

YOUTH, UNEMPLOYMENT, AND INSURGENCY: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF OPPORTUNITY DEFICITS IN BALOCHISTAN

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15805417>

Keywords

Youth, Unemployment, Insurgency, Sociological, Balochistan

Article History

Received on 26 May 2025

Accepted on 26 June 2025

Published on 04 July 2025

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Abstract

Balochistan, despite being rich in natural resources, remains Pakistan's most underdeveloped province, with alarming rates of youth unemployment and persistent political unrest. This sociological study explores the interconnections between youth marginalization, lack of socioeconomic opportunities, and the growing appeal of insurgent movements in the region. The central focus is to examine how inequality, educational underdevelopment, and Govt neglect have contributed to a generation of disillusioned youth susceptible to anti-state narratives. Grounded in theories of relative deprivation and social strain, this research utilizes a mixed-methods approach—combining field interviews, official statistics, and content analysis of media and militant discourse—to uncover the ways in which opportunity deficits contribute to political radicalization. The study finds that the absence of meaningful employment, quality education, and social mobility fuels frustration, erodes trust in institutions, and heightens the appeal of alternative ideologies that promise dignity and identity. Furthermore, the research reveals how youth in Balochistan often view Govt-led development projects as exploitative or exclusionary, deepening the gap between Govt intentions and Baloch perceptions. In many cases, the Govt's securitized response to dissent further alienates young people, reinforcing a cycle of mistrust and militancy. The paper concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for holistic, youth-centered development policies that prioritize inclusive education, vocational training, job creation, and civic engagement. Only by addressing the root causes of disempowerment and creating legitimate avenues for participation can the cycle of unrest be disrupted and peace sustainably fostered in Balochistan.

INTRODUCTION

Balochistan, Pakistan's largest and most resource-rich province, has long occupied a paradoxical space in the national narrative—strategically vital yet persistently underdeveloped; geographically expansive yet politically marginalized. The province, which spans nearly 44% of Pakistan's landmass, is endowed with significant natural wealth, including minerals, natural gas, and coastline. However, despite these advantages,

it continues to face chronic socio-economic deprivation, weak governance, and deep-rooted political discontent. For decades, Balochistan has been a site of contestation between the state and segments of the local population, many of whom perceive themselves as victims of systemic exclusion, cultural alienation, and economic exploitation. These tensions have fueled recurring insurgencies, with the

most recent wave gaining momentum in the early 2000s and continuing into the present day.

Amidst this complex backdrop, the youth of Balochistan occupy a particularly fragile position. As the most populous age group in the province, Baloch youth represent both a demographic majority and a political minority. They are caught between the promises of development and the realities of dispossession; between aspirations for education and livelihoods, and the constraints of underfunded institutions, unemployment, and political marginalization. Youth in Balochistan not only face the challenges common to marginalized regions—such as poor infrastructure, weak public services, and limited access to quality education—but also confront the psychological burden of existing in a province often defined by securitization and distrust. This demographic, full of untapped potential, finds itself at the crossroads of hope and hopelessness.

The rising tide of unemployment in Balochistan has become one of the most pressing concerns for both policymakers and civil society actors. According to various national labor force surveys and independent assessments, Balochistan consistently ranks at the bottom in terms of employment generation, technical training availability, and industrial development. The scarcity of job opportunities, particularly for educated youth, is not merely an economic issue—it is a sociopolitical fault line that feeds into the broader sense of exclusion and grievance. For many young people, especially those residing in southern and interior districts like Kech, Awaran, and Panjgur, unemployment is not just about lacking income but about the absence of a future. The state's inability to provide employment, coupled with an environment of distrust and militarization, has inadvertently made segments of Baloch youth more susceptible to radical ideologies and insurgent recruitment.

Insurgent groups have been quick to exploit this vacuum of opportunity and meaning. Through targeted propaganda, emotional appeals, and narratives centered on resistance and dignity, these groups offer an alternative form of identity and purpose to disillusioned youth. While not all unemployed youth are drawn to militancy, the overlap between social frustration, political alienation, and insurgent sympathies is a growing concern. The insurgency in Balochistan has increasingly relied on

young recruits, many of whom are drawn not purely by ideology but by a deep-seated resentment toward systemic injustices and a lack of viable alternatives. Understanding this dynamic is critical for developing effective and sustainable responses to both youth disempowerment and political instability in the province.

