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# Gallup Pakistan Analysis: Major Cities Growth Since 1951



## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Pakistan’s Urban Population Expands Sevenfold Since Independence — 55% of All Urban Residents Now Live in Just 46 Major Cities**

*Islamabad, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2025*

Drawing on the 7th Population and Housing Census 2023, conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), this edition of *Gallup Pakistan’s Big Data Analysis Series* examines how Pakistan’s major cities have expanded since 1951. Over the past seven decades, Pakistan’s population has surged from 33.7 million in 1951 to 241.5 million in 2023 — a 7.2-fold increase. Urbanization has accelerated sharply, with the urban share of population rising from 17.7% to 39.9% during this period.

The census identifies 657 urban localities in 2023, up from 586 in 2017. Yet, this modest increase in localities masks a deeper trend: 55% of all urban residents now live in just 46 large cities, each with populations exceeding half a million. This concentration illustrates how Pakistan’s urban growth has been highly centralized, with major metropolitan centers absorbing most of the population increase.

#### **What is the Big Data Analysis Series by Gallup?**

Gallup Pakistan’s Big Data series was started by Bilal I Gilani, Executive Director of Gallup Pakistan. Bilal explains the rationale of the series: *“Pakistan does not suffer from a lack of data,” notes Bilal Gilani, “but from limited accessibility and weak translation of numbers into understanding. Gallup Pakistan bridges this gap by analyzing large, often under-used datasets — from PSLM and Labour Force Surveys to Economic Surveys, Election Commission data, and now the National Census 2023 — so that these statistics can inform development priorities and public discourse.”*

#### **What data points this current edition covers:**

This analysis draws from the National Census Report 2023 published by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS). It compares population and urbanization data across censuses from 1951 to 2023, highlighting the growth of major cities, inter-census dynamics, and concentration patterns. All figures are derived from Tables 2.1–2.5 and 3.4–3.6 of the Census report.

# Gallup Pakistan Analysis: Major Cities Growth Since 1951

Pakistan's Urban Population Expands Sevenfold Since Independence  
**55%** of All Urban Residents Now Live in Just **46 Major Cities**

## Rapid National Urbanization:

Pakistan's total population increased more than sevenfold, from 33.7 million in 1951 to 241.5 million in 2023, while the urban share nearly doubled from 17.7% to 39.9%.



## Growth of Million-Plus Cities:

The number of cities with populations exceeding one million increased from 10 in 2017 to 13 in 2023, now encompassing 56.5% of the urban population.



## Deep Urban Concentration:

Despite **657** officially recognized urban localities in 2023 (up from **586** in 2017), just 46 large cities (with populations over **500,000**) host **55%** of all urban residents, illustrating that urbanization is heavily concentrated in major metropolitan centers.



## Dominance of Mega Cities:

Karachi and Lahore alone account for nearly **34%** of Pakistan's total urban population, confirming their position as the country's economic and demographic anchors.

## Exceptional Growth in Faisalabad and Gujranwala:

Between **1951** and **2023**, **Faisalabad** and **Gujranwala** expanded nearly fifty-fold, transforming from mid-sized industrial towns into dense metropolitan centers. Meanwhile, **Lahore** and **Karachi**, which once differed significantly in scale, have now reached almost equal population sizes

*The findings highlight the emergence of secondary growth hubs like Sargodha, Sialkot, and Bahawalpur, yet underline the infrastructure strain in Karachi, Lahore, and Faisalabad. The pattern calls for balanced urban development, transport expansion, and equitable investment to address congestion, housing shortages, and uneven service delivery.*

