

Gallup Pakistan History Project - **Weekend Read 11** ‘Pakistan’s Declining Population Growth Rate’: by Murad Javed (Research Fellow, Gallup Pakistan History Project)

Ever since Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*, the subject of population size and growth has remained a permanent fixture of socioeconomic, environmental, and political imagination. Notwithstanding the alarmist tone and predictions of Ehrlich’s book, global population has increased substantially over the century. Of the countries that have fueled this rapid increase, Pakistan ranks in the top 10. In 2013, Pakistan ranked as the sixth most populous country in the world, with a total population of 182,142,594.¹

The size of a country’s population is a critical determinant of social, political, and economic fortunes. Pakistan’s population size and growth rate has been a perennial subject of debate and scrutiny over the country’s attempt to chart sustained and healthy economic development and growth. Substantial population is often interpreted in both negative and positive frames. For instance, a substantial population base produces a large labour force, deep potential for exploiting human capital, and the scope for creating multisectoral industries to serve a large domestic market. Conversely, a large population can also often act as an impediment, especially if the population outpaces socioeconomic growth and development.

In Pakistan’s case, the discussion has largely revolved around and focused on the latter effect. The country’s continued struggles to develop resources, structures, and institutions are often attributed to the unchecked, rapid growth in population. Over time this runaway growth has undermined and eroded the state’s ability to register healthy socioeconomic growth rates, as the continually increasing population always outpaces any growth in resources. Domestic and international policymakers, as well as development experts often cite this phenomenon as a significant barrier to socioeconomic development. Crucially, an increasing population places a double burden on resources, as well as on policymakers’ ability to install policies and strategies to pursue long-term growth.

Pakistan’s significant population has grown rapidly since the 1960s. The growth rate accelerated from 2.4% in 1960 to 3.4% in 1984.² This rapid growth rate has been captured at the aggregate level in terms of the population growth rate. The Table below provides data from the World Bank on the population growth rate in Pakistan since the 1980s:

POPULATION GROWTH RATE							
1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2013
3.3	3.4	2.9	2.6	2.3	1.8	1.8	1.7

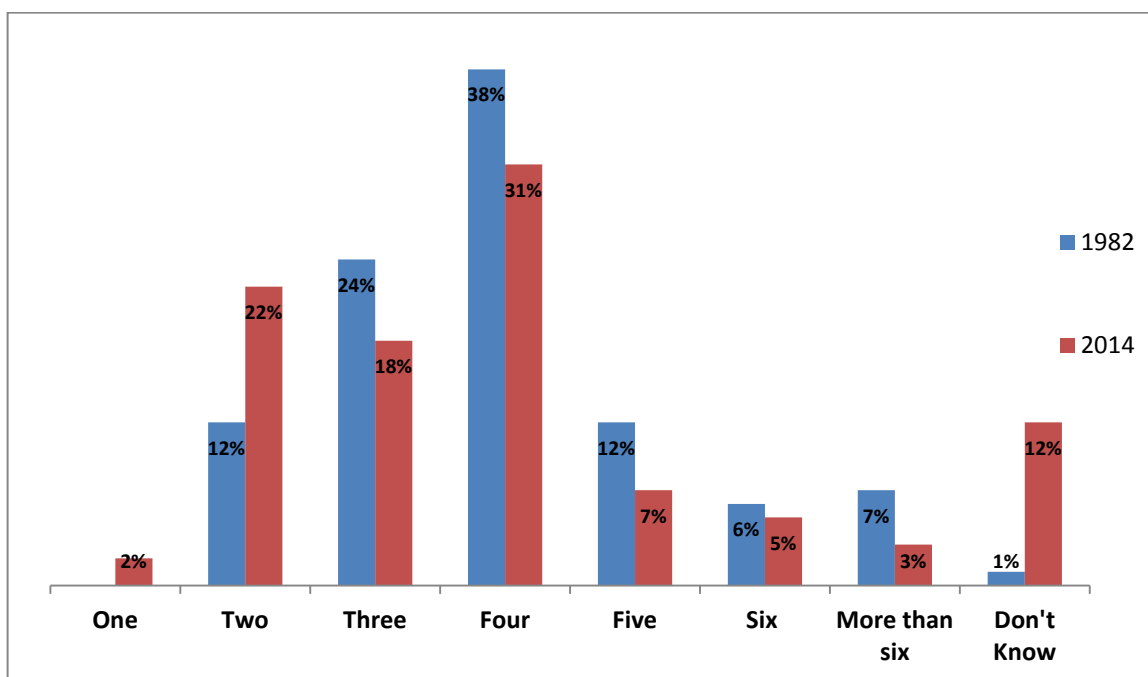
¹http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?order=wbapi_data_value_2013+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=desc

² <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.GROW/countries?page=2>

The data here shows that Pakistan's population base increased tremendously in the 1980s. Longitudinal aggregate population growth rate shows that the population growth rate in Pakistan was at its peak in 1985, when the country's population was growing at a rate of 3.4% per annum. However, 1985 seems to be a watershed year, as Pakistan has registered a steady decline in the population growth rate since that year. Between 1985 and 1995, the country's growth rate decelerated from 3.4% to 2.6%. By 2013, this growth rate had further declined to 1.7% per annum.