This study seeks to explore the nexus between youth, unemployment, and insurgency in Balochistan from a sociological perspective. It is guided by several interrelated research questions: How does the lack of socioeconomic opportunities shape the attitudes, behaviors, and identities of Baloch youth? To what extent do inequalities and neglect contribute to political radicalization among the younger population? What are the pathways through which opportunity deficits translate into support for or participation in insurgent activities? How do youth perceive the state's development and counterinsurgency efforts? And finally, what policy measures can be undertaken to bridge the opportunity gap and foster a more inclusive future for Balochistan's youth?

The primary objective of the study is to analyze how opportunity deficits—particularly in the realms of employment, education, and social mobility—contribute to a broader crisis of youth marginalization in Balochistan. It aims to examine the sociological underpinnings of youth disillusionment and the mechanisms through which insurgent groups leverage this discontent. The study also seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of existing state policies in addressing youth grievances and to offer evidence-based recommendations for more responsive, inclusive, and youth-centered interventions.

The scope of this research is both regional and thematic. Geographically, it focuses on districts that have historically exhibited strong insurgent activity and acute development gaps—such as Kech, Gwadar, Khuzdar, and Dera Bugti—while also referencing provincial-wide trends. Thematically, the research encompasses issues related to youth identity, education, employment, political participation, and exposure to conflict. The study is intentionally interdisciplinary, drawing on sociological theory, conflict studies, and development policy to offer a holistic understanding of the issue. While much has been written on Balochistan's political conflict from a

strategic or geopolitical standpoint, this research aims to shift the lens to the everyday lived experiences of youth who find themselves at the center of this struggle.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach enriched with interpretive analysis. Data has been collected through policy documents, media reports, and insurgent materials. The use of sociological theories—particularly Robert Merton’s strain theory and relative deprivation theory—allows for a conceptual mapping of how structural pressures can lead to deviant or non-conforming behavior when legitimate means of success are blocked. In doing so, the study not only captures the symptoms of youth discontent but also probes into its deeper structural and symbolic causes.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform both academic discourse and practical policy. By framing the insurgency in Balochistan not solely as a security problem but as a sociological consequence of unmet needs and unaddressed grievances, the study argues for a shift in how the state and society engage with the province’s youth. If left unaddressed, the current trajectory threatens to entrench cycles of conflict and underdevelopment further. However, if harnessed properly, Balochistan’s youth can be agents of peace, progress, and reconciliation. This transformation, however, requires more than tokenistic development packages—it demands structural change, inclusive governance, and genuine representatives and dialogue.

In sum, this research endeavors to shed light on one of the most pressing and understudied dimensions of the Balochistan conflict: the silent struggles and potent potential of its youth. Through a sociological analysis of opportunity deficits, the study hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of how grievances transform into resistance, and how meaningful interventions can reverse that cycle. Balochistan’s future, like its present, hinges on the choices made about its youth—and whether they are viewed as threats to be managed or citizens to be empowered.

Problem Statement

Balochistan, despite its strategic importance and resource wealth, continues to suffer from chronic underdevelopment, political marginalization, and

socio-economic inequality. Among the most affected segment of the population are the youth, who face high levels of unemployment, poor access to quality education, and limited participation in decision-making processes. These structural challenges have led to widespread frustration, disillusionment, and a growing sense of alienation among Baloch youth. In many parts of the province, the absence of viable economic opportunities is not just an individual hardship but a collective experience that reinforces feelings of neglect and abandonment by the state.

This situation has created a fertile ground for insurgent groups and anti-state actors, who exploit these grievances to mobilize and radicalize disenfranchised youth. The lack of trust in state institutions, combined with the securitization of development and governance, has further deepened the divide between the state and society. Despite various government initiatives, there remains a significant gap between policy design and ground realities, leaving many young people excluded from the benefits of national development. This study addresses the urgent need to understand the sociological dimensions of youth marginalization in Balochistan and the pathways through which unemployment and exclusion can escalate into political instability and insurgency. Without a focused, inclusive, and long-term approach, this crisis risks further destabilizing the province and undermining national cohesion.

