CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE OF NEPAL: FROM YOUTH BULGE TO AGING SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This study documents Nepal's transition from a youth-bulge population structure toward a progressively ageing society by analysing census age- composition data (1991, 2001, 2011, 2021) together with trends in crude birth and death rates and life expectancy. The purpose of this study is to describe changes in Nepal's age composition, quantify trends in crude birth rate (CBR), crude death rate (CDR) and life expectancy at birth, and discuss policy implications for realizing a demographic dividend and preparing for population ageing. This study is primarily based on secondary sources of data and descriptive research method. Data sources are used from Central Bureau of Statistics, National population and housing census thematic Reports-X; Ageing Situation in Nepal, thematic reports-IX; Mortality in Nepal, World Bank/FRED series). Using published tabulations from Nepal's national censuses this paper documents the share of children (0–14) fell markedly while the share of older persons (60+) rose, crude birth rates declined substantially, crude death rates declined more slowly, and life expectancy increased. These shifts indicate that Nepal is passing through the demographic transition: a falling fertility regime and rising survival have created an expanded working-age population now and a growing older population to plan for in the near future.

Keywords: Nepal, population aging, youth bulge, census, demographic transition, life expectancy, demographic divided.

INTRODUCTION

Youth is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence. That's why, as a category, youth is more fluid than other fixed age-groups. Yet, age is the easiest way to define this group, particularly in relation to education and employment, because 'youth' is often referred to a person between the ages of leaving compulsory education, and finding their first job.

The United Nations, for statistical purposes, defines 'youth', as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by member states. The Secretary-General first referred to the current definition of youth in 1981 in his report to the General Assembly on International Youth Year (A/36/215, para. 8 of the annex) and endorsed it in ensuing reports (A/40/256, para. 19 of the annex).

Under the National Youth Council Act, 2072 (2015) of Nepal, "Youth" is defined as: "a person in the age group of 16 years to 40 years."

Under the National Youth Policy, 2072 (2015) the definition is: "For the purpose of this Policy: (a) 'Youth' means citizens within the age bracket of 16 to 40 years."

More recently, under the new National Youth Policy, 2082 (2025), the Government of Nepal has announced that: "The population of the age group of 18 to 35 years will be considered youth in the context of Nepal."

However, the Act (National Youth Council Act, 2072) has *not yet been amended*, so legally the age group remains 16–40 years until the Act is updated.

Population ageing is a natural, ongoing process that encompasses the gradual physical, psychological, and social changes of an individual's life. It is a continuous, universal, progressive, essential, and deleterious process which represents the inevitable termination of life and the most significant demographic change in modern times. According to this perspective, ageing is a natural, unavoidable, genetic, painful, and ultimately fatal process for all living beings (NSO, 2021 ; Ageing Situation in Nepal).

Under the Senior Citizens Act, 2063 (2006) of Nepal: "Senior Citizen means a citizen of Nepal having completed the age of Sixty years."

The demographic transition-falling mortality followed by falling fertility-reshapes a country's age structure with wide economic and social consequences (Bloom, Canning, & Sevilla, 2003). A prolonged period of relatively large working-age populations (a "demographic window") can offer a demographic dividend if countries invest in education, jobs, and institutions; conversely, sustained fertility decline together with rising longevity leads to population ageing, which increases demand for health care, pensions, and long-term care (Bloom et al., 2003; Kinsella & He, W. 2009). Nepal's recent censuses and vital-statistic series show a clear trajectory consistent with these processes: fertility and crude birth rates have fallen substantially since the 1990s, while life expectancy has improved-producing an age-structure shift from a dominant child cohort toward larger working-age and growing older cohorts (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2021; World Bank, 2025). Understanding the pace and magnitude of this change is crucial for updating policies in health, education, labor markets, and social protection.

Nepal offers a recent example of fast demographic change. National census data and vital-statistic series indicate substantial declines in fertility and infant/child mortality since the 1990s and steady increases in life expectancy-factors that have reshaped the country's age composition. The 2021 National Population and Housing Census recorded changes in broad age-group shares that reflect decline in the child population share and a growing share of older persons (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2021). Global demographic data series (World Bank / UN aggregates) confirm falling crude birth rates and rising life expectancy for Nepal over the same period.

