



Gallup Pakistan Analysis of Punjab Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2024

School Attendance in Punjab



PRESS RELEASE

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School Attendance in Punjab: One in Three Children Still Out of School, with Sharp Drop-offs Across the Education Pathway

Islamabad, January 8th, 2026

Gallup Pakistan, as part of its Big Data Analysis initiative, presents a detailed examination of school attendance patterns using the Punjab Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2023–24. Although the majority of primary-age children attend school, a substantial portion remains out of school—and disparities grow sharply as children move from primary to lower secondary and then to upper secondary education. Gender, poverty, and early disadvantage accumulate across the educational lifecycle, creating deep structural inequalities in who progresses and who drops out. This analysis explores attendance patterns at each stage of schooling and highlights which children are being left behind across Punjab.

What is the Big Data Analysis Series by Gallup?

Gallup Pakistan’s Big Data Series was founded by Bilal I Gilani, Executive Director of Gallup Pakistan. Explaining its purpose, Bilal notes: *“Pakistan isn’t suffering from a shortage of data — it suffers from a shortage of usable, accessible data. Large datasets exist, but they’re rarely translated into meaningful insights for policymakers and the public. Gallup Pakistan bridges this gap.”* The series has previously analyzed a wide range of national datasets, including PSLM, the Labour Force Survey, Economic Survey of Pakistan, National Census Reports, and Election Commission datasets. Recent editions have examined major demographic and health trends using sources like the Global Burden of Disease (GBD), PBS, and DHIS2. The goal remains consistent: to transform raw data into public knowledge that can inform national dialogue and development priorities.

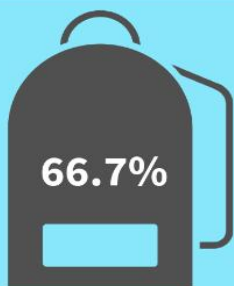
What data points this current edition covers:

This edition uses official data from the Punjab MICS 2023–24, drawing specifically on Tables LN.2.3, LN.2.4, and LN.2.6, which examine school attendance across three educational stages: Primary school age, lower secondary school age, and upper secondary school age. For each level, we review attendance patterns overall and by gender, and examine how early gaps widen as children progress through the system.

School Attendance in Punjab: One in Three Children Still Out of School, with Sharp Drop-offs Across the Education Pathway

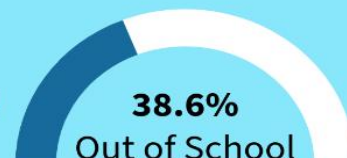
Early participation is high but incomplete:

66.7% of primary-age children attend primary school, but **14.9%** remain out of school.



Upper secondary shows the steepest exclusion:

Just **35.4%** attend upper secondary, while **38.6%** are out of school entirely.



Lower secondary is a major bottleneck:

Only **47.5%** attend lower secondary, and over **22%** are out of school.



Gender gaps widen through adolescence:

Girls outperform boys at all levels in attendance, yet poor rural girls still face early dropout.



Boys drop out due to work pressures; girls due to norms:

Boys' higher out-of-school rates reflect labor needs, while girls' dropouts reflect social and mobility barriers.

Cumulative inequalities shape outcomes:

Attendance declines across each stage of schooling demonstrate widening gaps that disproportionately affect disadvantaged children.

Key Findings:

1. Early participation is high but incomplete: 66.7% of primary-age children attend primary school, but 14.9% remain out of school.
2. Lower secondary is a major bottleneck: Only 47.5% attend lower secondary, and over 22% are out of school.
3. Upper secondary shows the steepest exclusion: Just 35.4% attend upper secondary, while 38.6% are out of school entirely.
4. Gender gaps widen through adolescence: Girls outperform boys at all levels in attendance, yet poor rural girls still face early dropout.
5. Delayed progression is widespread: 30.1% of lower secondary–age children and 24.4% of upper secondary–age adolescents remain in lower levels than appropriate for their age.
6. Boys drop out due to work pressures; girls due to norms: Boys’ higher out-of-school rates reflect labor needs, while girls’ dropouts reflect social and mobility barriers.
7. Cumulative inequalities shape outcomes: Attendance declines across each stage of schooling demonstrate widening gaps that disproportionately affect disadvantaged children.

