

Managing Urban Growth: The Role of Migration in Pakistan's Mega Cities

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ABSTRACT

In developed countries, rural-to-urban migration has notable socio-economic effects on both urban and rural regions. Migrants typically move to cities with some prior awareness of urban living, and their decisions are often self-motivated, though not always well-planned. A large proportion of these migrants are young, predominantly male, and unmarried, with many possessing some level of vocational or educational training before relocating. Migration is influenced by a variety of factors, including the search for better job opportunities, access to education and skill enhancement, and issues related to land ownership and declining agricultural productivity. Migrants often encounter challenges during the initial stages of settling into urban environments. This study seeks to explore the main causes and impacts of rural-to-urban migration. Data will be gathered through questionnaires administered to migrant households to capture relevant insights, and descriptive statistics will be employed to analyze and interpret the findings. The aim is to better understand the driving forces and difficulties linked with migration.

Keywords: Rural-urban migration, push and pull factors, reasons for migration, Migrant workforce, and city expansion

INTRODUCTION

Migration plays a crucial role in linking spatial dynamics with the economic development of a region (Lupak, R., 2022). It is suggested that a fundamental goal of economic growth is to transform the existing imbalance, where 85% of the population is engaged in agriculture and resides in rural areas, while only 15% participate in non-agricultural activities and live in urban centers (Wu, Y. 2025). The spatial flow component signifies a shift in rural-to-urban migration (Mubangizi, B. C. 2021). It is a multifaceted process involving many migrants and established

organizations, leading to the emergence of diverse and influential perspectives within a region (Liu, Y., 2022).

In 18th-century Europe, a significant wave of rural-to-urban migration was marked by an unprecedented scale and pace (Zinkina, J., 2019). However, compared to European migration patterns, urban expansion in developing nations today occurs at a much faster rate, driven by higher population growth and density, resulting in rapid urban development (Heifetz, I. & Jaffe, P. G., 2023).

In the greatest so-called emerging nations, job opportunities and living amenities are insufficient to accommodate the large influx of people in the towns (Fang, 2020). In contrast, European capitals have at least some jobs for incoming settlers, while many capitals in Africa, Latin America, and Asia struggle with serious issues such as unemployment, poverty, toxic waste, and corruption (Oluwaseyi Olatundun, E. 2024).

The causes and impacts of migration are examined across various disciplines (Zhang, X., & Zhou, J., 2023). Numerous scholars have contributed theoretical perspectives and explored potential empirical challenges, analyzing migration's effects on both local and global scales (O'Reilly, K. 2022). Van Hear in 2020 said that push-pull is directly implied because of migration. Consequently, the personal introduction is to choose the migration related to both "pull factors" or "push factors." (Awasthi, 2021). The push influences are the negative reinforcement of the reasons to leave home individually or with family, while pull factors are the magnetization of the objectives or the city (Bukar, H. M., Mohammed, et.al, 2021).

Furthermore, Rural-urban migration is work-related to nature (Dokubo, et.al 2023). It is, therefore, natural to consider migration as a job-search framework (Berbatovci-Sojeva, V. 2021). According to Lall, the models have three options involving different information and research flows: i) living in rural areas, (ii) engaging in rural research for urban work, and iii) moving to the city and engaging in urban research (Miheretu, B. 2011).

Altaye Aydiko, in 2015, defined the difference between male and female. As expected, the wedding setting is the second leading cause of migration among women. The education of men is the main cause of migration. (Khan, M. I., in 2023, shows that studies indicate that improved education and employment opportunities are key pull factors in migration. Other factors attracting migrants include access to quality healthcare, higher salaries, improved living conditions, better public entertainment, and efficient sanitation services (Amfo, B., 2022). Rural-to-urban migration has significant, diverse, and gendered impacts on various domains of family and gender values at distinct migratory stages (von Seidlein, 2021).

Various studies indicate that migration is strongly influenced by age and gender (Liao, P. J., 2022). Evidence suggests that rural-to-urban migration is primarily driven by younger age groups, which further accelerates urban population growth (Brewer, J., 2024).