While this data provides an aggregate level picture of the country's overall population growth over time, Gallup Pakistan's invaluable repository of historical public opinion data allows for dissecting this trend from an alternative lens: public opinion on the desired size of the family. Data is available for two points: 1982 and 2014. These two points reflect two different eras in the country's population growth. Pakistan was in the thick of a rapid population expansion in the 1980s, with the highest per annum population growth rate recorded in 1984. By 2014, the country's population growth rate has declined considerably. This longitudinal data is critical in that it shows how societal attitudes have shifted significantly vis-à-vis the ideal family size desired by Pakistanis.

Gallup Pakistan asked the same question a representative sample of Pakistanis across the country: How many children do you think a couple should have? Over a period of 32 years, the change in public opinion reflects a significant difference in societal attitudes towards the size of a family; specifically, the number of children that a family should have. Data on these two time points is presented in the figure below:



The public opinion data recorded by Gallup Pakistan shows a remarkable shift in Pakistanis' societal attitude towards the desired number of children in each family. In 1982, when Pakistan was in the throes of rapid acceleration in its population size, more Pakistanis favoured a larger family size. The highest proportion of Pakistanis in 1982, 38%, desired four children per couple i.e. leading to an average desired household size of 6. A significant 24% desired three children per couple. Similarly, 25% Pakistanis in 1982 wanted five or more children per couple. These numbers show that the social attitude in the country in 1982 reflected a significant propensity for larger households, and a desire for having several children.

In 2014, things had changed considerable in Pakistan. In line with the aggregate-level data show previously, more Pakistanis are now socially inclined towards having smaller families. Between 1982 and 2014, the largest shift has been recorded in downward preference for having fewer children per couple. The most significant change has been recorded in the preference for Pakistanis to having two children per couple. 22% Pakistanis think that a couple should have two children in 2014; up from 12% in 1982. While the country showed no preference for having one child per family, in 2014 this has changed slightly, with 2% Pakistanis now asserting that a couple should have one child. The preference for three and/or more children per couple has declined in 2014. Notwithstanding this change, the largest proportion of Pakistanis in 2014 believed that a couple should have four children 31% (down from 38% in 1982). Another important shift is the greater proportion of Pakistanis who are now undecided about the number children each couple should have – 12% respondents answered “Don’t Know” to the questions.

Two important interpretations can be made from this data. First, it provides empirical, societal evidence for the aggregate level data that shows a declining population growth rate in the country. Over the last three decades, the population growth rate has decreased in Pakistan, and this observation is backed by the data shown and analyzed here. Second, it shows that Pakistani social attitudes and opinions on family size have changed considerably. While the country's total population base has increased substantially over time, future growth could potentially decelerate. This decline in growth, while still positive, could present a more manageable challenge for the state and its policymakers to make strategic decisions with regards to Pakistan's future socioeconomic growth and development.

Evidence on birth rate (per 1000) and fertility rate at the aggregate level also substantiates this changing societal attitude and reality. The Tables below show this data over time:³

Birth Rate, crude (per 1,000 people)							
1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2012
42	42	40	36	31	28	27	26

³ <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.CBRT.IN/countries>

Fertility Rate, total (births per woman)							
1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2012
6.5	6.4	6.0	5.4	4.5	3.8	3.4	3.3

The data in the Tables above further cements the observation that the population growth rate in Pakistan is decelerating; with public opinion attitudinal data providing granular understanding of the average family size preference for Pakistanis in 2014. This decrease in population growth is a welcome and necessary change in trend and societal attitude. Pakistan's economy and resources require breathing space for deepening capacity and creating institutions, policies, and structures to deliver balanced and equitable growth and development opportunities to all citizens. However, a close reading of the aggregate level data should show that more needs to be done by the state to encourage and incentivize citizens to further enervate the population growth rate. For instance, the data in the last two Tables shows that while birth rates and fertility rates decreased dramatically between 1980 and 2005, this decline was stabilizing by 2012. This observation, when combined with Gallup's data that the majority of Pakistanis still desire an average of 4 children per couple, shows that the country's population is still growing; albeit, at a less rapid rate than the 1980s.

Policymakers and analysts need to enable and encourage the state to understand the decline in runaway population growth needs to be actively encouraged, if Pakistan is to capitalize and build on its human capital and economic potential. For a country with more than a 180 million citizens, a fertility rate of more than 3 children per woman is a high rate in that it contributes to the continued expansion in the population base.

The decline in preference for children per couple over three decades captured by Gallup and discussed here could be explained by a number of variables. For instance, increasing literacy rates could explain greater understanding and recognition by more Pakistanis of the need to have smaller families in order to better manage resources. This causal link could be explained by increasing knowledge and awareness for average Pakistanis through greater access to a wider variety of media. Similarly, the state's efforts for population reform since the 1990s might have made inroads in convincing Pakistanis to reduce the number of children per family. Increasing labour force participation by women – which is driven by increase in educational attainment, changing social attitudes, and rising incomes – could explain the possible deceleration in population growth over the last three decades. These variables have been recorded, deconstructed, and analyzed around the world as contributing significantly to controlling population growth rates in countries that faced runaway population growth rates. However, the state needs to take account of and understand these variables and their causal influences to help control the continued population growth in the country. Without such meaningful and empirically-driven understanding of longitudinal

trends and linkages, Pakistan will continue to face its own population base as a barrier to rather than a source of economic growth and development.