Editor’s Note

This edition examines how school attendance in Punjab changes as children move through the education system — and where the system begins to lose them. Using data from the Punjab MICS 2023–24, the analysis shows that while most children enter primary school, participation drops sharply at lower and upper secondary levels. By adolescence, more than one in three children is out of school, with disadvantages compounding along lines of poverty, gender, and geography.

The findings highlight that Punjab’s education challenge is no longer only about access, but about retention and progression. Early gaps widen over time, shaping who completes school and who is left behind. By mapping attendance across each stage of schooling, this edition aims to support more targeted, evidence-based discussions on keeping children — especially the most vulnerable — in school through adolescence.

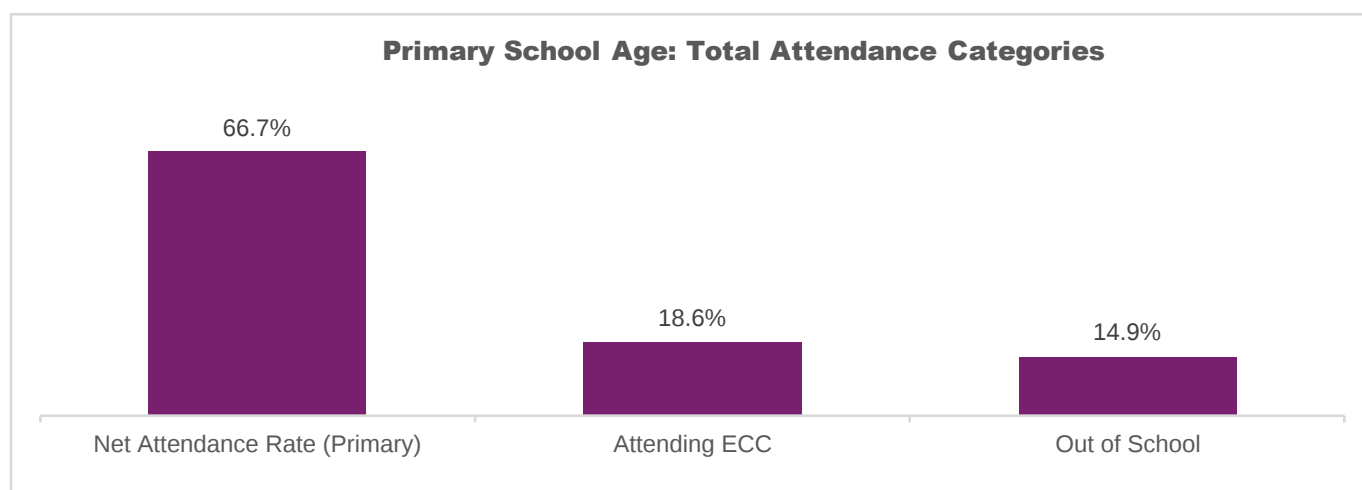
— **Aisha Aamir**

Assistant Manager Research, Gallup Pakistan

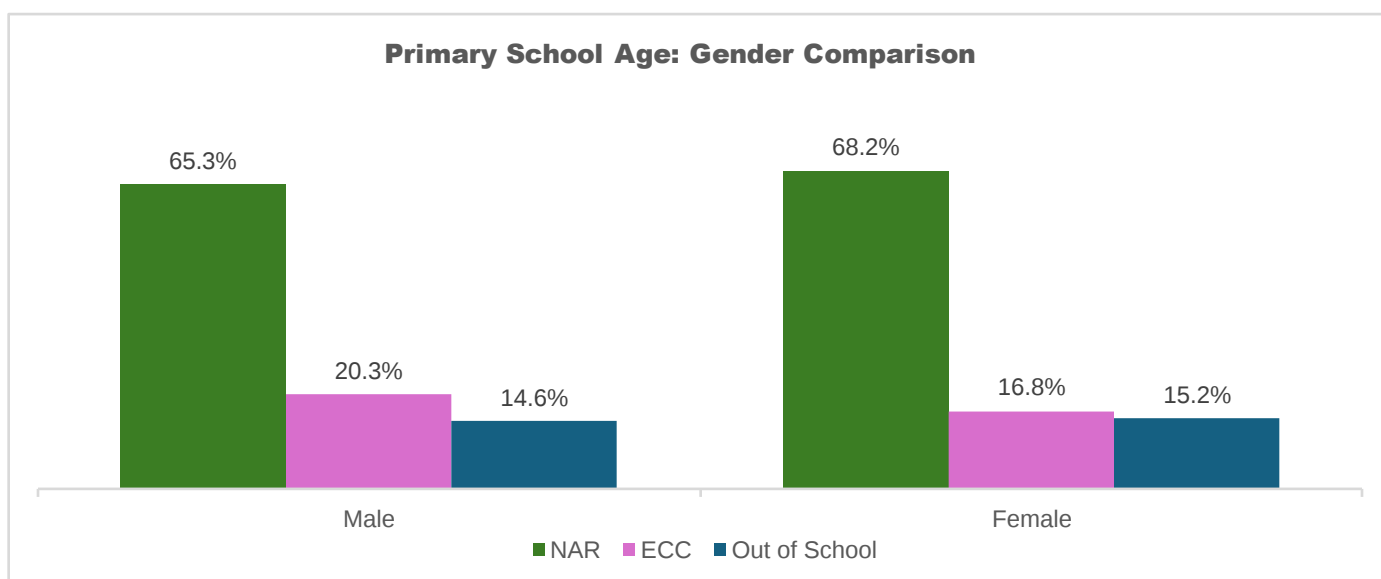
1. Primary School Attendance: Majority Attend School, but Nearly 15% Still Out of School

