

Migration and Youth Employment: A Demographic Analysis of Rural–Urban Migration in Nigeria

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Abstract: Rural–urban migration and youth employment are deeply intertwined challenges that shape Nigeria’s demographic and economic landscape. The study examined migration and youth employment: a demographic analysis (factors) of rural–urban Migration in Nigeria. The paper employed the use of secondary data which were collected from both online and print publications. The study identified opportunities and employment prospects, educational opportunities, poor infrastructure and social services in rural areas, agricultural challenges and declining rural livelihoods, urbanization and perceived better living conditions, insecurity and conflicts in rural areas and social networks and family influence have led to rural–urban migration in Nigeria. Based on these findings, the study recommends that to reduce the push factors driving migration, the Nigerian government and development partners should prioritize rural development. Investment in critical infrastructure such as roads, electricity, healthcare, schools, and clean water would improve living standards and create economic opportunities within rural areas. Given that agriculture remains the dominant occupation in rural Nigeria, transforming it into a modern, technology-driven, and profitable sector can help retain youth in rural areas. Government agencies such as the National Agricultural Development Fund (NADF) and Bank of Agriculture should expand credit facilities, mechanization programs, and agricultural training for young farmers. Encouraging agripreneurship through cooperatives, digital agriculture platforms, and value-chain development would help create sustainable jobs and make agriculture attractive to the youth. Many rural migrants lack the skills required to compete effectively in urban labour markets, leading to underemployment or engagement in low-paying informal jobs. To address this, the government should expand vocational and technical education programs targeted at rural and urban youth. The National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) and state ministries of education should collaborate with private institutions to establish skills acquisition centres focused on trades such as construction, ICT, renewable energy, and small-scale manufacturing. This will equip the youth with employable skills, enhance productivity, and reduce migration pressures.

Keywords: Migration, Youth Employment, Rural–Urban Migration



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1. Introduction

Migration is one of the most significant demographic phenomena shaping population distribution, economic development, and social transformation across the globe. In Nigeria, rural–urban migration has become a defining feature of the country’s demographic landscape, reflecting deep-seated socioeconomic disparities between rural and urban areas. This internal migration pattern is largely driven by the search for better employment opportunities, education, healthcare, and improved living standards. Over the past few decades, the rapid urbanization of cities such as Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Kano has been

fuelled by the steady inflow of young people from rural regions, seeking to escape the challenges of poverty, underemployment, and limited access to essential services that characterize much of rural Nigeria.

The youth demographic—comprising individuals between the ages of 15 and 35—constitutes a significant proportion of Nigeria's population and labour force. Their movement from rural to urban areas has profound implications for both regions. On one hand, urban centres benefit from the influx of energetic and potentially productive labour, which supports industrial growth, service delivery, and innovation. On the other hand, rural areas experience depopulation, agricultural labour shortages, and a weakening of traditional family structures and community systems. For many young migrants, however, the promise of urban prosperity often contrasts sharply with the harsh realities of unemployment, informal labour markets, and poor housing conditions that characterize many Nigerian cities.

A demographic analysis of rural–urban migration provides an important framework for understanding the scale, causes, and consequences of this population movement. It enables researchers to examine how factors such as education, age, gender, family background, and regional disparities shape migration decisions and outcomes. Moreover, it sheds light on the impact of migration on youth employment trends, including the mismatch between the skills migrants possess and the demands of urban labour markets. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for policymakers seeking to address unemployment, promote equitable regional development, and harness the demographic dividend offered by Nigeria's growing youth population.

In essence, studying migration and youth employment from a demographic perspective offers valuable insights into the interplay between population mobility, economic opportunity, and social change. It also highlights the urgent need for integrated policies that balance urban growth with rural development, create sustainable employment opportunities, and ensure that migration contributes positively to Nigeria's long-term socioeconomic development.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Concept of Migration and Youth Employment