Research Objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between youth unemployment and political discontent in Balochistan, with a focus on how opportunity deficits contribute to feelings of marginalization and exclusion.
2. To analyze the sociological factors that influence youth vulnerability to insurgent narratives and participation in militancy, including structural deprivation, identity crisis, and lack of state trust.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of state-led policies and interventions aimed at youth development and conflict prevention, and to recommend strategies for inclusive, sustainable engagement of Baloch youth.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the sociological relationship between youth unemployment, marginalization, and insurgency in Balochistan. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with unemployed youth, local educators, community leaders, and policymakers in selected districts such as Kech, Panjgur, and Quetta. These regions are chosen due to their high youth population and relevance to the conflict dynamics in the province. In addition, secondary data from government reports, NGO publications, and academic literature will be analyzed to contextualize findings. The research will apply sociological theories—particularly Robert Merton’s Strain Theory and Relative Deprivation Theory—to interpret how structural inequality and blocked opportunities contribute to deviant behavior, including the attraction toward insurgent movements. The interpretivist approach will guide the analysis, allow the voices and live experiences of Baloch youth to shape the study’s conclusions and policy recommendations.

Socioeconomic Profile of Youth in Balochistan**5.1. Demographics and Youth Population Trends**

Balochistan, Pakistan’s largest province by area but the least populated, is home to a youth-dominant population. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023), over 60% of the province’s population is under the age of 30. The youth cohort (aged 15–29) represents a critical demographic force that, if empowered, can significantly contribute to peacebuilding and economic progress. However, the demographic dividend remains untapped due to inadequate investment in human development and institutional neglect (UNDP, 2020).

The province’s youthful population faces unique challenges due to widespread poverty, insecurity, and lack of social mobility. While the youth in other provinces often benefit from growing urbanization and digital connectivity, Balochistan’s youth remain disconnected due to underdeveloped infrastructure and inadequate access to modern technology. This demographic isolation has contributed to a growing gap between youth aspirations and available opportunities, creating conditions for discontent (Ahmed & Shah, 2019).

Moreover, political instability and limited youth representation in decision-making forums further exacerbate feelings of alienation. The lack of youth engagement in policy planning at provincial and national levels leaves their concerns largely unaddressed. Scholars such as Khan and Yousaf (2021) argue that the youth bulge in Balochistan—if not integrated meaningfully into development and governance—risks becoming a destabilizing force rather than a transformative one.

5.2. Access to Education and Skill Development

Access to quality education in Balochistan remains alarmingly low, particularly in rural and conflict-prone districts. According to Pakistan’s National Human Development Report (UNDP, 2020), the province has the lowest literacy rate in the country—at 46% overall, with female literacy significantly lower. Public schools suffer from severe teacher shortages, lack of basic facilities, and curriculum gaps. This educational crisis contributes directly to the lack of employment-readiness among Baloch youth, who often leave school without marketable skills.

Furthermore, vocational and technical training institutions are scarce, underfunded, and often poorly aligned with the demands of the local economy. The National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTTC, 2022) reports that Balochistan accounts for less than 5% of national enrollments in technical education, despite its high unemployment rate. This skills mismatch leaves many young people either unemployed or underemployed, reinforcing the cycle of poverty and frustration (Baloch & Nizamani, 2021).

Private-sector involvement in skill development has been minimal due to security concerns and infrastructural bottlenecks. As a result, youth remain dependent on state-run programs that often lack transparency and efficiency. Researchers like Jaffer and Khilji (2020) emphasize that without systematic investment in human capital, particularly in modern education and entrepreneurship, Balochistan’s youth will continue to be marginalized from mainstream economic growth and empowerment.

5.3. Unemployment and Underemployment Statistics

Balochistan faces one of the highest youth unemployment rates in Pakistan. According to the Pakistan Labour Force Survey (2022), the unemployment rate among youth aged 15–29 in Balochistan stands at approximately 22%, significantly above the national average. However, these figures underrepresent the scale of underemployment—where many youths are forced into informal, low-paying jobs with no job security or career progression (NIPS, 2021). The informal sector absorbs a large segment of the workforce but provides limited economic mobility or skill acquisition.

