



Here Come the Young

In the coming years, the population of people under the age of 30 in some of the most fragile and unstable countries is going to skyrocket. And the world is not ready for them.

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As tweets and headlines skip from crisis to crisis, the largest youth population in human history is coming of age in a steady, unstoppable wave.

While countries across Europe and East Asia are grappling with declining birthrates and aging populations, societies across the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia are experiencing youth booms of staggering proportions: More than half of Egypt's labor force is [younger than age 30](#). Half of Nigeria's population of 167 million is [between the](#)

ages of 15 and 34. In Afghanistan, Angola, Chad, East Timor, Niger, Somalia, and Uganda, more than two-thirds of the population is under the age of 25.

How well these young people transition to adulthood — and how well their governments integrate them economically, politically, and socially — will influence whether their countries thrive or implode. Surging populations of young people will have the power to drive political and social norms, influence what modes of governance will be adopted and the role women will play in society, and embrace or discredit extremist ideologies. They are the fulcrum on which future social attitudes rest.

These young people could transform entire regions, making them more prosperous, more just, and more secure. Or they could also unleash a flood of instability and violence. Or both. And if their countries are not able to accommodate their needs and aspirations, they could generate waves of migration for decades.

In the face of this deluge of young people, world leaders should be strategizing and taking steps daily that steer us all toward the former and away from the latter. But as serial acts of global terrorism, large-scale humanitarian disasters, perplexing political trends in Europe like Brexit and persistent economic fragility demand urgent attention, the question emerges:

Is anyone even paying attention?

Consider India. More than 300 million Indians are under the age of 15, making India home to more children than any country, at any time, in all of human history. To put the

size of this generation's numbers into perspective consider this: If these children formed a country, that country would be the fourth-largest in the world, still smaller than the United States but larger than Indonesia, Brazil, and Pakistan.

Every month until 2030, one million Indians will turn 18 years old, observes Somini Sengupta, the reporter and author of a compelling new [book](#), *The End of Karma: Hope and Fury Among India's Young*. These young people will need both education and jobs — lots of them — in a global economy that is most certainly going to feature more automation and fewer of the semi-skilled manufacturing jobs that absorbed earlier youth surges elsewhere in Asia. If India succeeds in this respect, its coming demographic bonanza holds the potential to create an unprecedented surge in the country's economic health. If not, its youth boom could rock the world's largest democracy and second-largest population with sustained instability.

“In the coming years, India can thrive because of its young. Or it can implode. Or both. There's little time left,” writes Sengupta.

And India is far from being the only country grappling with a booming youth population. Africa's current population of 200 million young people between the ages of 15 and 24 is set to [double by 2045](#). In the Middle East, a region of some 400 million people, [nearly 65 percent of the population](#) is younger than age 30 — the highest proportion of youth to adults in the region's history.

Booming youth populations are the demographic equivalent of wild cards for those trying to predict the trajectory of large, strategically important, and politically volatile countries like Pakistan and Iran.

In Pakistan, [two-thirds](#) of the population is under the age of 30. Many of these young people will only know Pakistan after its latest [transition](#) to democracy from 2008 to 2010 and after Pakistan ended its most recent [war with India](#) in 1999. They will also know political corruption, extremist violence, and dire shortages of energy and water. In Iran, two-thirds of the population is currently [under the age of 35](#). These young people are educated, tech savvy, and full of potential. Whereas the revolution will be something they learned about in school, many will remember seeing Iranians pour into the streets during the Green Movement or to celebrate the nuclear deal with the United States. And they will be watching to see whether [engagement with the West](#) benefits them or not. Will young Iranians and Pakistanis uplift or splinter the politics, economies, cultures, and security of their respective countries — or both? Will they engage the world productively and peacefully, turn inward, or pick fights with neighbors? Given the size, strategic position, and military capabilities of these two geopolitically critical countries, the answers will determine whether these two critical countries will export vitality or violence.

Unfortunately, the countries that have most of the world's young people are also the ones that are the most ill-equipped to grapple with their needs, ambitions, expectations, and inevitable frustrations — let alone capitalize on their potential. According to the United Nations, developing countries are home to [89 percent](#) of the world's 10- to 24-year-olds; by 2020, they will be home to [nine out of every 10 people globally](#). Like too

many developing countries, countries like Chad and Niger rank high on lists of the [world's most fragile states](#). They also have populations in which [half](#) of their citizens are under the age of 16.