In Pakistan, a significant number of migrants from both rural and urban areas cross national borders. Many who relocate to larger, more developed cities in search of employment and a better quality of life often struggle to secure positions in the formal sector (Chadwick, G. 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Pakistan's total population currently stands at 241,093,526, with approximately 20.3 million people residing in Karachi. Around 14.9 million live in the city's urban areas (Iftikhar, A. 2022). A significant portion of rural migrants continues to move to Karachi in search of better facilities and opportunities. A massive population increase occurred between 1998 and 2017 of 77.0 million people, or an increase of +56.5%. Urban migration is predominantly male, with many migrants sending a portion of their earnings back to their families in rural areas (Roshania, R. P., 2021). They often return to their villages during peak farming seasons to work. In many cases, migrants are married but leave their families behind, treating them as dependents (Asfaw, W., 2010). The decision to bring their wives and children to the city marks a significant step in the migration process. While this migrating population has a limited direct impact on Pakistan as a whole, it has a significant influence on the country's social fabric (Mardones, M. G. E., 2024).

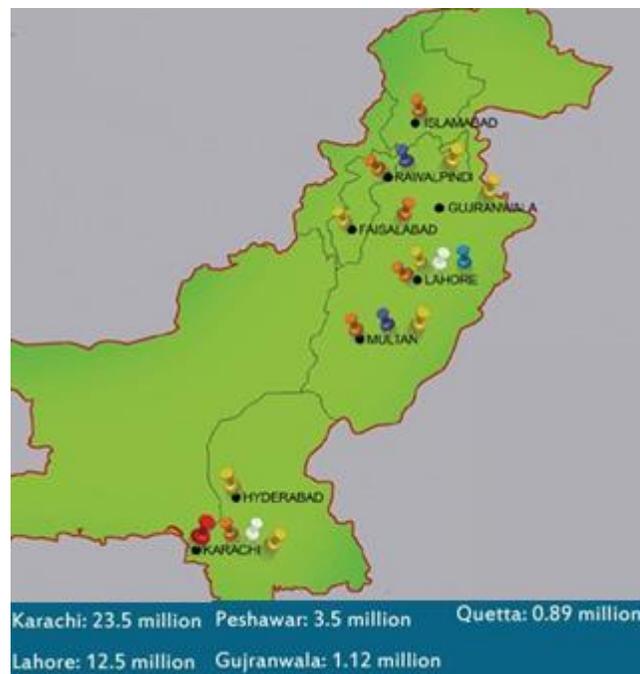


Figure 01: Population of each Pakistani District as of the 2017 Pakistan Census

Source: Blank Districts of Pakistan

Data Collection

This study aims to understand the perceptions of rural-to-urban migration in Pakistan, focusing on the needs, challenges, services, and facilities available to migrants. Data for the study is collected from individuals who have resided at their destination for at least one year and from local authorities of a particular region. A survey is conducted using questionnaires, primarily focusing on the causes of migration. To achieve this, a random sample of migrant households is selected, along with other variables, to identify the key factors driving migration.

The collected data is analyzed using SPSS and GIS software. To examine the causes of migration, factors such as the global percentage of rural-to-urban migration, gender, age groups, preferred migration destinations, and places of origin are assessed. Descriptive statistics are used to summarize the findings.

To support the research on urban growth and migration in Pakistan, a Migration Patterns Map is illustrated to show both internal and external migration flows, helping to identify major source and destination regions and the influence of migration on urbanization. Population Density Maps will depict the spatial concentration of populations, particularly in megacities like Karachi and Lahore, highlighting zones of high density and potential overpopulation. Lastly, Urban Growth Maps will showcase the spatial expansion of urban areas over time, emphasizing the rapid development and sprawl of Pakistan's megacities. These visuals will be sourced from national census data, satellite imagery, and GIS databases, serving as key analytical tools to understand the patterns, causes, and consequences of urban expansion and population shifts.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Rapid Urban Growth in Pakistan:

Pakistan's urban population has surged from 32% in 1998 to 40% in 2017, with projections indicating it will exceed 50% by 2025 if current rural-to-urban migration trends persist (Javed, M. et al, 2024). Major cities have experienced significant growth. For instance, Karachi's population increased from approximately 9.8 million in 1998 to over 16 million in 2017, while Lahore saw a rise from about 5.1 million to over 11 million in the same period (Malik, A., & Khawaja, I. 2021).