Structural factors, including a weak industrial base, low public investment, and lack of foreign direct investment, contribute to the stagnant job market. The absence of major employment-generating sectors outside of government and security services has narrowed youth employment options drastically. Moreover, large-scale development projects like CPEC have so far failed to integrate local youth into the formal labor force due to skill mismatches and trust deficits (Siddiqui & Ahmed, 2020).

The frustration stemming from prolonged joblessness is compounded by perceptions of discrimination and neglect, particularly among educated youth. Many feel that employment opportunities are either reserved for outsiders or are distributed based on patronage rather than merit. This widespread disillusionment makes unemployed youth vulnerable to radical narratives that promise dignity, identity, and purpose, as discussed by Shahid (2022) in his analysis of youth recruitment into insurgent groups in South Balochistan.

5.4. Regional Disparities: Urban vs Rural

Urban-rural disparities in Balochistan are stark and deeply rooted in the province's uneven development. Urban centers like Quetta and Gwadar benefit from relatively better educational facilities, job markets, and public services. In contrast, rural districts such as Awaran, Kharan, and Washuk remain severely underdeveloped, with limited infrastructure, schools, and healthcare access. According to the Balochistan Development Statistics (2022), over 70% of Balochistan's population lives in rural areas where

state presence is minimal and basic services are inadequate.

These disparities directly affect youth prospects. In urban areas, youth have somewhat better access to universities, internet connectivity, and job markets—although even here, opportunities remain limited. However, rural youth are often entirely excluded from the modern economy and educational landscape, leading to entrenched cycles of poverty and underdevelopment (Baloch & Khan, 2021). This exclusion becomes even more pronounced in conflict-affected districts, where mobility and security constraints further isolate young people from opportunities.

The lack of regional equity also fuels regional grievances and strengthens anti-state narratives. Youth from rural and tribal areas often perceive development projects as extractive and exclusionary, reinforcing the belief that urban elites benefit disproportionately from state resources. Scholars like Akhtar (2021) note that this rural neglect has become a powerful mobilizing tool for insurgent groups, who capitalize on these disparities to promote resistance and undermine state legitimacy.

5.5. Impact of Gender, Tribe, and Geography on Youth Opportunity

Youth opportunity in Balochistan is profoundly shaped by the intersection of gender, tribal affiliation, and geographic location. Female youth face significant cultural and institutional barriers to education and employment. In many districts, girls' schools are either non-existent or poorly maintained, and societal norms often restrict women's mobility. According to UNICEF (2022), female literacy in some parts of Balochistan is as low as 15%, and female participation in the workforce is even lower. This gender exclusion limits the economic potential of nearly half the youth population.

Tribal affiliations also influence access to opportunities. In regions where tribal hierarchies dominate, political and economic resources are often concentrated among elite families. Youth belonging to marginalized tribes or lacking tribal patronage find it more difficult to access scholarships, jobs, or political platforms. As discussed by Yaqoob (2020), tribalism in Balochistan serves as both a safety net and

a barrier, depending on one's lineage and alignment with dominant power structures.

Geography further compounds inequalities. Remote districts with poor road connectivity, frequent conflict, and natural disasters (such as droughts or floods) face additional hardships. Youth in these areas are less likely to attend school, access healthcare, or participate in civic activities. These compounded layers of exclusion not only deprive young people of opportunities but also deepen their sense of isolation and disenfranchisement. As noted by Raza & Jamil (2021), addressing Balochistan's youth crisis requires an intersectional approach that accounts for gender, tribal, and spatial inequalities simultaneously.

Opportunity Deficits and Political Alienation

6.1. Perceived and Real Inequalities in Resource Access

Resource allocation in Balochistan has long been a source of contention between the province and the federal government. Despite its abundance of natural wealth—such as natural gas, copper, gold, and fisheries—Balochistan remains one of the poorest regions in Pakistan. The province contributes significantly to the national exchequer through the extraction of gas and minerals, yet local communities often lack access to basic amenities such as clean water, electricity, and health care (Ahmed & Shah, 2020). This disconnect between resource wealth and public welfare has created a deep sense of historical grievance.

The perception that Balochistan's resources are being exploited without fair compensation is widespread among the youth. