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**A CLASH OF GENERATIONS? YOUTH BULGES AND  
POLITICAL VIOLENCE<sup>1</sup>**

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# A CLASH OF GENERATIONS? YOUTH BULGES AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

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## A. INTRODUCTION

Youth often play a prominent role in political violence, and the existence of a “youth bulge” has historically been associated with times of political crisis (Goldstone 1991; 2001). Generally, it has been observed that young males are the main protagonists of criminal as well as political violence.

But are countries and areas with youthful age structures, or ‘youth bulges’, more likely to experience political violence? The issue has received increasing attention over the past decade following the more general debate over security implications of population pressure and resource scarcity. In ‘The Coming Anarchy’, Robert Kaplan argues that anarchy and the crumbling of nation states will be attributed to demographic and environmental factors in the future (Kaplan, 1994: 46). More recently, youth bulges have become a popular explanation for current political instability in the Arab world and for recruitment to international terrorist networks. In a background article surveying the root causes of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the US, *Newsweek* editor Fareed Zakaria argues that youth bulges combined with slow economic and social change has provided a foundation for an Islamic resurgence in the Arab world (Zakaria, 2001:24).

Samuel Huntington qualified the ‘Clash of Civilization’ by adding the dimension of age structure: ‘I don’t think Islam is any more violent than any other religions [...]. But the key factor is the demographic factor. Generally speaking, the people who go out and kill other people are males between the ages of 16 and 30. During the 1960s, 70s and 80s there were high birth rates in the Muslim world, and this has given rise to a huge youth bulge. But the bulge will fade. Muslim birth rates are going down; in fact, they have dropped dramatically in some countries’ (Huntington, 2001: 1).

This paper presents and discusses the results of some recent empirical studies on youth bulges and political violence. While a general statistical relationship between age structure and political violence has been identified, there is also evidence suggesting that governments that invest in secondary education experience lower conflict risks. Furthermore, more countries are likely to experience that large youth cohorts can be a vehicle for economic development, rather than conflict, as fertility and dependency ratios are declining, opening the potential for demographic dividends.

## B. YOUTH BULGES: PROVIDING OPPORTUNITY AND MOTIVE FOR CONFLICT

The literature on youth bulges has focused in particular on spontaneous and low-intensity unrest like non-violent protest and rioting. However, youth bulges may also increase the risk of more organized forms of political violence like internal armed conflict. The paper draws on two dominant and competing, albeit not mutually exclusive, theoretical traditions in the study of civil war; one focusing on opportunities and the other on motives for conflict.

Both the opportunity and the motive perspectives are macro-level frameworks that attempt to explain events essentially consisting of a series of individual-level decisions associated with joining a rebel or terrorist organization or not, by focusing on economic, political and social structural features. The opportunity literature, often coined the *greed*

*perspective*, has its roots in economic theory and focuses on structural conditions that provide opportunities for a rebel group to wage war against a government (Collier, 2000; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). These are conditions that provide the rebel group with the financial means to fight, or factors that reduce the cost of rebellion, such as unusually low recruitment costs for rebel soldiers. Former World Bank research director Paul Collier has suggested that relatively large youth cohorts may be a factor that reduces recruitment costs through the abundant supply of rebel labor with low opportunity cost, increasing the risk of armed conflict (Collier, 2000: 94). According to the opportunity perspective, rebellion is feasible only when the potential gain from joining is so high and the expected costs so low that rebel recruits will favor joining over alternative income-earning opportunities.

The motive-oriented tradition, or *grievance perspective*, has its origins in relative deprivation theory and tends to see the eruption of political violence as a rational means to redress economic or political grievances (Gurr, 1970: 223). Motives for committing political violence can be economic--like poverty, economic recession or inequality--or political--like lack of democracy, absence of minority representation or self-governance. Most of the literature on youth bulges and political violence arguably falls into this tradition. It focuses on how large youth cohorts facing institutional crowding in the labor market or educational system, lack of political openness, and crowding in urban centers may be aggrieved, paving the way for political violence (e.g. Choucri, 1974; Braungart, 1984; Goldstone, 2001).