Understanding the concepts of migration and youth employment requires exploring definitions from diverse scholarly and institutional perspectives. Both concepts are central to demographic studies and socioeconomic development, particularly in countries like Nigeria where youth constitute a large proportion of the population and internal migration patterns shape labour market outcomes.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2019), migration is the movement of persons away from their usual place of residence, either across an international border or within a state, regardless of the length, composition, and causes of the movement or the legal status of the person.* This definition encompasses all forms of migration—internal and international—recognizing that people move for diverse reasons, including economic, social, political, and environmental factors. In the context of Nigeria, this definition captures the massive internal movement of youths from rural to urban centres in search of better economic prospects. Todaro in Musa (2020) defines migration as a rational economic decision where individuals move from one area to another in response to expected differences in income and employment opportunities. The Todaro migration model emphasizes that people, especially young adults, are motivated to migrate when they believe urban areas offer better employment and income prospects compared to rural areas. This economic perspective is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where rural–urban migration among youths is largely driven by perceived economic inequalities.

The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) describes youth employment as the participation of young people aged 15–24 years in the labour market, either as employed or unemployed but actively seeking work. The ILO's definition recognizes that youth employment is not limited to the presence of jobs but also concerns the quality, stability, and productivity of work. This definition is essential for demographic analysis, as it links employment outcomes to population dynamics, education, and migration flows. In Nigeria, where youth unemployment and underemployment are significant challenges, this definition underscores the need to create sustainable employment opportunities for a rapidly growing young population. The United Nations (2018) views youth employment as a critical aspect of human development involving the access of young people to decent and productive work that ensures income,

social inclusion, and personal growth. This definition highlights the multidimensional nature of employment, going beyond economic activity to include social and developmental aspects. In the Nigerian context, this definition is particularly useful because it links employment to broader issues such as education, skill development, and social stability—factors that often influence young people’s decision to migrate.

Castles, de Haas, and Miller (2014) define migration as a process shaped by the interplay between demographic pressures, labour market demands, and social networks, where individuals relocate to improve their living standards and employment prospects. This comprehensive definition bridges migration and employment, emphasizing that economic motivation—particularly employment—is one of the strongest drivers of migration. It also recognizes the demographic dimension of migration, where age, education, and skill levels determine who migrates and what employment outcomes they experience in destination areas.

2.2 Concept Rural-Urban Migration

Rural–urban migration refers to the movement of people from rural areas (villages and small towns) to urban centres (cities and metropolitan areas) in search of improved living conditions, employment opportunities, education, and access to better social amenities. It is one of the most significant demographic and socioeconomic processes shaping population distribution in developing countries, including Nigeria. This migration pattern is largely driven by the push factors in rural areas—such as poverty, unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, and declining agricultural productivity—and pull factors in urban areas, including industrial growth, availability of jobs, modern lifestyles, and access to social services (Ajaero, & Onokala, in Musa, 2022).

In Nigeria, rural–urban migration has been a major force influencing urbanization and labour dynamics. Young people, in particular, constitute the largest group of migrants, often seeking economic advancement and education. However, while migration contributes to the transfer of labour and innovation, it also poses challenges such as urban congestion, housing shortages, unemployment, and the neglect of rural development. Moreover, the continuous outflow of young and active individuals from rural communities often leads to a decline in agricultural productivity and rural depopulation (Oyeniya, in Musa, 2022). Demographers and development experts view rural–urban migration as both an opportunity and a challenge. On one hand, it facilitates labour mobility, human capital development, and urban growth; on the other hand, it intensifies inequalities between rural and urban regions. Therefore, managing rural–urban migration requires balanced development policies that enhance rural infrastructure, promote agricultural modernization, and create job opportunities to reduce excessive movement to cities.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the Push and Pull Theory of Migration which was developed by Everett Lee (1966), provides a useful framework for analyzing the factors influencing rural–urban migration in Nigeria, particularly among youths. The theory posits that migration occurs as a result of a combination of push factors (unfavorable conditions in the place of origin) and pull factors (attractive opportunities in the destination). In the Nigerian context, this theory helps to explain why a significant number of youths leave rural areas for urban centers in search of better living conditions and employment opportunities.