The speed of population ageing is often measured by the time it takes for a society to transition from an 'ageing' to an 'aged' status. This is typically defined by the proportion of the population aged 65 years or older, moving from 7 percent (ageing society) to 14 percent (aged society). Nepal is on the threshold of this transformation, with 6.9 percent of its population aged 65 or older in 2021. According to estimates, Nepal will become an 'aged society' by 2054, emphasizing the importance of strategic planning to handle these upcoming demographic changes (National Planning Commission 2017).

This paper synthesizes census-based evidence to describe the transition from a youth-dominated population to one that is steadily ageing, and discusses implications.

Statement of the problem

Despite extensive discussion of the "youth bulge" as an economic opportunity in Nepal during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, more recent census evidence indicates a rapid decline in child cohorts and a rising proportion of older persons. This shift presents a dual challenge:

1. to convert the remaining high working-age share into productive economic outcomes (the demographic dividend), and
2. to simultaneously prepare social, health and fiscal systems for an expanding older population. Policymakers require concise, census-based documentation of these trends to plan appropriately.

Objectives of the study

1. To describe changes in Nepal's age composition using broad groups (0–14, 15–59, 60+) across censuses (1991, 2001, 2011, 2021).
2. To quantify trends in crude birth rate (CBR), crude death rate (CDR) and life expectancy at birth for the same years.
3. To discuss policy implications for realizing a demographic dividend and preparing for population ageing.

METHODS

This study is primarily based on secondary sources of data. Statistical information has been collected from various websites, reports, and publications. Data were taken from Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) census publications and national reports for 1991, 2001, 2011 census years. Primarily data were taken from published tabulations of Nepal's National Population and Housing Censuses for the years and 2021, as compiled in thematic census reports and population monographs produced by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) and related analytical reports. Where supportive context on fertility and working-age shares was needed, the Population Monograph and World Bank demographic indicators were consulted. This study is based on a descriptive research method. Tables and graphs have been used in the analysis of the data.

RESULTS

Trend in broad age groups in Nepal

The census of 2021 is the first census conducted under Nepal's federal system established by the Constitution, with new administrative divisions and governance structures. Subsequent censuses showed that from 1991 to 2021, while fewer children were born, people were living for longer. Summarizes the change in the percentage composition of Nepal's population across broad age groups using official census tabulations (CBS).

Table 1 : Broad age-group composition of Nepal's population, (1991–2021)

Year	1991	2001	2011	2021
Age group	Total population (percent)	Total population (percent)	Total population (percent)	Total population (percent)
0–14	7,840,771 (42.4)	8,948,587 (39.4)	9,248,246 (34.9)	8,115,575 (27.8)
15–59	9,579,092 (51.8)	12,310,968 (54.1)	15,091,848 (57.0)	18,071,685 (62.0)
60+	1,071,234 (5.8)	1,477,379 (6.5)	2,154,410 (8.1)	2,977,318 (10.2)
Total	18,491,097 (100)	22,736,934* (100)	26,494,504 (100)	29,164,578 (100)

Source: CBS, 2014 and NSO, 2021.

Above table shows that the proportion of children (0–14) declined from 42.4 percent in 1991 to 27.8 percent in 2021 (a drop of 14.6 percentage points) reflecting sustained fertility decline and smaller cohorts born in recent decades. The working-age share rose from about 51.8 percent (1991) to 62.0 percent (2021), producing a long window of elevated labour-supply potential (a demographic dividend opportunity), though realizing that dividend depends on employment and human-capital policies. The share of older persons (60+) increased from 5.8 percent (1991) to 10.2 percent (2021), an almost doubling in percentage terms and a near tripling in absolute numbers (from ≈1.07 million to ≈2.98 million). The growth rate of the older population exceeded that of the total population in each intercensal period.