While useful as ideal models, the distinction between the motive and opportunity perspectives is sometimes overstated. First, in its simplest form, the motive perspective overpredicts political violence; the existence of serious grievances is not sufficient for collective violent action to erupt (Kahl, 1998). The likelihood that motives are redressed through political violence increases when opportunity arises from availability of financial means, low costs or a weak state. Second, while opportunity factors may better explain why civil wars break out, this does not necessarily mean that actors cannot also have strong motives (Sambanis, 2002: 224). Third, many factors may equally well be described as representing both opportunity and motive. A young impoverished person may both be considered a potential low-cost recruit, and at the same time an aggrieved individual motivated by economic and political exclusion. Below, the most relevant contextual factors suggested to affect the relationship between large youth cohorts and conflict are discussed.

### 1. *The Cohort Size Effect*

The mere existence of an extraordinary large pool of youth is a factor that lowers the cost of recruitment since the opportunity cost for a young person generally is low (Collier, 2000: 94). This is an assumption that hinges on the extent of alternative income-earning opportunities. If young people are left with no alternative but unemployment and poverty, they are increasingly likely to join a rebellion as an alternative way of generating an income.

New research in economic demography even suggest that the alternative cost of individuals belonging to larger youth cohorts are generally lower compared to members of smaller cohorts. According to the 'cohort size' hypothesis, 'other things being constant, the economic and social fortunes of a cohort (those born in a given year) tend to vary inversely with its relative size' (Machunovich, 2000: 236). So not only do youth bulges provide an unusually high supply of individuals with low opportunity cost, but an individual belonging to a relatively large youth cohort generally also has a lower opportunity cost relative to a young person born into a smaller cohort.

The influence of the size of youth cohorts on unemployment is also emphasized in the motive-oriented literature on civil violence (Moller, 1968; Choucri, 1974; Goldstone, 1991; Cincotta et al., 2003). If the labor market cannot absorb a sudden surplus of young job-seekers, a large pool of unemployed youths will generate strong frustration. In extreme cases,

the challenge to employ large youth cohorts can appear overwhelming. In Saudi Arabia, approximately four million people will add to the labor force over the current decade, equaling two-thirds of the current Saudi national work force (Winckler, 2002: 621). The socio-economic problems associated with 'youth bulges' may provide fertile ground for recruitment to terrorist organizations (Lia, 2005: 141).

## 2. *Economic Growth*

The overall economic performance of a society is an important factor determining the income forgone by joining a rebel movement, and thus the opportunity for rebellion. Economic growth over a longer period may act as a proxy for new income opportunities (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004: 569). For large youth cohorts, the economic climate at the time they enter into the labor market is particularly crucial. To the degree that income opportunities are determined by general economic performance, large youth cohorts are likely to be rendered particularly susceptible to lower income opportunities when economic conditions generally deteriorate, reducing the income they forego by signing up as a rebel. The motive-oriented literature also shares the concern over economic decline. Youth belonging to large cohorts will be especially vulnerable to unemployment if their entry into the labor force coincides with periods of serious economic decline. Such coincidences may generate despair among young people that moves them towards the use of violence (Choucri, 1974: 73).

## 3. *Education*

A tool that countries can exploit in order to respond to youth bulges is the expansion of higher education. Can this serve as a strategy to reduce the risk of political violence? Higher levels of education among men may act to reduce the risk of political violence. Since educated men have better income-earning opportunities than the uneducated, they would have more to lose and hence be less likely to join a rebellion (Collier, 2000). A recent study based on interviews with young soldiers presents strong micro-level support for the expectation that poverty, lack of schooling and low alternative income opportunities are important reasons for joining a rebel group (Brett & Specht, 2004).

Rebel recruitment is thus more costly and rebellion less likely the higher the level of education in a society (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). This is not inconsistent with the motive-oriented literature. However, it has been suggested that when countries respond to large youth cohorts by expanding opportunities for higher education, this may produce a much larger group of highly educated youths than can be accommodated in the normal economy. Unless the government is able and willing to absorb a surplus of university graduates into the public sector, as has been done for instance by the government of Egypt (Winckler, 2002: 630), prevailing unemployment among highly educated youth segments may cause frustration and grievances that could motivate political violence. It has been argued that high unemployment among educated youth is one of the most destabilizing and potentially violent socio-political phenomena in any regime (Choucri, 1974: 73), and that a rapid increase in the number of educated youths has preceded historical episodes of political upheaval (Goldstone, 2001: 95). It has been argued that the expansion of higher education in many countries in the Middle East, producing large classes of educated youth that the labor market cannot absorb, has had a radicalizing effect and provided new recruits to militant organizations in the area (Lia, 2005: 145-146).

## 4. *Lack of Democracy*

When being used to assess the role of democracy, the opportunity and motive perspectives yield opposite predictions. The opportunity literature suggests that the opportunity for political violence is greater the less autocratic a state is, while the motive-oriented literature argues that the greater the political oppression and the lack of political

rights, the greater the motive for political violence. Several empirical studies of regime type and civil conflict have found a curvilinear ‘inverted U’ relationship between democracy and conflict, suggesting that starkly autocratic regimes and highly democratic societies are the most peaceful (Hegre et al., 2001). This relationship is assumed to arise as a result of both opportunity and motive, as semi-democratic regimes may have greater openings for conflict compared to autocratic states. At the same time, lack of political rights may also constitute a motive for conflict. It has been suggested by proponents of the motive perspective that when large youth groups aspiring to political positions are excluded from participation in the political processes, they may engage in violent conflict behavior in an attempt to force democratic reform (Goldstone, 2001). The potential for radical mobilization for terrorist organizations is argued to be greater when large educated youth cohorts are barred from social mobility by autocratic and patriarchic forms of governance (Lia, 2005: 147).

### 5. *Urbanization*

While institutional crowding has been the major focus, geographic crowding has also been argued to generate motives for political violence (Brennan-Galvin, 2002). Since terrorism is essentially an urban phenomenon, states undergoing rapid urbanization may be particularly likely to experience increased risks of terrorism (Lia, 2005: 141). If youth are abundant in a relatively small geographical area, this may increase the likelihood that grievances caused by crowding in the labor market or educational institutions arise. Historically, the coincidence of youth bulges with rapid urbanization, especially in the context of unemployment and poverty, has been an important contributor to political violence (Goldstone, 2001). Youth often constitute a disproportionately large part of rural-to-urban migrants; hence, in the face of large youth cohorts, strong urbanization may be expected to lead to an extraordinary crowding of youth in urban centers, potentially increasing the risk of political violence.

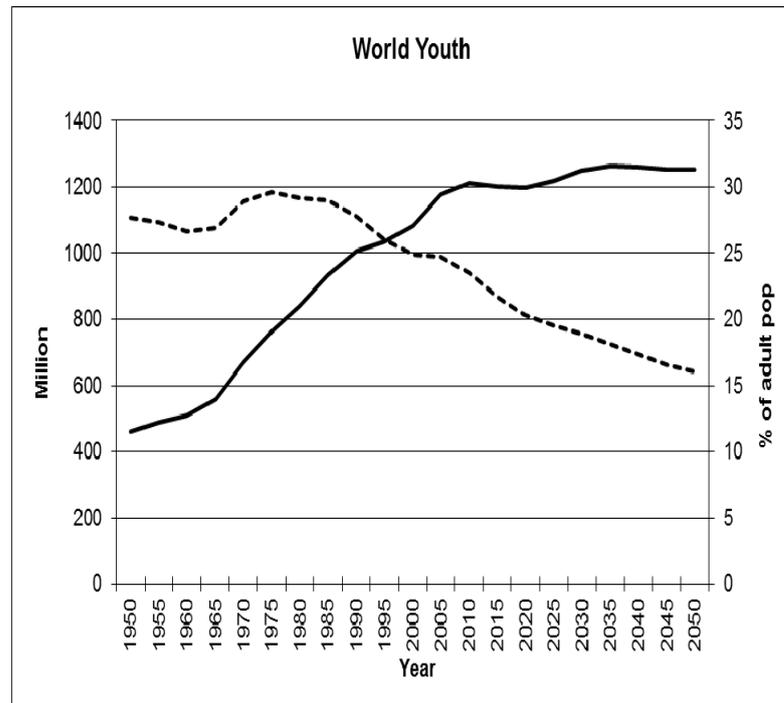
## C. EMPIRICAL STUDIES OF YOUTH BULGES AND VIOLENCE

### 1. *Measuring youth bulges*

Acknowledging that the understanding of youth differs vastly between societies, here youth refers to those aged 15 up to 24, which is also the definition employed by the United Nations. While there is significant regional as well as local variation, the total number of youth in the world is now growing at a much lower rate than in the previous five decades, and is expected to remain relatively constant between 2010 and 2050 (See figure I, the solid line measures millions of youth globally).

The dotted line in figure 1 shows the size of the youth population aged 15-24 as a percentage of the total adult population of 15 and above, excluding those younger than 15 years. Two recent authoritative studies of civil war that failed to find an effect of youth bulges on the risk of conflict used a different measure of youth bulges, dividing 15-24 year olds by the total population, including those under 15 (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Such definition is highly questionable both from a theoretical and a practical perspective. Most theories about youth revolt assume that violence arises from competition between younger and older cohorts, or because youth cohorts experience institutional ‘bottlenecks’ due to their larger size compared to previous cohorts. When using the total population in the denominator, youth bulges in countries with continued high fertility will be underestimated because of large under-15 populations that deflate the youth bulge indicator. At the same time, countries with declining fertility and relatively smaller under-15 populations – potentially experiencing a demographic dividend from large youth cohorts (see below) – are ‘weighted’ upwards.

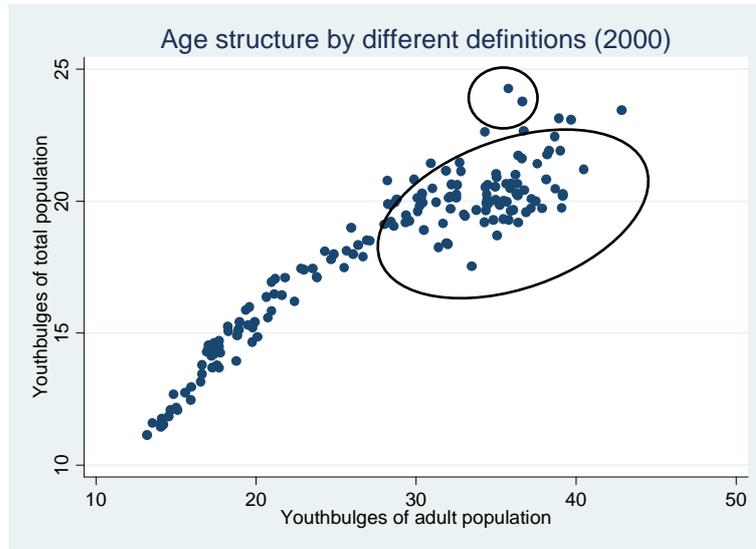
FIGURE 1. WORLD YOUTH POPULATION, 1950-2050



Source: United Nations Population Division (2011).

The implications of measuring youth bulges in different ways are illustrated in the scatterplot in figure 2. Here, all countries are plotted according to their values on the two different youth bulge measures in year 2000. The horizontal x-axis shows the value on the recommended measure, where youth bulges are defined relative to the total adult population (YBAP), while the vertical y-axis represents the flawed measure of youth relative to the total population (YBTP). The deviations from a linear trend line increase as the relative size of youth cohorts grow. The observations marked by the larger, lower circle are countries that have large youth cohorts, but also very large populations under the age of 15. Many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa belong in this category, as do countries like Guatemala, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Laos, Iraq, Yemen, Maldives and Papua New Guinea. In statistical models that assess the impact of youth bulges on conflict, this latter group of countries will have considerably less impact on the results when using the YBTP measure rather than the YBAP measure. The two outliers in the smaller circle are Libya and Iran, both of which experienced very steep declines in fertility in the 1990s and are now just starting to see an opportunity for a ‘demographic dividend’.