Push Factors (Forces Driving Youths Away from Rural Areas)

Push factors refer to the negative conditions in rural communities that compel youths to migrate to cities. These include:

a. Unemployment and Underemployment

Rural areas in Nigeria are characterized by limited job opportunities outside subsistence agriculture. Many young people face chronic underemployment, earning low income that cannot sustain their livelihoods. This economic frustration drives them to seek better prospects in urban centers.

b. Poor Infrastructure and Social Services

Lack of access to quality education, healthcare, good roads, electricity, and communication networks in rural areas discourages young people from remaining in their communities. In contrast, cities offer better

access to modern amenities and social infrastructure.

c. Low Agricultural Productivity

Due to inadequate mechanization, poor access to credit, and unreliable markets, agriculture — the main occupation in rural Nigeria — yields low returns. The unattractiveness of farming, coupled with the drudgery involved, pushes youths away from rural life.

d. Poverty and Low Living Standards

High poverty levels, poor housing, and lack of social mobility in rural areas generate dissatisfaction, motivating migration toward cities perceived as centers of wealth and opportunity.

e. Social and Cultural Constraints

Traditional practices, lack of exposure, and limited opportunities for personal development also push ambitious youths to relocate to urban areas where they can pursue modern lifestyles and independence.

Pull Factors (Forces Attracting Youths to Urban Areas)

Pull factors refer to the positive attractions and perceived advantages that lure youths to urban centers. In Nigeria, these include:

a. Employment Opportunities

Cities like Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt are seen as centers of economic activity where industries, government institutions, and private enterprises offer higher chances of employment compared to rural regions.

b. Better Education and Skill Development

Urban centers host universities, polytechnics, and training institutes that provide opportunities for higher education and professional advancement — major attractions for young migrants.

c. Improved Social Amenities and Modern Lifestyle

The availability of electricity, internet connectivity, entertainment, and better healthcare in urban areas appeal to young people seeking comfort and exposure to modern life.

d. Perceived Social Mobility and Success

Cities are associated with wealth, success, and prestige. The media portrayal of urban life as glamorous influences rural youths to migrate in search of status and recognition.

e. Networks and Peer Influence

Migrants who have successfully settled in cities often influence others back home by sending remittances and sharing success stories, creating a social pull for others to follow.

Implications for Youth Employment

While migration may offer short-term opportunities, it has both positive and negative implications:

- Positive: Access to better jobs, skill acquisition, exposure to modern technology, and improvement in standard of living for some migrants.

- Negative: Overpopulation in cities, youth unemployment and underemployment, increase in urban poverty, rise in informal sector jobs, and strain on housing, infrastructure, and public services.

The Push and Pull Theory effectively explains the dynamics of rural–urban migration among Nigerian youths. Economic hardship, poor infrastructure, and limited rural opportunities act as push factors, while urban employment prospects, education, and modern amenities serve as pull factors. However, the continued drift of youths to cities has created new socio-economic challenges, including urban unemployment and rural neglect. Sustainable solutions must therefore focus on rural development, job creation, and balanced regional growth to reduce excessive rural–urban migration.

3.0 Method

The migration and youth employment: a demographic analysis (factors) of rural–urban Migration in Nigeria. This paper is a position paper that adopted a systematic literature review-based method. The

method allows to collect and review the related previous literature from various online sources. With the aid of digital platform, the researcher collected secondary information to generate knowledge on this topic from 2015-2025. The position paper followed qualitative narrative design method. The researcher has visited different online sites to collect the previous literature and analyze the migration and youth employment: a demographic analysis (factors) of rural–urban Migration in Nigeria. The previous findings are critically analyzed and presented in different themes as on the migration and youth employment: a demographic analysis (factors) of rural–urban Migration in Nigeria. (Adapted from Ogunode, 2025).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion

This output of the literatures on the migration and youth employment: a demographic analysis (factors) of rural–urban Migration in Nigeria presents an in-depth study and result that can infer conclusion on the topic. The study includes: online publication; conference paper, journals sorted from reputable international journals such as CEON, Elsevier, Hindawi, JSTOR, IEEE, Learn Techlib, SAGE, Nebraska and Springer (Adapted from Ogunode, 2025v).

Exclusion

Also, the literature review excludes information from edited books, preprints, monographs, information below 2015 and book chapters (Adapted from Ogunode, 2025).

4.0 Result and Discussion on Factors Responsible for Rural–Urban Migration in Nigeria

Rural–urban migration is one of the most prominent demographic and socioeconomic trends shaping Nigeria’s population distribution and labour dynamics. It involves the movement of people, especially the youth, from rural areas to cities in search of better economic, social, and living conditions. This pattern of migration has been intensified by structural imbalances in development, poverty, and limited employment opportunities in rural communities. The following seven factors are central to understanding the causes of rural–urban migration in Nigeria.

Economic Opportunities and Employment Prospects

One of the foremost drivers of rural–urban migration in Nigeria is the search for better employment opportunities. Rural areas are predominantly agrarian, with limited industrial or formal sector employment, while urban centres such as Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt host a concentration of industries, services, and commercial enterprises. Young people migrate in anticipation of higher wages and stable jobs in the cities. According to Todaro in Musa (2022), migration decisions are often based on expected income differentials between rural and urban areas. The perceived economic prosperity of cities continues to attract migrants seeking to escape rural poverty.

Educational Opportunities

Access to quality education is another major factor driving migration. Most rural communities in Nigeria suffer from inadequate educational facilities, poor infrastructure, and limited access to tertiary institutions. In contrast, urban centres are home to universities, polytechnics, colleges, and technical schools that attract young people seeking academic advancement. Education is often seen as a pathway to improved social status and better job prospects. As noted by Oyeniyi in Muhammed (2019), educational migration forms a substantial part of rural–urban population movement in developing countries, as education is viewed as an investment in human capital.

Poor Infrastructure and Social Services in Rural Areas

The inadequate provision of basic infrastructure—such as roads, electricity, water supply, healthcare, and communication facilities—has contributed significantly to the movement of people from rural to urban areas. Many rural communities face chronic neglect in government development plans, making urban life appear more attractive. According to Ajaero and Onokala in Adeyemi (2020), the disparities in social amenities between urban and rural areas create a “push factor” that encourages migration. This infrastructural inequality not only affects quality of life but also reduces productivity and investment in rural economies.

Agricultural Challenges and Declining Rural Livelihoods

Agriculture remains the mainstay of rural Nigeria; however, declining productivity, climate change, and lack of modern farming techniques have made it less attractive to the youth. Issues such as land degradation, unpredictable rainfall patterns, poor access to markets, and lack of credit facilities further discourage young people from remaining in rural areas. The result is a steady migration toward cities where non-agricultural employment is perceived as more profitable. As observed by Okunmadewa in Musa (2022), the agricultural sector's stagnation and vulnerability to environmental factors contribute heavily to rural depopulation.

Urbanization and Perceived Better Living Conditions

Urban areas in Nigeria symbolize modernity, progress, and opportunity. The growing exposure to urban lifestyles through media, technology, and communication has reinforced the perception that cities offer a better quality of life. Urban centres often provide better access to healthcare, entertainment, transportation, and housing (though sometimes overcrowded). According to the United Nations (2018), rapid urbanization in developing countries like Nigeria is not only a demographic phenomenon but also a reflection of socioeconomic aspirations that drive migration.

Insecurity and Conflicts in Rural Areas

In recent decades, insecurity has become a significant cause of rural–urban migration in Nigeria. Persistent communal clashes, banditry, terrorism (especially in the North-East), and herder–farmer conflicts have forced many rural dwellers to relocate to urban centres perceived as safer. These conflicts disrupt agricultural activities, displace families, and destroy livelihoods. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2021) reported that thousands of internally displaced persons in Nigeria migrate to cities like Abuja and Maiduguri, where humanitarian aid and relative safety are more accessible.

Social Networks and Family Influence

Social networks play a vital role in sustaining migration patterns. Many individuals migrate because they have relatives, friends, or community members who have already established themselves in urban areas. These networks reduce the risks and costs associated with migration by providing information, temporary accommodation, and job connections. As observed by Mabogunje in Muhammed (2019), migration in Nigeria often follows a chain process, where the success of earlier migrants encourages others to follow, creating self-sustaining migratory flows.

