

Where Youth Opportunity Is Weakest in Pakistan

District evidence to guide investment in education, skills and employment

Ahmad Nadeem | Based on the Pakistan Youth Opportunity and Exclusion Report 2026



The challenge

Pakistan has 62.6 million people aged 15 to 29, a quarter of its population (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2023). How many of them gain a foothold in education and work will shape the country's growth, stability and public finances for decades.

In 2024 to 2025, 28.4 per cent of people aged 15 to 24 were not in employment, education or training (NEET), including 45.4 per cent of young women (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2025). The 2023 census found 14.2 million people aged 15 to 24 who could not read and write.

National averages say little about where to act. This brief uses the District Youth Opportunity Index, a new measure covering all 136 census districts, to show where disadvantage is deepest, where the most young people are affected, and how progress should be tracked.

KEY MESSAGES

Exclusion is large and gendered. Young women are 3.5 times as likely as young men to be NEET.

Disadvantage is concentrated. The 27 lowest ranked districts hold 5.3 per cent of young people but 10.6 per cent of illiterate youth.

Numbers matter as much as rates. The largest numbers of illiterate youth live in large districts such as Rahim Yar Khan (456,445).

Gaps within provinces are wide. District scores span 71.8 points in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 69.1 in Sindh.

Measurement must improve. No national data yet link training to jobs or measure young people's digital skills.

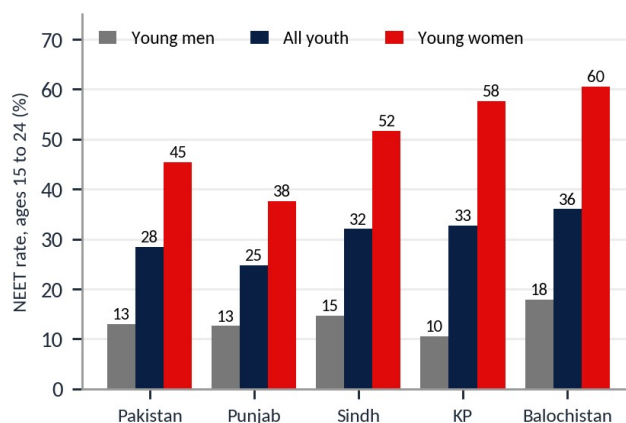
What the evidence shows

1. Exclusion is large, persistent and gendered

Almost three in ten people aged 15 to 24 are outside work, education and training. The rate fell from 32.5 per cent in 2020 to 2021 to 28.4 per cent in 2024 to 2025, but only because the female rate fell 9.9 points; among young men it rose 2.5 points (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2025).

Open unemployment captures only part of the problem: most NEET youth are outside the labour force altogether, so programmes that reach only registered jobseekers will miss them.

Figure 1. Youth NEET rate by province and sex, 2024 to 2025 (%)



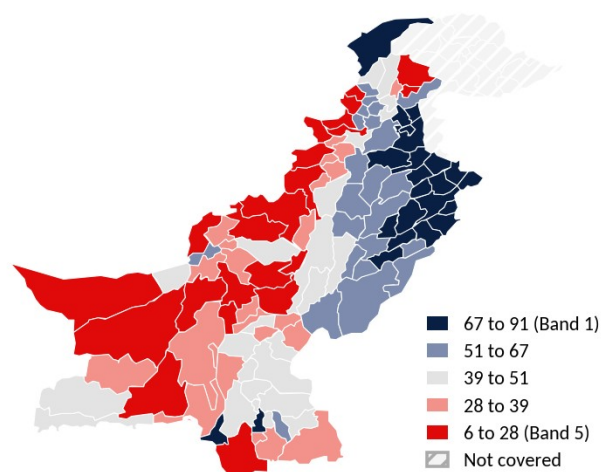
Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2025), Labour Force Survey 2024 to 2025, Table 8.8.

2. Disadvantage is concentrated in identifiable districts

The District Youth Opportunity Index scores every district from 0 to 100 on youth literacy, enrolment, market employment and the share of young people outside both study and the labour force. Scores range from 6.2 in Upper Kohistan to 91.2 in Lahore.

The lowest band of 27 districts lies entirely in Balochistan (13), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (12) and Sindh (2); Punjab has no district in the two lowest bands.

Figure 2. District Youth Opportunity Index, 2023



Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023); CSADS calculations. Districts created after 2019 are shown within their 2019 boundary unit.

BOX 1. ABOUT THE DISTRICT YOUTH OPPORTUNITY INDEX

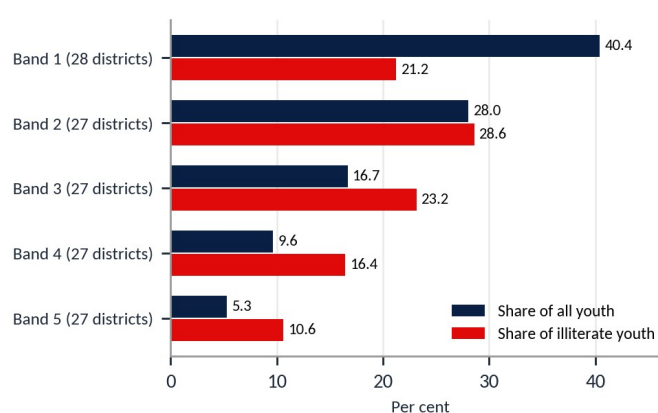
The index uses four indicators from the Population and Housing Census 2023 for young people aged 15 to 24: literacy and current enrolment (education domain), and market employment and the share outside both study and the labour force (economic domain). The two domains carry equal weight, and districts are grouped into five bands. District totals reconcile exactly with published national figures, two independent calculations give identical results, and rankings were tested across 13 alternative specifications. Ranks are robust at the top and bottom; mid table positions are best read by band. The index measures relative conditions in 2023 and is not an official statistic.

3. Rates and counts point to different places

The lowest band holds 5.3 per cent of young people but twice that share of illiterate youth. Yet none of the ten districts with the most illiterate young people is in that band.

Rahim Yar Khan, Muzaffargarh, Peshawar and Lahore each hold more illiterate young people than whole groups of low ranked districts. Targeting by rank alone would miss most affected young people.

Figure 3. Share of all youth and of illiterate youth by band, 2023 (%)

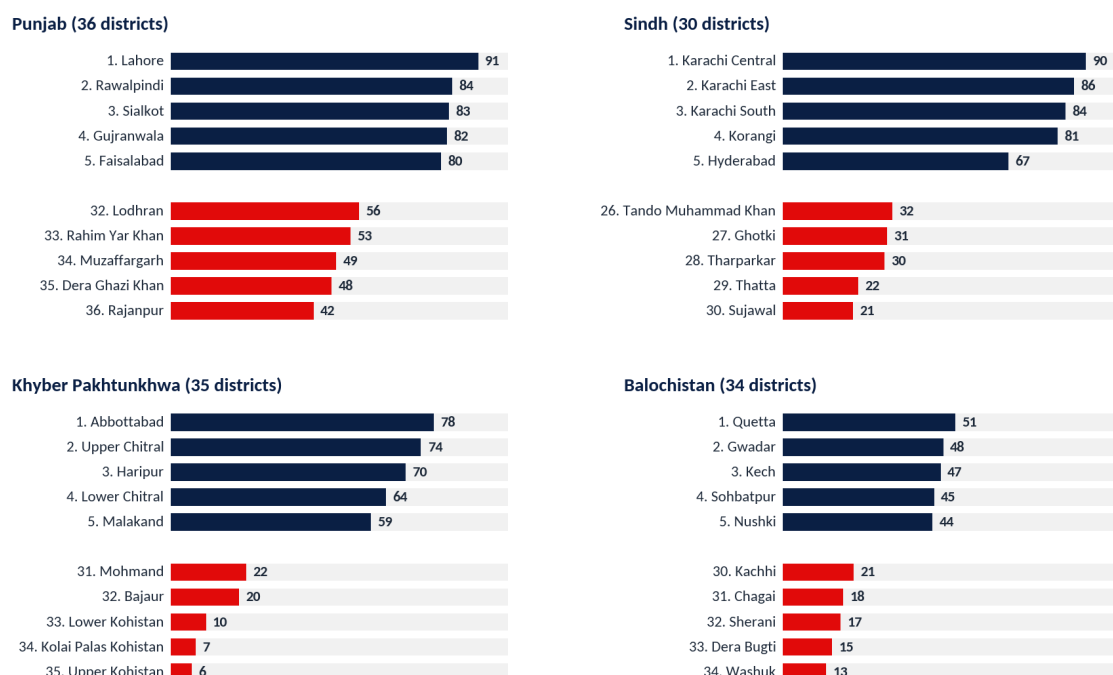


Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023); CSADS calculations.