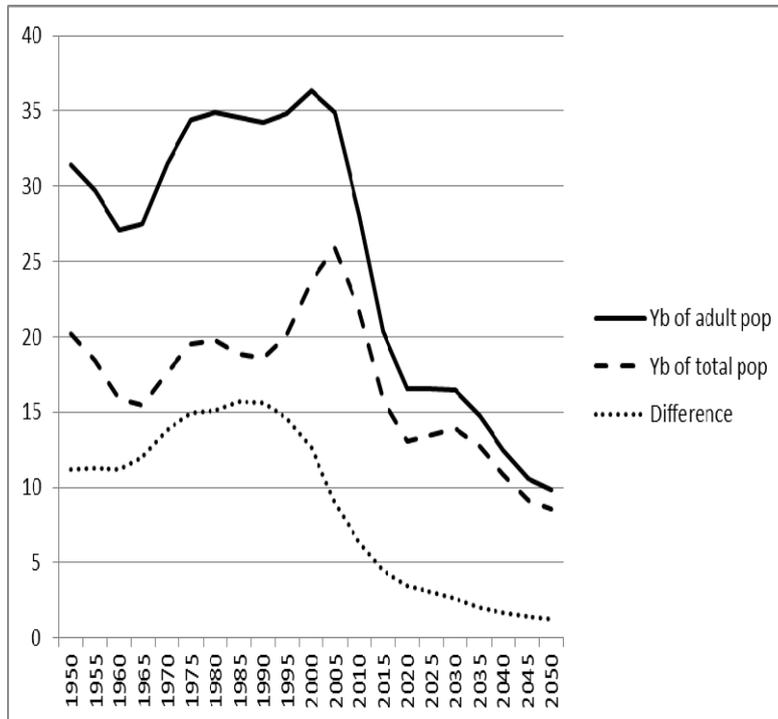
FIGURE 2. AGE STRUCTURE BY DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS



Source: United Nations Population Division (2011).

The difference between the measures is further illustrated in figure 3, showing age structural transition in Iran. The difference between the two measures is greatest in the initial phase of the youth bulge peak, and declines rapidly along with reduced fertility levels. Again, this underscores the importance of using a measure that is not deflated by large under-15 populations.

FIGURE 3. AGE STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN IRAN 1950-2050



Source: United Nations Population Division (2011).

## 2. *Cross-national study of youth bulges and violence*

In a recent cross-national time-series study of the 1950-2000 period, I found that the presence of youth bulges increase the risk of conflict outbreak significantly.<sup>ii</sup> The statistical relationship holds even when controlling for a number of other factors such as level of development, democracy, and conflict history, and are also robust to a variety of technical specifications (for detailed results, see Urdal, 2006). For each percentage point increase that youth make up of the adult population, the risk of conflict increases by more than four percent. When youth make up more than 35% of the adult population, which they do in many developing countries, the risk of armed conflict is 150% higher than in countries with an age structure similar to most developed countries. In 2000, 15–24 year-olds made up 17% or less of the total adult population in almost all developed countries, the median being 15%. The same year, 44 developing countries experienced youth bulges of 35% or above.<sup>iii</sup>

A claim that youth bulges are particularly volatile when they pass a certain threshold does not seem to have any validity, as there seems to be more of a linear trend (Huntington, 1996). Further, youth bulges seems to be associated with a higher risk of conflict in countries with high dependency ratios, while countries that are well underway in their demographic transitions are likely to experience a ‘peace dividend’.

If youth bulges increase the likelihood of armed conflict, how and why do they matter? While the conflict risk does not seem to increase when youth bulges coincide with long-term per capita economic decline, high dependency ratios, expansions in higher education or strong urban growth, the results suggest that the effect of youth bulges appears to be greater in the most autocratic regimes as well as in the most democratic states. It could indicate that youth bulges provide greater opportunities in autocracies and greater motives in democracies.

## 3. *Education study*

To address whether education may serve as a strategy to reduce the risk of political violence in the context of large youth bulges, a cross-national study (1970-2000) was conducted on a new education dataset (Barakat & Urdal, 2009). The dataset was constructed using demographic back-projection techniques, and covers educational attainment for a total of 120 countries (Lutz et al., 2007).