## Key Findings:

- 1. Rapid National Urbanization:** Pakistan's total population increased more than sevenfold, from 33.7 million in 1951 to 241.5 million in 2023, while the urban share nearly doubled from 17.7% to 39.9%. This represents a structural shift toward urban living, though rural areas still account for about 60% of the population. *It is important to note that the definition of 'urban' used here follows the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) classification, which primarily considers administrative boundaries. However, alternative definitions — such as those used by the World Bank — suggest that Pakistan's functional urban population could be as high as 90%, when factoring in peri-urban and high-density settlements contiguous with city limits.*
- 2. Deep Urban Concentration:** Despite 657 officially recognized urban localities in 2023 (up from 586 in 2017), just 46 large cities (with populations over 500,000) host 55% of all urban residents, illustrating that urbanization is heavily concentrated in major metropolitan centers.
- 3. Dominance of Mega Cities:** Karachi and Lahore alone account for nearly 34% of Pakistan's total urban population, confirming their position as the country's economic and demographic anchors. The top 20 cities (Karachi to Okara) together host 24% of the total national population.
- 4. Growth of Million-Plus Cities:** The number of cities with populations exceeding one million increased from 10 in 2017 to 13 in 2023, now encompassing 56.5% of the urban population. This expansion reflects ongoing rural-to-urban migration and natural population growth concentrated in large cities.
- 5. City-Specific Growth Trends:** Between 1951 and 2023, Faisalabad, Gujranwala, and Rawalpindi saw the highest relative growth (more than 25× their 1951 size), while Rawalpindi and Quetta recorded the fastest growth rates between 2017 and 2023. Karachi's population rose to 18.87 million, representing 7.8% of Pakistan's total and 20% of its urban population.
- 6. Exceptional Growth in Faisalabad and Gujranwala:** Between 1951 and 2023, Faisalabad and Gujranwala expanded nearly fiftyfold, transforming from mid-sized industrial towns into dense metropolitan centers. Meanwhile, Lahore and Karachi, which once differed significantly in scale, have now reached almost equal population sizes, reflecting a more balanced distribution of Pakistan's megacity population base.
- 7. Urban Planning Implications:** The findings highlight the emergence of secondary growth hubs like Sargodha, Sialkot, and Bahawalpur, yet underline the infrastructure strain in Karachi, Lahore, and Faisalabad. The pattern calls for balanced urban development, transport expansion, and equitable investment to address congestion, housing shortages, and uneven service delivery.

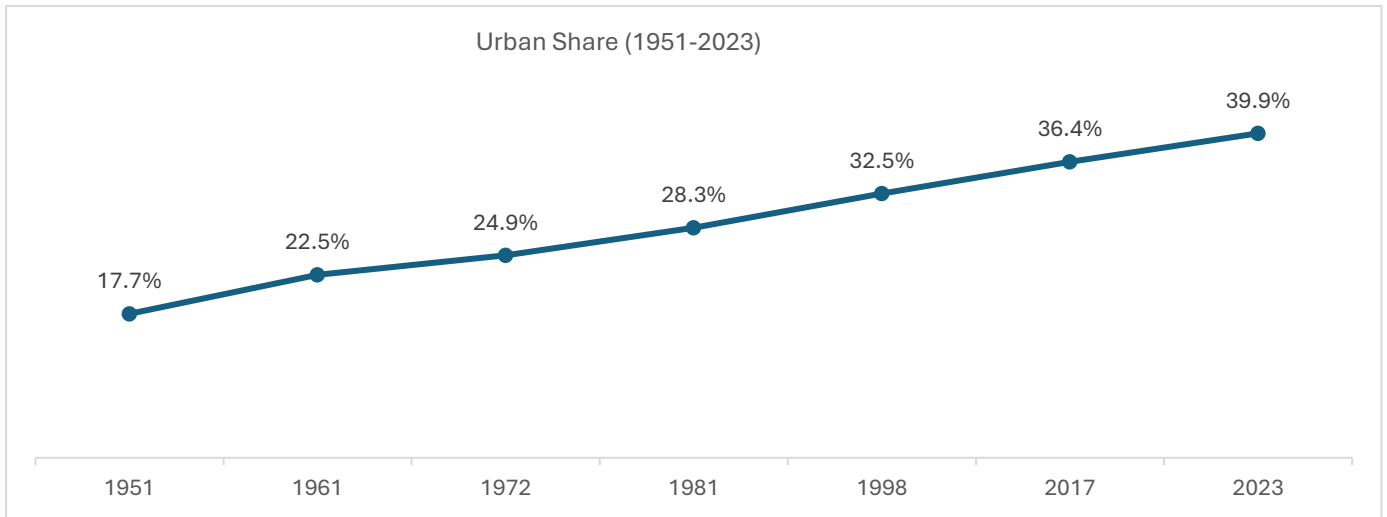
## 1. Population Growth of Major Cities (1951–2023)

The trajectory of Pakistan's ten largest cities since 1951 reflects both explosive demographic growth and unequal regional urbanization.