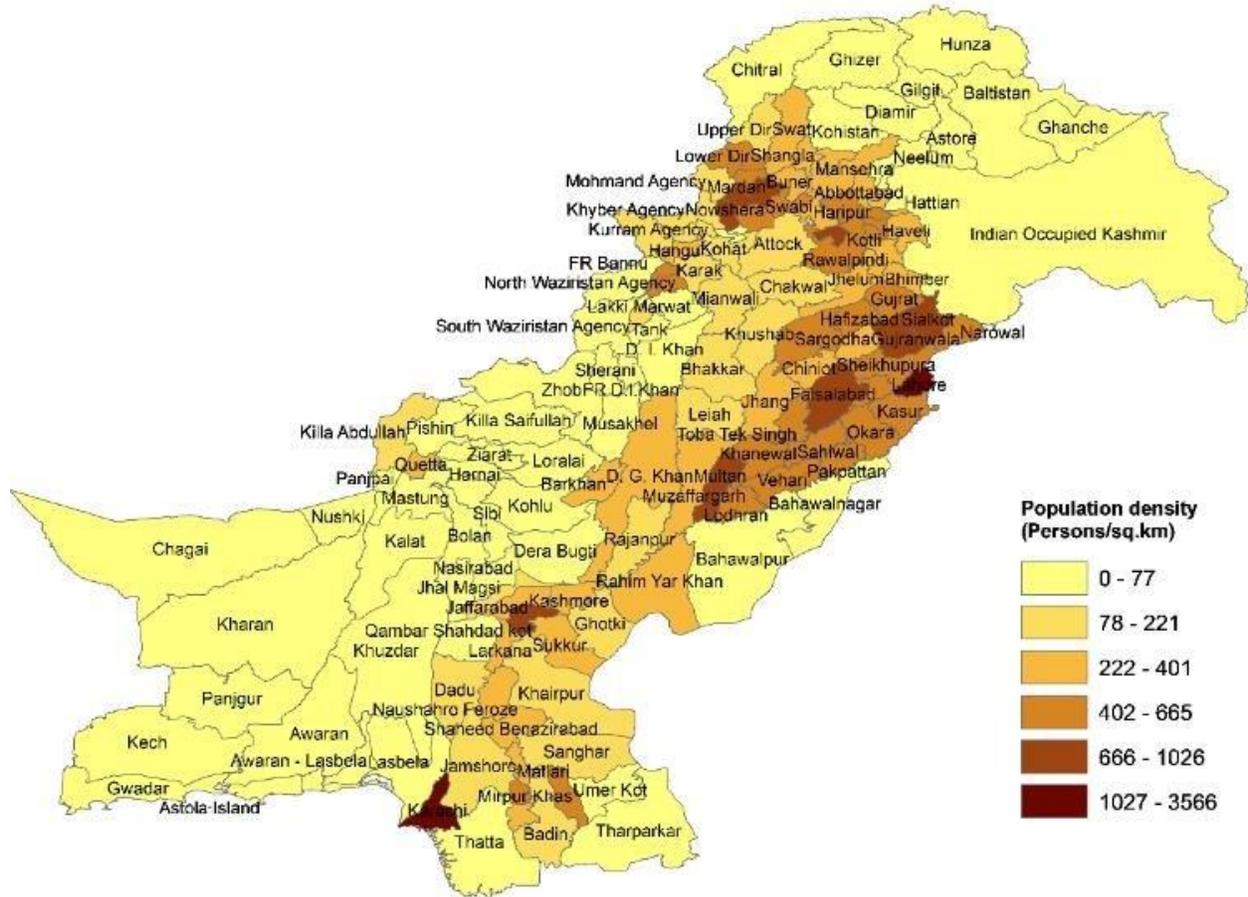


Figure 02: District-wise population density of Pakistan

This figure is a district-wise population density map of Pakistan. The map uses a color gradient to show population density, with light yellow indicating very low density and dark brown representing extremely high density, particularly in major urban centers. Dark brown and brown regions are concentrated in the eastern belt of the country, particularly in central Punjab (e.g., Lahore, Faisalabad, Gujranwala, Sialkot, Multan) and southern Sindh (notably Karachi and Hyderabad). These areas are the most densely populated in Pakistan.

Migration Patterns and Their Impact

Internal Migration in rural-to-urban migration is a primary driver of urban expansion. Punjab leads with the highest intra-provincial migration rate at 6%, followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (4%), Sindh (3%), and Baluchistan (2%) (Salik, K. M., 2023). For Inter-provincial Migration, Cities like Karachi attract a diverse migrant population from across the country, with 45-55% of its migrants originating from different provinces (Karim, M.S., & Baqai, H., 2020). Karachi hosts significant numbers of international migrants, including approximately 2 million Bengalis, 1 million Afghan

refugees, and up to 400,000 Rohingyas, making it one of the most ethnically diverse cities globally (Partha, S., 2024).

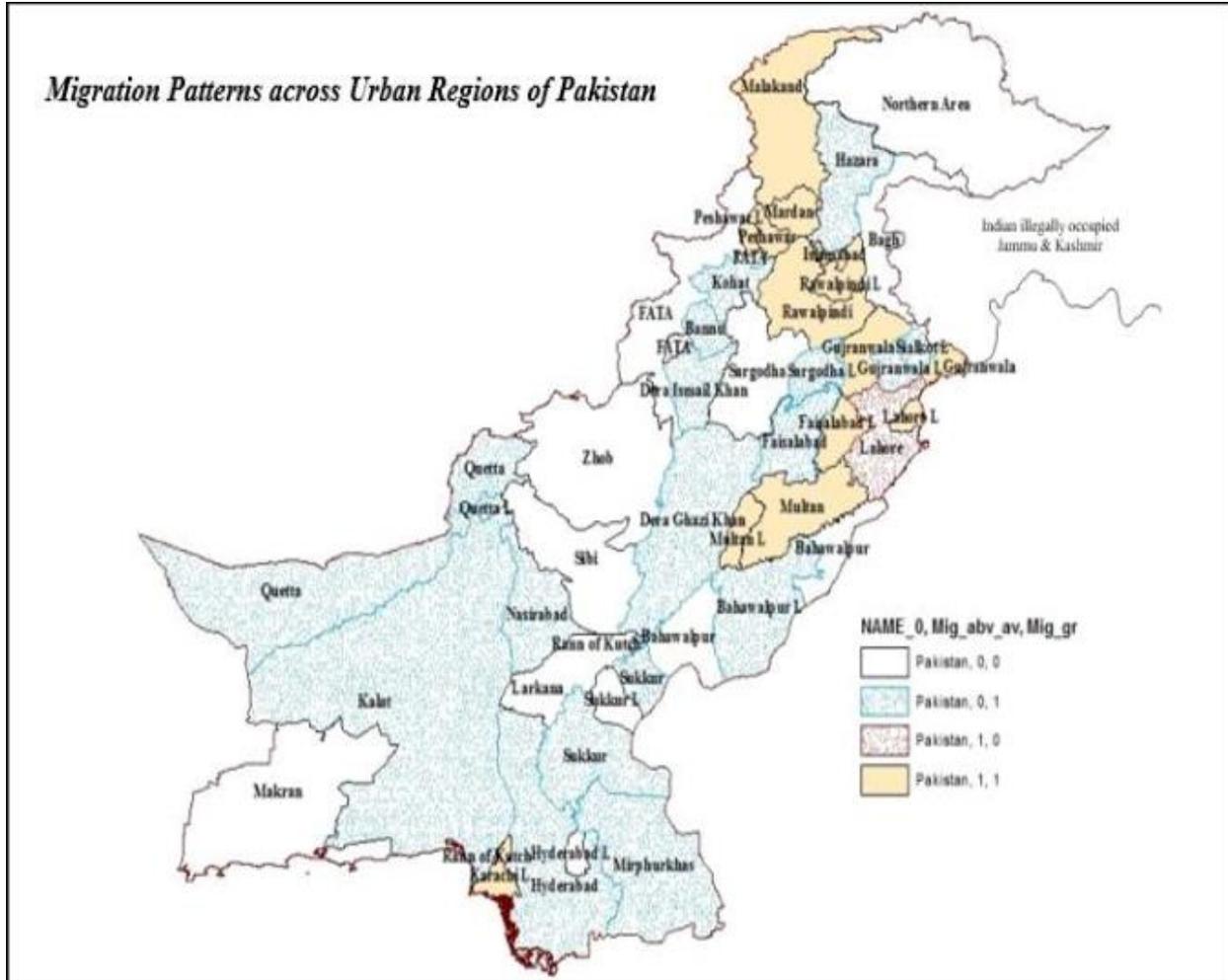


Figure 03: Migration Pattern of urban regions of Pakistan

The map illustrates how migration is heavily concentrated in specific urban corridors, particularly Karachi and the urban Punjab belt. Figure 03 shows Karachi and its surrounding areas in southern Sindh, marked in red-brown on the map, indicate both high migration levels and rapid growth, emphasizing Karachi’s status as a major urban migration hub. In contrast, urban belts in Punjab—such as Lahore, Gujranwala, and Faisalabad—appear in peach or beige, reflecting above-average migration but relatively slower recent growth. Northern regions and parts of Baluchistan are shown in white or light blue, signifying low or below-average migration activity, while some central regions display emerging migration trends, as represented by the light blue zones.

Challenges of Rapid Urbanization

The rapid pace of urban expansion has surpassed the development of essential infrastructure, resulting in significant challenges such as insufficient housing, overburdened transportation systems, and inadequate sanitation services (Zhang, N., Nazroo, J., & Vanhoutte, B. 2021). Despite cities playing a major role in the national economy—for instance, Karachi alone contributes 12–15% of Pakistan’s GDP and 55% of federal tax revenue—urban poverty remains widespread, with approximately one in eight urban residents living below the poverty line (Azhar, N., et al., 2024). Unplanned urban sprawl has given rise to 'ruralopilises'—densely populated rural zones on the outskirts of cities that lack proper urban planning, resulting in environmental degradation and limited access to essential services (Adeyeye, K., et al, 2020).

Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive method is used to analyze respondents' statements, with frequency distribution summarized in a frequency chart for better interpretation.

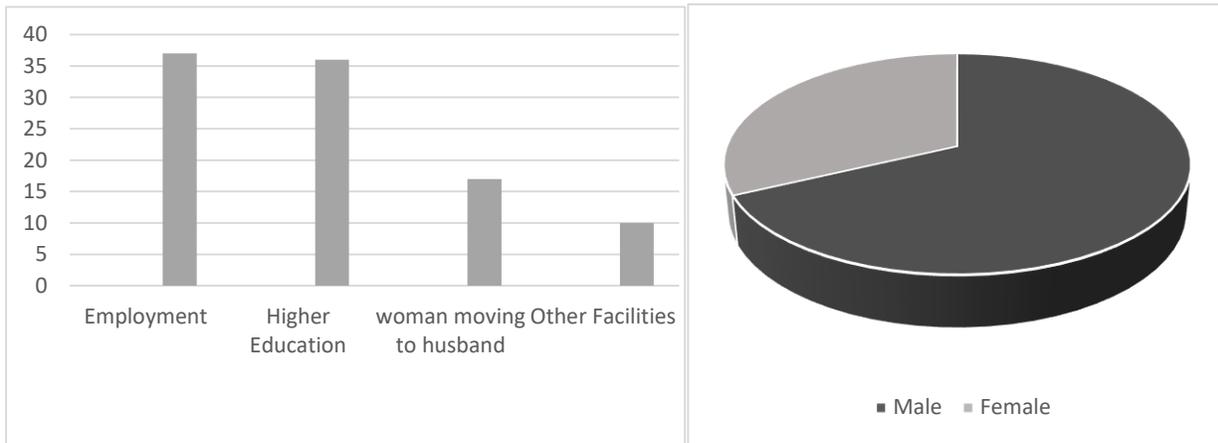


Fig 04: Reasons of migration

Fig 05: Ratio of Gender migration

As shown in Figure 04, Most people migrate for economic reasons to meet their needs and provide better education for their children. A significant number of male migrants in Sindh seek employment to support their families, including their wives and children. Initially, they stay with relatives or in hostels, and once they secure stable jobs, they often bring their families and seek housing in informal settlements (katchi abadis).

In Figure 05, Male migrants generally make up a larger share of the migrating population than female migrants, particularly in places where men migrate to cities in search of work while women and children stay in rural areas. However, the availability of jobs and educational possibilities has led to a rise in female migration in recent years.

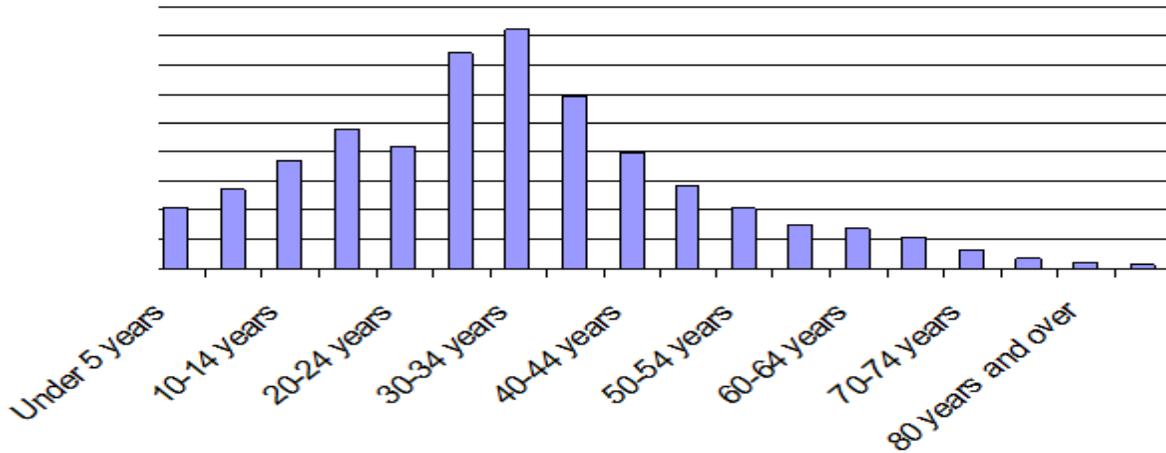


Fig 06: Rural urban migration age Ratio

People between the ages of 30 and 40, when many people look for stability and financial independence, have the highest jobless rate. Because of this, a sizable portion of this age group would rather launch their own companies in developed cities. The most alarming experiment being handled by the new Sindh government is unemployment in rural areas. Since the majority of Pakistanis are compelled to seek employment in urban regions, rural areas are rapidly losing their agricultural-based services.

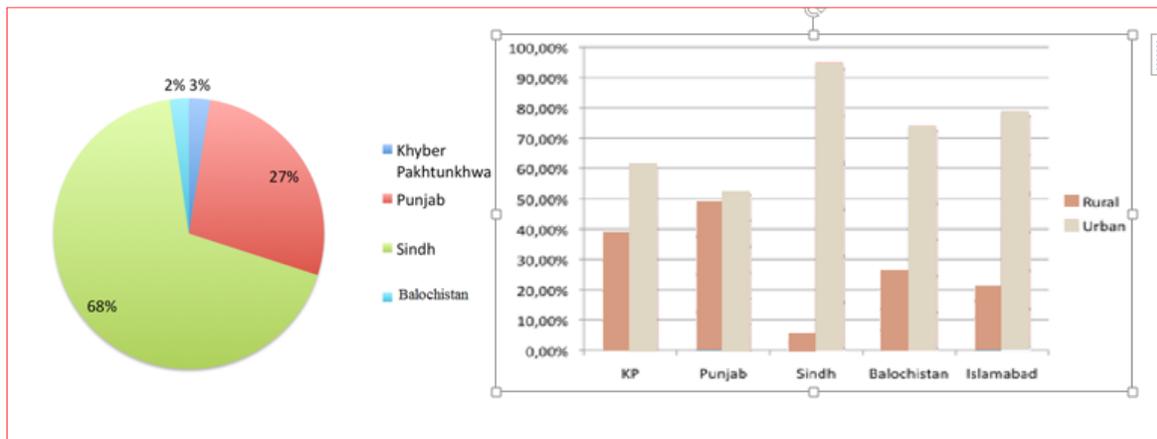


Figure 07: Migration of people within Pakistan and Settlement within the provision

In Pakistan, internal migration is common, with a significant number of people relocating within provinces. Figure 07 shows a majority of migrants move from interior Sindh to urban centers like Karachi in search of better employment, education, and living conditions. Many settles in informal settlements or low-income housing areas.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that rural-to-urban migrants often contribute to expenses through cash, food, and clothing. It has been observed that migration from rural to urban areas in Pakistan has significantly increased over time. This rapid growth has led to overcrowding in city centers and a decline in per capita resources available in urban areas. The study aims to explore the impact and causes of rural-to-urban migration rather than just the driving factors, drawing insights from both Pakistan's capital and existing research on the topic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To manage urban growth effectively, it is essential to decentralize urban development by promoting the growth of secondary cities, thereby reducing the pressure on mega cities. Comprehensive urban planning should be implemented, focusing on affordable housing, efficient public transportation, and sustainable infrastructure to support expanding urban populations. Strengthening data collection on migration and urban growth is also crucial, as accurate data enables informed and responsive policy-making. Additionally, engaging local communities in the planning and implementation of urban development projects ensures that initiatives are aligned with the actual needs and priorities of residents, fostering more inclusive and sustainable urban environments.

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