4.1 Findings

Rural–urban migration in Nigeria is a multifaceted process driven by economic, educational, environmental, and social factors. The interplay of economic opportunities and employment prospects, educational opportunities, poor infrastructure and social services in rural areas, agricultural challenges and declining rural livelihoods, urbanization and perceived better living conditions, insecurity and conflicts in rural areas and social networks and family influence have led to rural–urban migration in Nigeria

4.2 Conclusion and Recommendations

Rural–urban migration and youth employment are deeply intertwined challenges that shape Nigeria's demographic and economic landscape. The study examined migration and youth employment: a demographic analysis (factors) of rural–urban Migration in Nigeria. The study identified opportunities and employment prospects, educational opportunities, poor infrastructure and social services in rural areas, agricultural challenges and declining rural livelihoods, urbanization and perceived better living conditions, insecurity and conflicts in rural areas and social networks and family influence have led to rural–urban migration in Nigeria.

The following recommendations are proposed to manage migration and enhance youth employment in Nigeria:

1. To reduce the push factors driving migration, the Nigerian government and development partners should prioritize rural development. Investment in critical infrastructure such as roads, electricity, healthcare, schools, and clean water would improve living standards and create economic opportunities within rural areas. By making rural communities more habitable and economically viable, the incentive for

young people to migrate in search of better livelihoods would be significantly reduced. Additionally, implementing rural industrialization policies and promoting agro-based industries can stimulate local employment and encourage youth to remain and invest in their communities.

2. Given that agriculture remains the dominant occupation in rural Nigeria, transforming it into a modern, technology-driven, and profitable sector can help retain youth in rural areas. Government agencies such as the National Agricultural Development Fund (NADF) and Bank of Agriculture should expand credit facilities, mechanization programs, and agricultural training for young farmers. Encouraging agripreneurship through cooperatives, digital agriculture platforms, and value-chain development would help create sustainable jobs and make agriculture attractive to the youth.

3. Many rural migrants lack the skills required to compete effectively in urban labour markets, leading to underemployment or engagement in low-paying informal jobs. To address this, the government should expand vocational and technical education programs targeted at rural and urban youth. The National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) and state ministries of education should collaborate with private institutions to establish skills acquisition centres focused on trades such as construction, ICT, renewable energy, and small-scale manufacturing. This will equip the youth with employable skills, enhance productivity, and reduce migration pressures.

4. Youth unemployment remains one of the most critical consequences of rural–urban migration. The government should implement inclusive employment policies that prioritize youth engagement in both rural and urban development projects. Programs such as the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP), Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YouWiN), and N-Power should be restructured to target migrants and returning youths with training, financial support, and mentorship. Moreover, private sector participation in job creation through tax incentives and public-private partnerships should be encouraged to expand the labour market for young Nigerians.

5. Uncontrolled migration often leads to urban overcrowding, unemployment, slum proliferation, and poor living conditions. To mitigate these issues, Nigeria needs comprehensive urban planning policies that align population growth with housing, transportation, and employment opportunities. Urban authorities should regulate informal employment sectors and improve data collection on migration and labour trends. Establishing urban employment information centres can help link job seekers with employers and reduce the mismatch between available skills and market demand.

6. Insecurity, particularly in rural regions affected by banditry, insurgency, and communal conflicts, continues to displace thousands of people into urban centres. The government must strengthen security measures, enhance community policing, and invest in peacebuilding initiatives to make rural areas safe for habitation and economic activity. Programs that promote dialogue between farmers and herders, as well as early warning systems for conflict prevention, should be implemented to ensure stability and reduce migration triggered by fear and violence.

7. A major cause of migration is the overconcentration of economic activities and government institutions in a few cities such as Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt. To address this imbalance, policies promoting decentralization and regional economic integration should be adopted. The federal and state governments should develop medium-sized towns and regional growth poles through targeted investment in industry, education, and technology. This approach will spread economic opportunities more evenly across the country and reduce the population pressure on major urban centres.

Managing rural–urban migration and promoting youth employment require a holistic approach that addresses both the causes and consequences of population movement. Strengthening rural economies, improving education and skill development, ensuring security, and balancing regional growth can collectively reduce migration pressure while enhancing the productivity and wellbeing of Nigeria's youth population. A coordinated effort between government, private sector, and community stakeholders is essential to achieve inclusive and sustainable development that benefits both rural and urban populations.

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