Ageing trend and growth rate of older person in Nepal

The Ageing trend and growth rate of older person in Nepal (1991–2021) presents a clear picture of how Nepal's population structure is changing, particularly with regard to the ageing population, which is given as below:

Table 2: Ageing trend and growth rate of older person, (1991–2021)

Census Year	60+ older person	60+ older person (percent)	60+ older population growth rate	Doubling time of older population (Years)
1991	1,071,234	5.8	2.2	32
2001	1,477,379	6.5	3.4	21
2011	2,154,408	8.1	3.5	20
2021	2,977,318	10.2	3.3	21

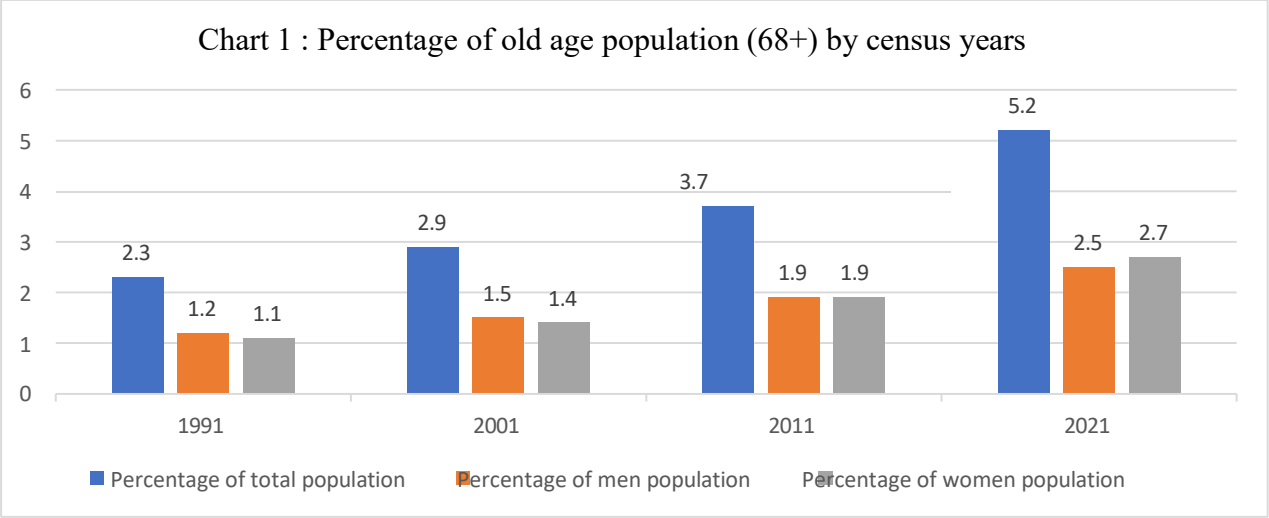
Source: CBS, 2014 and NSO, 2021.

The number of people aged 60 years and above has increased consistently over the 30-year period:

1,071,234 to 2,977,318. This shows that Nepal's elderly population almost tripled in three decades. The proportion of older people in the total population rose from 5.8 % in 1991 to 10.2 % in 2021. This indicates that: The ageing process in Nepal is accelerating. Nepal is moving from a young population structure toward a more balanced or ageing population structure. The growth rate of the 60+ population remained relatively high throughout the decades: increased from 2.2 % (1991) to 3.5 % (2011), then slightly declined to 3.3 % (2021). This pattern suggests a rapid ageing phase especially between 2001 and 2011. The recent slight decline in growth rate (2021) could indicate that the ageing process is stabilizing somewhat, but the base population of older adults remains large. The doubling time of the older population decreased from 32 years (1991) to 20–21 years (2011–2021). A shorter doubling time means the elderly population is growing faster than before, which has several implications:

Distribution of old age population (68 years and over)

The distribution of old age population (68 years and over) by census years provides a comprehensive view of Nepal's ageing dynamics, particularly among the elderly population aged 68 years and above, from 1991 to 2021, which is given as below:



Source: CBS, 2014 and NSO, 2021.