The empirical analysis does indeed suggest that large young male bulges are more likely to increase the risk of conflict in societies where male secondary education is low. This suggests that the availability of large cohorts of poorly educated youth can support armed conflict. The effect on conflict risk by low education and large youth populations is particularly strong in low- and middle-income countries, although it seems to be contingent on structural economic factors. In particular, education does not seem to have a pacifying effect on large youth cohorts in highly agrarian societies. While quantitative studies generally find a strong relationship between indicators of development and conflict risk, the results suggest that poor countries do have some leverage over reducing conflict potential through the increase of educational opportunities for young people. The study further supports broad policy interventions in education by relaxing concerns about consequences of certain forms of educational expansion. In particular, raising female education is likely to have an added mitigating effect on conflict even though females with low education are not typically a group directly engaging in violence. Also, there is no indication that rapid expansions in secondary or in tertiary education increases conflict potential by leading to an over-supply of educated youth.

#### 4. *Two disaggregated studies*

Can age structure also explain variation in violence below the state level? Two recent studies take slightly different approaches to disaggregating the study of youth bulges and conflict. The first is a time-series study of political violence in 27 Indian states for the 1956-2002 period (Urdal, 2008). India is a very diverse country with respect to demography, where the southern regions have experienced a very considerable fertility decline while northern regions still have continued high fertility and also very young age structures. I tested whether youth bulges are associated with three different and independently collected measures for political violence; armed conflict, political violent events, and Hindu-Muslim riots. The results are quite clear for all three measures. Youth bulges increase the risk of armed conflict, particularly in states with large male compared to female populations. Youth bulges are furthermore associated with increased risks of political violent events, but neither male surpluses nor urbanization appear to be contributing factors. Finally, youth bulges are associated with higher levels of rioting in states where urban inequality is great.

A second study addresses specifically how young age structures in urban centers affect levels of social disorder and violence (Urdal & Hoelscher, 2009). Among the many concerns over rapid urbanization is the question of whether large youth bulges in urban centers may be a source of political instability and violence. Youth, and especially male youth, have historically made up a disproportionately large share of rural to urban migrants, and young male shares of the population are thus often higher in urban centers as compared to rural areas. It has been argued that in the context of high levels of exclusion from economic, social and political spheres, large youth bulges in urban centers may become a source of instability and political violence. In the paper, we assess this claim empirically from an entirely new angle by using data on city-level urban social disorder, ranging from non-violent actions such as demonstrations and strikes, to violent political actions like riots, terrorism and armed conflict. The dataset covers 55 major cities in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa and spans over the 1960-2006 period. The importance of age structure is further considered in relation to conditional factors that potentially affect youth exclusion, in particular the level of informal employment, economic growth, education, and gender imbalances. We find that large male youth bulges aged 15-24 are generally not associated with increased risks of either violent or non-violent social disturbance.

#### *A geriatric peace?*

By 2050, the world will have undergone a dramatic shift in the age structure of the adult population compared to 1950. During the 1950-1990 period, youth between 15 and 24 years made up more than 25% of the adult population in Asia, Africa and America. By 2050, however, the United Nations Population Division (UN, 2007) predicts that only Sub-Saharan Africa still has young adult shares above 25%, while most other world regions are below 15%. The main reason for this shift is the global decline in fertility that began in the 1960s and which has gained increasing momentum over the last decades. Will this ageing world also become a more peaceful world?

Recent studies in economic demography suggest that the relationship between large youth cohorts and political violence may be muted if youth bulges precede significantly smaller cohorts. Economists and demographers have long discussed the allegedly negative impact of population growth rates on economic growth. Recently, this debate has been advanced by disaggregating the focus to look at the impact of growth among different age segments. While high growth rates in the non-working, or dependent, age groups are associated with lower economic growth, increases in the working-age population are positively associated with economic growth (Kelley & Schmidt, 2001). Thus, in areas where the demographic transition is well underway with sharply declining fertility rates, countries

may experience a window of opportunity for economic development, often coined a 'demographic dividend', largely flowing from increased savings as the relative number of dependents decreases.

In a cross-national study using updated demographic and conflict data covering the 1950-2007 period, we specifically look at the effect of youth bulges under different phases of the demographic transition, distinguishing between groups of countries that experience very high and very low growth rates in the 0-14 cohorts (Urdal & Malmberg, 2008). The differences are quite stunning. In countries where growth in the 0-14 population is high, large youth bulges are strongly associated with the onset of armed conflict. But where fertility has been rapidly declining, producing low or even negative growth in the 0-14 age segment, youth bulges are negatively associated with armed conflict onset, albeit not statistically significant. One possible interpretation of the latter finding is that this category contains both countries that succeed and fail to take advantage of their 'demographic window of opportunity', and that large youth bulges in this group of countries have a more mixed influence on conflict propensity.

Based on United Nations population projections of age structure, total population and infant mortality, we describe how future conflict risk is likely to develop up to 2050 for different world regions. Looking ahead, it can be noted that the three world regions with the highest current risks – SSA, Asia, and Mena – can expect relatively rapid declines in the demographically determined risk levels after 2010. The most rapid decline will, according to the model, take place in SSA where the risk level can be reduced by 40%, provided that the UN projections come true. The model also predicts a dramatic reduction in Mena, where risk levels can become almost as low as in Europe.

#### D. CONCLUSION

Recent empirical studies suggest that youth bulges are associated with an increased risk of political violence. However, states are to some extent able to reduce the risk through the provision of opportunities for young people, primarily by providing education. The level of secondary education appears to have a clearly pacifying effect on large youth bulges in low and middle income countries, although the effect appears to be contingent on structural economic factors.

Furthermore, the importance of youth bulges in causing political violence is expected to fade in most parts of the world over the next decades because of declining fertility. The general relationship between age structure and conflict is weakened as countries experience declining fertility rates and become positioned to take advantage of their young age structures to achieve demographic dividends. Many countries are currently moving into this category. However, for states that will experience high fertility levels and great youth shares for years to come, especially in countries in the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia, age composition still warrant some caution.

In order to avoid instability and violence particular, focus should be on monitoring economic opportunities for young people, and particularly on providing employment or educational opportunities for youth in periods of economic decline. While expanding opportunities for education generally pacify youth cohorts, some evidence suggest that as opportunities for higher education is expanded, lack of employment opportunities for highly educated youth may contribute to instability.

Limiting migration opportunities may increase the risk of violence in some countries with large youth bulges if not compensated by increased domestic employment opportunities. Emigration may work as a safety valve in countries with large youth cohorts. In a recent survey, almost half of all Arab youth expressed a desire to emigrate resulting from concerns

over job opportunities and education (UNDP, 2002). If migration opportunities are increasingly restricted without domestic initiatives in place to provide opportunities for youth, developing countries that previously relied on exporting surplus youth may experience increased pressures from youth bulges accompanied by a higher risk of political violence.

Some areas stand out as particularly promising for further study of youth bulges and political violence. Additional disaggregated, sub-national studies can provide better tests of some of the relationships concerning youth opportunities and violence. While the results for the city-level analysis reported here do not generally find support for a relationship between young urban age structures and violence, the lack of good city-level indicators of economic and social exclusion prohibits a thorough assessment of possible contextual factors. Disaggregated studies could also address the claim that differential age structures between identity groups contribute to explain interethnic conflict dynamics. However, structural models are limited in the sense that they purportedly explain individual-level behavior while in reality we have very limited micro-level evidence explaining what motivates youth who engage in political violence. Hence, a promising next step in the study of youth and violence would be surveys of youth in both conflict and non-conflict settings aimed at explaining variations in perceptions and perpetration of violence.

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Another project, however, did find statistically significant effects. The State Failure Task Force Group found some effect of youth bulges on ethnic conflict, see Esty et al. (1998). Yet another analysis that finds a positive relationship between youth bulges and conflict is Cincotta et al. (2003).

<sup>ii</sup> For conflict data, see the PRIO/Uppsala dataset: Gleditsch et al. (2002). Conflicts are defined according to a set of specific criteria, of which at least 25 battledeaths per year is one.

<sup>iii</sup> The results were corroborated by similar effects of youth bulges on measures of terrorism and riots/demonstrations.