With this information, it is all too easy to conjure a dystopic future, the Hollywood caricature of a lawless developing country dominated by gangs of rough-talking young men brandishing firearms (Think, [“I’m the captain now.”](#))

But what if we made a different choice? What if the world invested in the potential of these young people? It is feasible to believe these countries could pull themselves out of poverty and instability within a generation — the way China did, the way India might. But if the international community fails to act now, we will all suffer the consequences

As we ponder our path forward, we should consider that the developing world’s youth boom coincides with four interrelated global trends: an information revolution, the largest movement of refugees and displaced people in recorded history, growing urbanization that will concentrate youth in cities, and a rise in terrorism and extremist ideologies. Together these trends will spread not just people but, more importantly, their ideas at an unprecedented rate. They will raise and dash expectations pushing and pulling young people toward and away from their hometowns and homelands, toward and away from their desired futures. They will make young people around the globe aware of how others are living, the divisions within their societies, and how those they identify with are treated by governments, security forces, and other groups. This knowledge can inspire or anger. It can commit people to elevating their families and communities — or make them lash out against them.

Coming to terms with the global youth surge is about so much more than managing the logistical and governmental challenges of providing enough healthcare and education and jobs. It is about how the expectations and grievances and aspirations of these young people will shape the cultural norms and societal ideals of their societies. It is about the character and mores of a still-forming generation — and how they will affect us all. But, again, we must ask the question: Is the world even paying attention?

“Aspiration is like water,” writes Sengupta. “It needs a place to go, or else it drowns everything in its path.” In other words, if the raised expectations of masses of young people are left unmet, frustrations may fester, grievances will grow, and those people may choose to seek out their opportunities elsewhere.

Already, an exodus of people fleeing violence, poverty, or simply a lack of opportunity is underway; rising youth populations are only likely to feed it. The young, not the old, are more likely to vote with their feet. Roughly 25 percent of all Afghans [want to leave](#) their country, according to a recent [Gallup poll](#), and more than 100,000 Afghans are expected to head for Europe this year. The same poll, compiled from more than 450,000 interviews in 151 countries from 2009 to 2011, found that 40 percent of Nigerians (a country of more than 180 million) would emigrate to the West if they could.

Approximately two million Iraqis have already left their homeland. And they are willing to pay high prices and accept great risks to do so. As a young Kurdish doctor fleeing Iraq in a dangerous voyage via a rubber dinghy told *New York Times* correspondent Rod Norland, “Better to die quickly there than slowly in Iraq.”

Developed countries in Europe are not the only destination. Migrants from more than a dozen African nations have already landed in North Africa and an estimated 100,000 African migrants now live in Morocco alone. Syrian refugees registered by the United Nations now number 2.1 million in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon; there are 2.7 million in Turkey and more than 29,000 in North Africa. Half of all Syrian refugees in the world are children under the age of 18, many of whom missed important years of schooling and whose future paths are now in question.

Youth booms historically paid dividends in the form of economic growth. South Korea, for instance, translated its youth boom into twelvefold GDP per capita growth between 1970 and today, keeping unemployment for its large youth population around 10 percent. If this history repeats in large population centers like India and Pakistan, Nigeria and Ethiopia, Egypt and Iran — all of which currently have unusually large youth populations — economic booms will transform whole regions.

But the ability of developing countries to create enough jobs in today's technologically advanced and ruthlessly efficient global economy is far from assured. Even wealthy and well-educated countries like Germany and the United States are struggling to employ elements of their workforces and sustain a prosperous middle class. A lack of economic opportunity concerns young people worldwide as the pace of technological advancements decreases the demand for manufacturing labor even when economies are growing. In Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, for example, youth unemployment rates already exceed 30 percent, and youth populations there are expected to grow by another 20 percent or more over the coming 15 years, according to the U.N.

There is also the risk that the unmet expectations of youth could fuel widespread violence. While there is no empirically concrete link between [joblessness and terrorism](#), unemployment can contribute to a broader sense of marginalization and grievance that can drive young people to commit acts of violence, whether they live in Nairobi, Baghdad, or the Brussels neighborhood of Molenbeek. According to recent [survey](#) by ASDA's Burson-Marsteller, Arab youth across the Middle East view a lack of jobs and opportunity as factors that aid the recruitment efforts of extremist groups in that region.

As a 2015 Mercy Corps [report](#) and many other studies makes clear, grievances due to experiences of injustice, discrimination, corruption, and abuse by security forces are more important drivers of political violence than poverty. Thus, merely finding jobs for youth does not reduce the incidence of young people committing acts of terrorism or political violence. Addressing their grievances through effective institutions of governance and justice is an important, though admittedly long-term, response. Yet another, perhaps more easily attainable objective in the short term, is giving young people a sense of self-worth and the ability to contribute to and shape the future of their communities as well as their own individual futures. Economic needs are important but are only one of many dimensions of a person's life.

To change the trajectory of youth living in challenging circumstances around the world, young people need economic opportunities, civic engagement, and justice as well as opportunities to positively change their communities. They need to develop their identities as individuals who have something to contribute, and as citizens. They need to come together to shape more positive futures for themselves and for others. And they are not just going to wait.

Tapping the potential of massive youth populations worldwide could be the opportunity of the century. Or, it will unleash even more disorder, division, and violence. Or both. To echo Sengupta again, the world is now home to a tipping-point generation that will bend the arc of history. There's little time left.