The majority of primary school-age children in Punjab attend school, with a Net Attendance Rate (NAR) of 66.7%. An additional 18.6% of children are enrolled in early childhood education (ECC), meaning early school exposure remains relatively strong. Still, 14.9% of primary-age children are out of school, a significant concern because missing the foundational years of education often sets the stage for long-term learning disadvantages.

Gender differences are relatively small at this stage. 68.2% of girls and 65.3% of boys attend primary school, reflecting a modest female advantage in early schooling. However, both groups still face meaningful dropout risk, with 14.6% of boys and 15.2% of girls not attending school. While early participation is encouraging, the persistence of nearly one in seven children being out of school highlights the continuing need for targeted interventions in early grades.



Source: Punjab MICS 2023–24 (Bureau of Statistics Punjab & UNICEF)

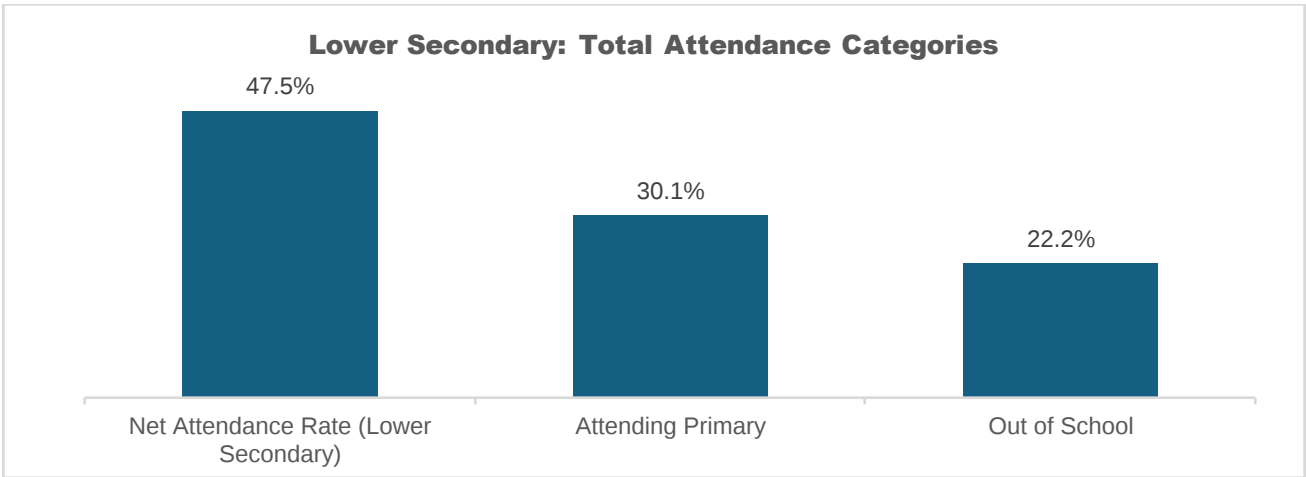


Source: Punjab MICS 2023–24 (Bureau of Statistics Punjab & UNICEF)