Above chart shows a clear and accelerating trend of population ageing is evident over the three decades from 1991 to 2021. The proportion of the population aged 68 and over more than doubled, rising from 2.3% in 1991 to 5.2% in 2021. This growth was not linear but accelerated over time, with a more pronounced increase of 1.5 percentage points occurring between the last two censuses (2011-2021) compared to the previous decades. Furthermore, a consistent gender disparity is visible, where women constitute a larger share of the elderly population. While the gap was narrow in 1991 (1.2% men vs. 1.1% women), it widened significantly by 2021, with women making up 2.7% of the total population compared to 2.5% for men, highlighting greater female longevity. If this data were applied to Nepal's context, it would signal a profound demographic shift with major implications for healthcare systems, pension schemes, and social support structures, necessitating urgent policy planning to address the needs of a rapidly growing older population.

Trends in fertility, mortality, and life expectancy in Nepal

The trends in fertility, mortality, and life expectancy in Nepal (per census year) provides a clear picture of the country's demographic transition over three decades (1991–2021). It reflects major improvements in health outcomes, declines in fertility and mortality, and increased life expectancy, all of which have reshaped Nepal's population dynamics, which is given as below:

Table 3: Trends in fertility, mortality, and life expectancy in Nepal (per census year)

Census Year	CBR	TFR	CDR	IMR	Life expectancy (M/F)	
1991	39.0	5.16	13.3	97.0	55.0	53.5
2001	33.0	3.25	10.3	64.0	60.8	61.0
2011	22.4	2.52	7.3	40.5	66.6	67.9
2021	14.21	1.94	6.81	17.1	68.8	74.3

Source: CBS, 2014 and NSO, 2021.

Both the Crude Birth Rate (CBR) and Total Fertility Rate (TFR) show a consistent and significant decline. CBR dropped from 39.0 (1991) to 14.21 (2021). TFR fell from 5.16 to 1.94 during the same period. The Crude Death Rate (CDR) fell from 13.3 (1991) to 6.81 (2021), while the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) declined sharply from 97.0 to 17.1. These improvements reflect better maternal and child health services, expanded immunization programs, improved nutrition, and increased access to clean water and sanitation. This decline in mortality is a major public health success and a key factor behind the rising life expectancy and growth of the older population observed in Nepal.

Life expectancy for both men and women increased steadily, Men: 55.0 years (1991) to 68.8 years (2021), Women: 53.5 years (1991) to 74.3 years (2021). The gender gap in life expectancy widened over time, with women now outliving men by more than 5 years. This improvement in women's longevity suggests better maternal health care and social changes benefiting female survival. The combined trends falling fertility and mortality with rising longevity demonstrate Nepal's steady movement through the demographic transition model, shifting from a high-growth to a low-growth population regime.

Policy implications

1. **Opportunity (demographic dividend) :** The enlarged working-age share (15–59) creates a window to accelerate economic growth if employment, skills, and institutional capacity are scaled up-education, active labor market policies, and entrepreneurship support are essential.
2. **Emerging elder needs:** The rapid rise of the older population share (60+) signals growing demand for geriatric health services, long-term care, pension coverage, and social protection. Nepal's social protection architecture will need strengthening and possibly redesign to meet these needs.
3. **Health system shift:** With declining infant/child burdens and rising chronic disease prevalence in older ages, the health system should rebalance toward noncommunicable disease prevention, primary care for older adults, and long-term care.

4. **Regional and sub-group variation:** National averages mask regional heterogeneity- fertility and age-structure transitions vary by province, urban/rural location, and socio-economic groups; subnational planning is required. CBS publications and fertility reports highlight these differences.

CONCLUSION

Nepal is clearly on a demographic trajectory that moves it away from the youth-bulge stage and toward an ageing society. The window of elevated working-age shares (the demographic dividend) exists now but will not last indefinitely; at the same time, the country must prepare for rapidly growing older cohorts. Successful policy responses will need to simultaneously harness the productive potential of younger adults and plan for expanded healthcare, social protection, and elder-care services. The census evidence (1991–2021) provides a firm empirical basis to guide those preparations.

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