4. Gaps within provinces are as large as gaps between them

Within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, scores run from 78.0 in Abbottabad to 6.2 in Upper Kohistan. In Sindh, the four highest ranked districts are in Karachi, while coastal Thatta and Sujawal rank last. All five of Punjab's lowest ranked districts lie in the south of the province, and Balochistan's highest scoring district, Quetta (51.2), scores lower than all but three Punjab districts. Provincial plans therefore need district level targeting, not only provincial allocations.

Figure 4. Five highest and five lowest ranked districts within each province, DYOI score, 2023



Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023); CSADS calculations. Numbers before names are ranks within the province.

Policy recommendations

- Target foundational education where it is weakest.**
 Prioritise the lowest band districts for second chance literacy, secondary school completion and safe access for girls, assessing delivery capacity before committing funds.
Lead: Provincial education departments in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh **Timing:** Begin within 12 months
- Scale transition services where the numbers are largest.**
 Place integrated youth services, combining assessment, bridging education, training and job placement, in large districts with the most affected young people, such as Rahim Yar Khan, Muzaffargarh, Peshawar and Lahore.
Lead: Provincial employment and skills departments **Timing:** Pilot within 12 months; scale over 3 years
- Make gender gaps an explicit programme target.**
 Set targets for young women's access, completion, placement and retention in the 74 districts where female youth literacy is below 50 per cent, and design programmes around locally observed barriers.
Lead: Federal and provincial youth, education and labour departments, with development partners **Timing:** Next planning cycle
- Judge training by results, not volumes.**
 Report unique enrolments, completions, certification and employment at six and twelve months, using a common tracer standard with published response rates.
Lead: NAVTTC and provincial technical and vocational training authorities **Timing:** Common standard within 12 months
- Close the evidence gaps that limit targeting.**
 Publish the definition of the census labour category used here, release census employment tables by sex for young people, and make the district Youth Development module available for analysis.
Lead: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics **Timing:** With next data releases

Timing is indicative.

Measuring progress

Progress should be tracked with a small set of indicators, each reported with its observation year and repeated only when comparable data are released. The district index should be recalculated when the district Youth Development module is published.

Indicator	Baseline	Year	Source	Next update
Youth NEET rate, ages 15 to 24 (SDG 8.6.1)	28.4%	2024 to 2025	LFS	Each LFS round
Female youth NEET rate	45.4%	2024 to 2025	LFS	Each LFS round

Indicator	Baseline	Year	Source	Next update
Youth literacy rate, ages 15 to 24	68.2%	2023	Census	Next census or district survey
Districts with female youth literacy below 50%	74 of 136	2023	Census	District survey release
Share of illiterate youth in lowest band districts	10.6%	2023	Census; DYOI	Index recalculation
Women ever trained, age 10 and above	7.4%	2024 to 2025	LFS	Each LFS round
Individuals using the internet, age 10 and above	57%	2024 to 2025	HIES	Each HIES round

Sources: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023, 2025, 2026).

Conclusion

Pakistan's youth opportunity gap is substantial, gendered and concentrated in identifiable places. Using district evidence on both intensity and scale, setting explicit targets for young women, and judging programmes by results rather than volumes would make public and donor investment in young people more effective. The District Youth Opportunity Index and the Annual Youth Opportunity Monitor provide a practical basis for tracking whether that happens.

NOTE ON DATA

District results use the Population and Housing Census 2023 for ages 15 to 24 and describe conditions in 2023. Labour indicators come from the Labour Force Survey 2024 to 2025 and digital indicators from the Household Integrated Economic Survey 2024 to 2025; these are not district estimates. The census inactivity category, published as "Not L.F & Stud", is interpreted as young people outside the labour force who are not students and differs from NEET.



About CSADS

The Centre for Social Analytics and Development Support (CSADS) is a knowledge centre based in Islamabad that links research, evidence, policy and development practice. It turns complex information into accessible analysis for governments, development organisations, civil society and academic institutions, combining established research methods with analytical tools enabled by artificial intelligence, with an emphasis on rigour, source transparency and professional judgement.

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Responsible Use of Artificial Intelligence

This brief and the report it summarises were developed through an evidence based research process supported by artificial intelligence tools, which contributed to document review, evidence synthesis, analytical drafting, data processing, visualisation and design. Research design, indicator selection, methodological decisions, interpretation of findings and final quality assurance remain matters of human analytical responsibility and professional judgement. All key findings are traceable to verifiable sources, and the district results were reproduced through two independent calculations.

References

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