the Philippines.

Group 4. Countries in this group will not experience a peak in the foreseeable future (Pakistan, Sierra Leone). For most

the fertility transition is halted, proceeding slowly, or yet to get under way. Other countries in this group include Afghanistan, Cambodia, Chad, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Liberia, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Senegal, Somalia, Uganda, and the Republic of Yemen.

Within this group there are marked differences in countries. Some with very late fertility declines, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone, are projected to have continuing rapid growth of the youth population for the next several decades. Dependency ratios have yet to fall, so resources available per youth are falling, and youth cohorts are growing relative to older workers, intensifying the pressure on the labor market from new entrants. Others such as Pakistan and Senegal are projected to have slower growth. Dependency ratios are falling, steadily improving the economic circumstances for investing in youth. Also falling is the relative size of youth cohorts, easing labor market pressures.

These distinct country patterns underpin the approaching plateau in the absolute number of young people in the developing world. While numbers are declining in several countries, they are countered by increases elsewhere. At the regional level, East Asia and Europe and Central Asia are already experiencing contraction, while Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa are set to grow, the latter the fastest.