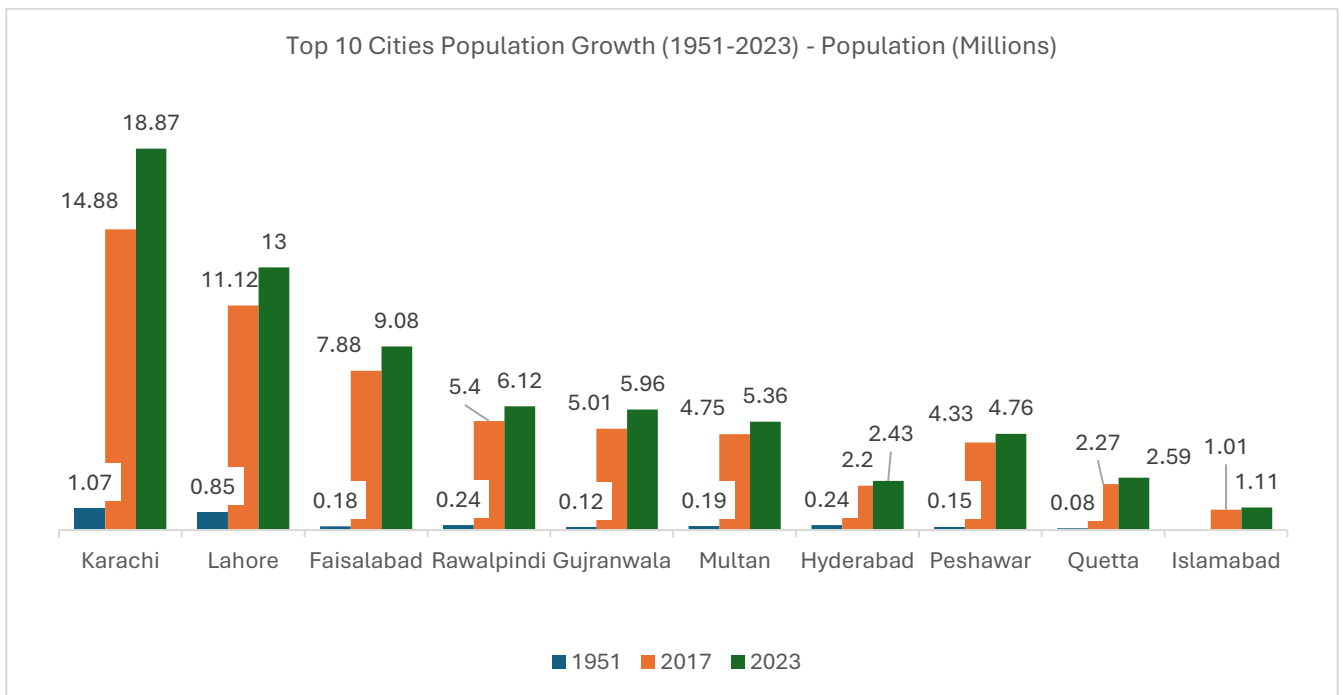
City	1951	2017	2023	Growth (×1951)
<b>Karachi</b>	1.07 M	14.88 M	18.87 M	<b>17.6×</b>
<b>Lahore</b>	0.85 M	11.12 M	13.00 M	<b>15.3×</b>
<b>Faisalabad</b>	0.18 M	7.88 M	9.08 M	<b>50.7×</b>
<b>Rawalpindi</b>	0.24 M	5.40 M	6.12 M	<b>25.8×</b>
<b>Gujranwala</b>	0.12 M	5.01 M	5.96 M	<b>49.3×</b>
<b>Multan</b>	0.19 M	4.75 M	5.36 M	<b>28.2×</b>
<b>Hyderabad</b>	0.24 M	2.20 M	2.43 M	<b>10.1×</b>
<b>Peshawar</b>	0.15 M	4.33 M	4.76 M	<b>31.4×</b>
<b>Quetta</b>	0.08 M	2.27 M	2.59 M	<b>30.9×</b>
<b>Islamabad</b>	—	1.01 M	1.11 M	—

Karachi continues to dominate Pakistan's urban landscape, accounting for nearly 8% of the national population and serving as the country's commercial, industrial, and migration hub. Lahore follows closely, its population expanding fifteenfold since 1951, driven by its emergence as a cultural, administrative, and educational powerhouse. Faisalabad, Gujranwala, and Rawalpindi illustrate a second wave of industrial cities that have absorbed millions of rural migrants seeking work in manufacturing and services.

Between 1951 and 2023, Faisalabad alone grew more than 50 times, transforming from a textile town into a dense metropolitan center. Meanwhile, Peshawar and Quetta—regional capitals in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan—have seen their populations multiply by over 30 times, underscoring that even traditionally peripheral provinces are undergoing rapid urban transformation, albeit from smaller bases.



Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), National Census Report 2023.



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## 2. Urban Concentration and Distribution

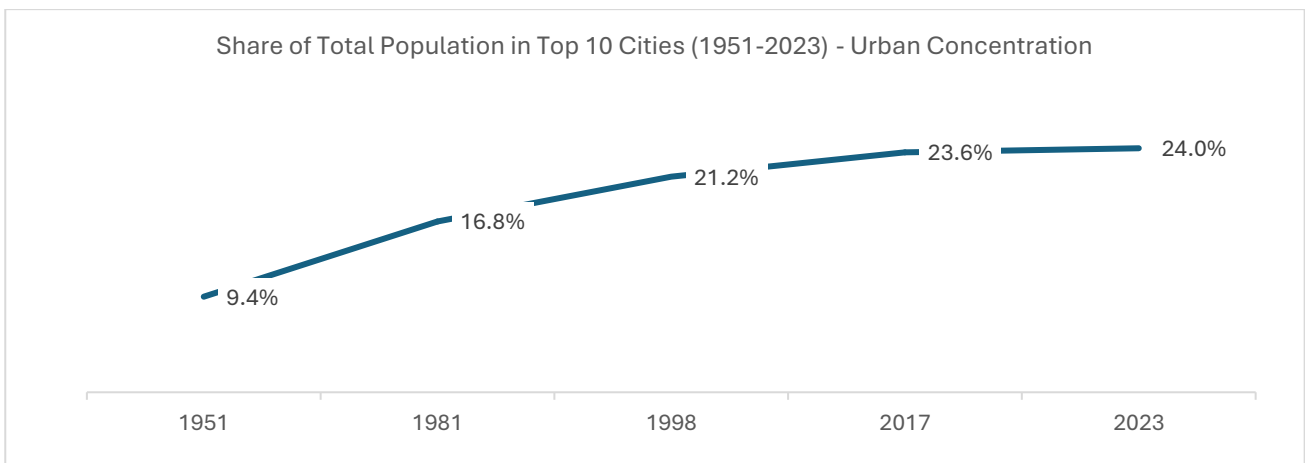
Despite this nationwide expansion, Pakistan’s urbanization remains highly centralized.

In 2023, 13 cities exceed one million residents, up from 10 in 2017, and together they house 56.5% of the country’s total urban population. Just two cities — Karachi and Lahore — alone account for 34% of all urban residents, illustrating a megacity-driven pattern of development.

This over-concentration of population and investment has created what urban planners describe as a “megacity bias.” Karachi–Lahore–Islamabad now forms a demographic and economic corridor that captures the bulk of migration flows, private investment, and job creation.

By contrast, small and medium-sized towns struggle to expand meaningfully — many have grown only marginally or even stagnated since 2017, leading to widening disparities in infrastructure and opportunity.

This pattern is not merely demographic; it is economic and spatial, concentrating innovation, public spending, and economic dynamism in a few large centers, while smaller towns risk exclusion from the national growth narrative.



Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), National Census Report 2023.

### 3. Inter-Census Growth (2017–2023)

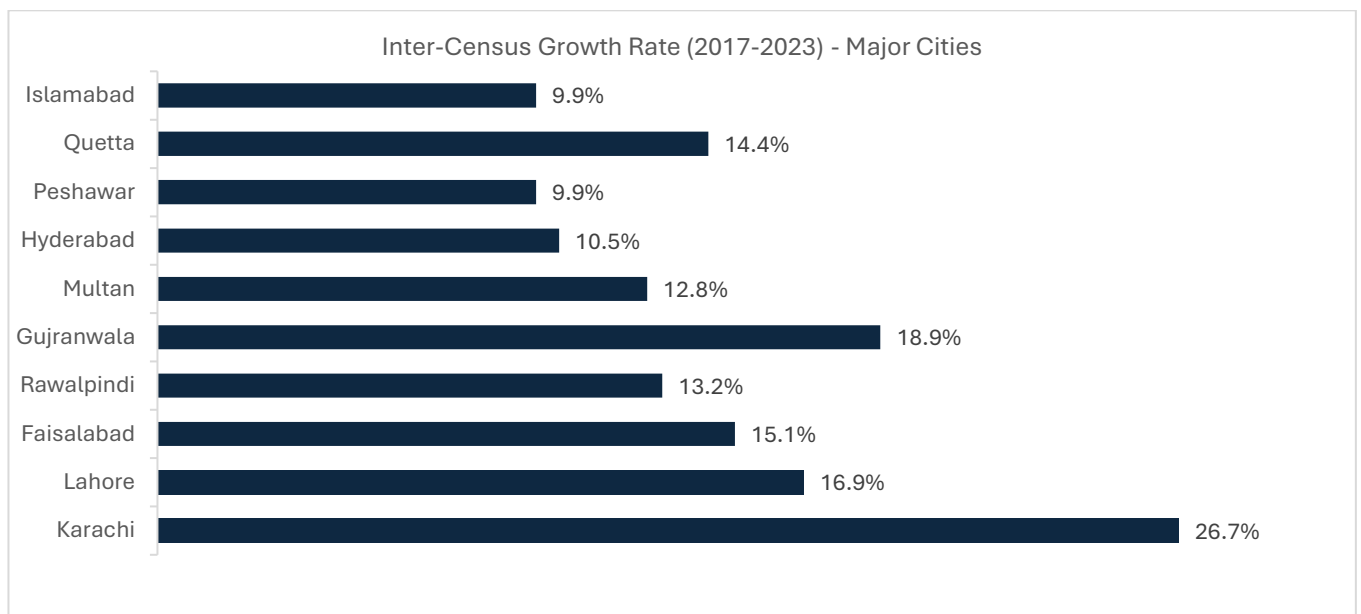
Between 2017 and 2023, Pakistan’s urban population continued to expand but at a slightly slower rate (2.55% annually) than in previous decades. This slowdown indicates that the country may be entering a phase of urban consolidation rather than new expansion.

Among major cities:

- Karachi added nearly 3.98 million residents (+26.7%)
- Lahore grew by 1.88 million (+16.9%)
- Faisalabad and Gujranwala each expanded by around 15%,
- while Rawalpindi (+13.2%) and Quetta (+14.4%) recorded the highest proportional gains.

The data confirm that growth is no longer dispersed across all provinces but heavily focused along central urban corridors with industrial or administrative significance. While the urban footprint expands outward, rural depopulation continues — signaling an ongoing shift in Pakistan’s labor and social structure toward cities.

The implication is clear: urban growth has transitioned from sheer numerical increase to spatial reconfiguration, where peri-urban areas merge into city cores, forming sprawling agglomerations that redefine provincial boundaries and commuting patterns.



Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), National Census Report 2023.

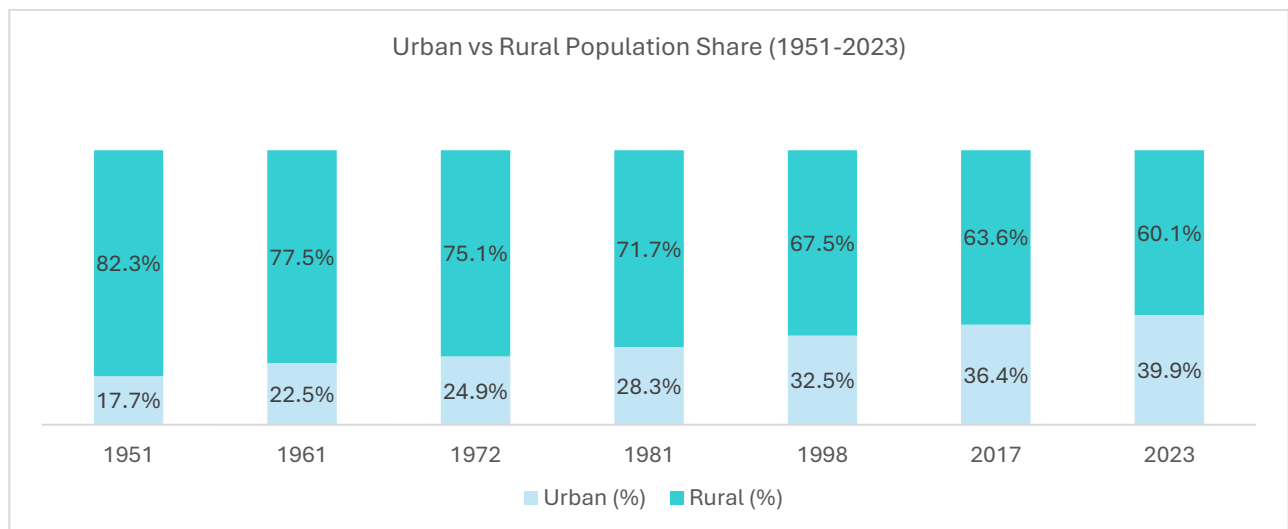
#### 4. Urban Planning and Policy Implications