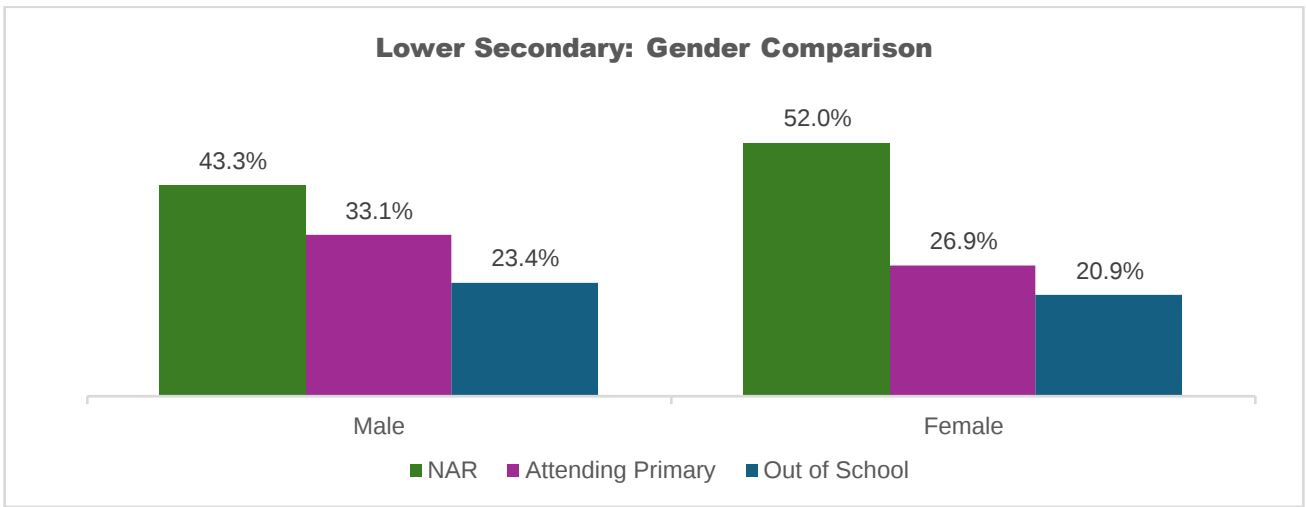
2. Lower Secondary Attendance: Sharp Decline as Children Transition into Adolescence

Attendance drops sharply at the lower secondary stage. Only 47.5% of lower secondary school-age children are enrolled in lower secondary, indicating that over half are not participating at the correct level. A full 30.1% continue to attend primary school, signaling grade repetition, delayed entry, or age-appropriate progression challenges. Moreover, 22.2% of lower secondary-age children are completely out of school, worsening the cumulative exclusion that begins in early childhood.

Gender gaps widen substantially at this level. 52% of girls attend lower secondary compared to 43.3% of boys, revealing a reversal from historic patterns where girls were traditionally more excluded. However, this female advantage does not reflect uniform gains; rather, it masks disparities where many rural or poorer girls continue to drop out. Boys’ higher dropout (23.4%) reflects labor pressures and income-related responsibilities, while girls’ dropout (20.9%) remains linked to household responsibilities, safety concerns, and social norms. The middle-school bottleneck is a defining challenge in Punjab’s educational pathway.



Source: Punjab MICS 2023–24 (Bureau of Statistics Punjab & UNICEF)



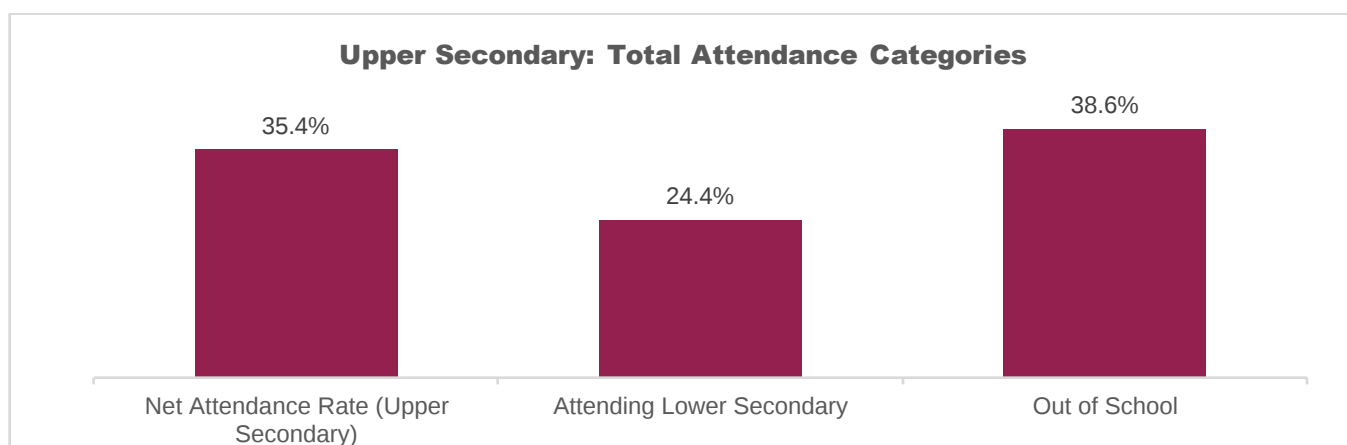
Source: Punjab MICS 2023–24 (Bureau of Statistics Punjab & UNICEF)

3. Upper Secondary Attendance: Severe Drop-offs and Intensifying Gender Differentials

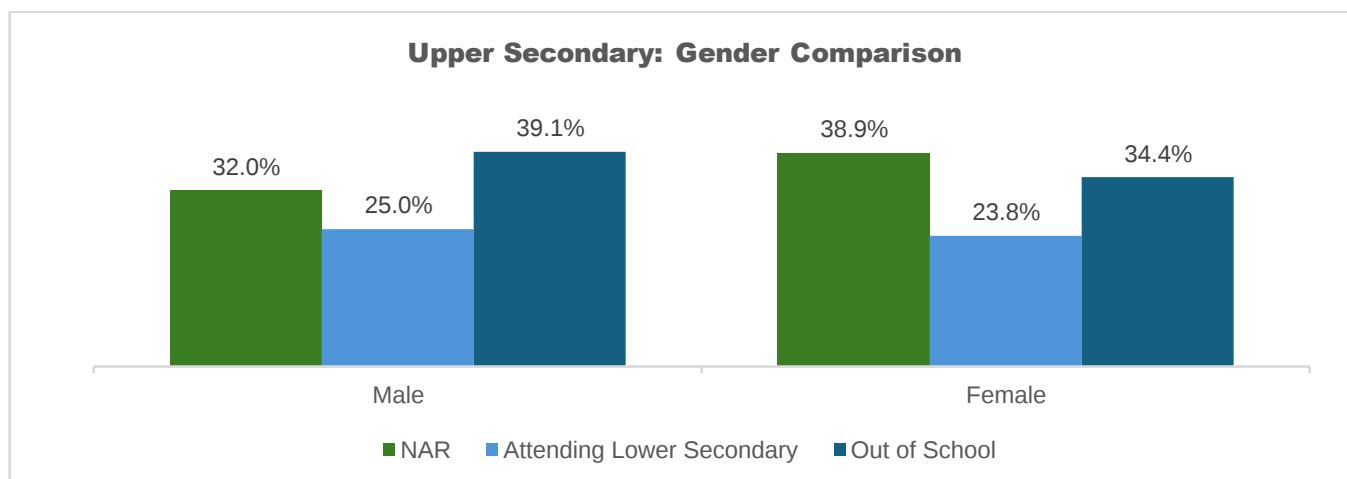
The starkest exclusion occurs at the upper secondary level. Only 35.4% of adolescents aged 15–17 are enrolled in upper secondary school. An additional 24.4% are still attending lower secondary, suggesting significant delays and a large cohort struggling to transition to higher grades. Most alarming is that 38.6% of upper secondary–age adolescents are completely out of school.

Gender differences remain significant: 38.9% of girls attend upper secondary compared to 32% of boys. While this seems to indicate a female advantage, it reflects a selective pattern: only girls from wealthier or urban households remain in the system, while many rural and poorer girls are excluded far earlier. Boys' higher dropout rate (39.1%) is driven by labor market expectations and income pressures. For girls, the dropout rate (34.4%) is influenced by early marriage, mobility restrictions, and limited senior secondary school availability.

Upper secondary attendance is a key predictor of long-term earning potential, post-secondary enrollment, and economic mobility. The high dropout rate at this stage has serious implications for Punjab's future workforce, particularly among disadvantaged adolescents.



Source: Punjab MICS 2023–24 (Bureau of Statistics Punjab & UNICEF)



Source: Punjab MICS 2023–24 (Bureau of Statistics Punjab & UNICEF)

4. Gender Differences Across the Education Pathway

Comparison across the three stages reveals important patterns. Girls consistently have slightly higher attendance rates than boys at all levels:

- Primary NAR: Girls 68.2% vs. Boys 65.3%
- Lower Secondary NAR: Girls 52.0% vs. Boys 43.3%
- Upper Secondary NAR: Girls 38.9% vs. Boys 32.0%

However, this advantage is unevenly distributed and masks deep inequalities. Girls in rural and low-income households continue to face high dropout risk, often earlier than boys. Conversely, boys from poorer households also face pressure to leave school for work. These dynamics show how gender intersects with poverty, geography, and family circumstances to produce different pathways of exclusion.

5. The Education Pathway: Cumulative Losses Across Levels

Taken together, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary attendance form a “funnel” that narrows significantly as children grow older. Nearly 67% attend primary school, but by lower secondary, NAR drops to 47.5%, and by upper secondary it falls to 35.4%. This means that a large majority of children who enter school do not complete upper secondary education, either because they never progress, are held back, or drop out entirely.

This cumulative loss points to systemic issues in retention, transition, and support—especially for children who start school behind or lack adequate family resources. Interventions must therefore focus not only on access but also on keeping children in school through adolescence and ensuring smooth transitions between stages.

6. Implications

The MICS 2023–24 findings make clear that Punjab’s education challenges are not limited to access but extend across the full educational pathway. Attendance declines significantly at each successive level, with the steepest losses at the secondary stages. Addressing these drop-offs will require:

- Expanding and upgrading middle and high schools, especially in rural areas
- Providing financial and social support to low-income families
- Strengthening programs that reduce safety and mobility barriers for girls
- Supporting at-risk boys who leave school for work
- Ensuring smoother grade transitions with remedial support

Investing in retention and secondary education will be essential for improving Punjab’s overall human development outcomes and breaking cycles of poverty and underachievement.

About the MICS Punjab 2023–24 Survey

The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2023–24 is Punjab’s largest and most comprehensive source of population and social sector statistics, conducted by the Bureau of Statistics, Government of Punjab, in collaboration with UNICEF. The survey provides high-quality, internationally comparable data on the well-being of women and children across the province. MICS follows a globally standardized methodology used in more than 120 countries, ensuring that results are reliable, representative, and comparable over time.

The 2023–24 round covers a wide range of indicators—including child mortality, nutrition, health, education, water and sanitation, child protection, reproductive health, and socio-demographic characteristics. The survey sampled tens of thousands of households across urban and rural Punjab using a stratified, multi-stage cluster sampling design that guarantees statistical precision at both provincial and district levels. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews, with rigorous quality checks, real-time monitoring, and global MICS validation standards applied throughout the fieldwork.

MICS data are widely used by policymakers, researchers, development partners, and civil society to assess service delivery gaps, track progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and monitor the situation of women and children. The Punjab 2023–24 edition is especially significant as it provides post-COVID evidence on vulnerabilities, inequalities, and emerging demographic patterns in the province. By offering granular insights across wealth quintiles, education levels, geographic regions, and demographic groups, MICS enables a deeper understanding of who is being left behind and where targeted investments are most urgently needed.

This PR series by Gallup Pakistan draws directly on this authoritative dataset to translate complex indicators into accessible insights for decision-makers and the wider public. The goal is to ensure that the rich evidence generated by the MICS survey meaningfully informs policy, programming, and public dialogue across 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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