Family Pakistan’s unprecedented urban expansion offers both opportunity and risk. Large cities now serve as the main engines of economic growth, contributing over 80% of national GDP, yet they face mounting pressure on housing, water, waste management, and public transport systems. Urban planning debates increasingly emphasize that how “urban” is defined shapes resource allocation. Broader interpretations, as noted by the World Bank, would imply that Pakistan’s urban transition is far more advanced than reflected in official figures.

Karachi, Lahore, and Faisalabad typify this imbalance: booming economies paired with stressed infrastructure. Meanwhile, smaller cities such as Sargodha, Sialkot, Bahawalpur, and Abbottabad offer emerging alternatives but lack the institutional capacity and investment to absorb migration sustainably.

The Census findings call for a rethink of national urban policy — one that shifts focus from megacity expansion to regional urbanization, where multiple secondary cities are developed as viable economic clusters. Investments in mass transit, housing regulation, and decentralized governance will be critical if Pakistan is to manage its demographic momentum effectively and prevent urban inequality from deepening further.

Ultimately, the challenge lies not in halting urbanization but in managing it equitably — ensuring that growth translates into better living standards and social mobility across cities large and small.



Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), National Census Report 2023.

## **About the National Census (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics)**

The 7th Population and Housing Census 2023, conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) under the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, marked a historic milestone as the first-ever digital census in Pakistan. Guided by the decisions of the Council of Common Interests (CCI), the Digital Census was carried out nationwide from March to May 2023, employing cutting-edge technology to ensure transparency, accuracy, and efficiency in data collection.

For the first time, the census adopted a digital data collection model, supported by over 120,000 tablets, a secure software solution, and a real-time monitoring framework. Technical collaboration with NADRA, NTC, and SUPARCO enabled high-resolution mapping, data transmission, and centralized synchronization, while a dedicated Census Support and Call Center ensured timely troubleshooting and field coordination.

The report presents a comprehensive picture of Pakistan's demographic, social, and housing characteristics — covering indicators such as population growth, density, literacy, migration, education, housing materials, utilities, and digital access. It forms the foundation for national planning, resource allocation, electoral delimitation, and policy formulation at all levels of governance.

PBS expresses gratitude to all partners, provincial governments, enumerators, and citizens for their cooperation in making Pakistan's first digital census a success. The National Census Report 2023 stands as a landmark achievement, embodying innovation, transparency, and data-driven policymaking for the country's sustainable future.

### **Editor's Note**

This analysis draws on seven decades of census records to unpack how Pakistan's cities have grown, expanded, and transformed since 1951. What becomes immediately clear from the data is the scale and speed of urban change. Karachi, Lahore, Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, and Gujranwala have evolved from modest post-independence towns into dense metropolitan hubs, collectively shaping the country's economic and demographic landscape.

At the same time, the findings highlight a striking imbalance: more than half of Pakistan's urban population now lives in just 46 major cities. Karachi and Lahore alone account for roughly one-third of all urban residents, reflecting a pattern of concentrated growth that places immense pressure on housing, transport, infrastructure, and service delivery. The rise in million-plus cities and the rapid expansion of secondary urban centers further illustrate that Pakistan's urban transition is no longer a future projection — it is already here.

This edition of the Big Data Analysis Series aims to make these trends more understandable and actionable. By presenting long-term shifts alongside recent census insights, the goal is to support a more informed conversation on how Pakistan can manage urban growth sustainably, distribute opportunity more evenly, and prepare its cities — large and small — for the decades ahead.

— **Aisha Aamir**

*Research Executive, Gallup Pakistan*



## **Wish to Contribute to Gallup Big Data Analysis?**

Gallup Pakistan is looking for collaboration with researchers to expand the Big Data Analysis project. If you have any ideas, please write to Bilal I Gilani, Project Director, Big Data Analysis at Gallup Pakistan.

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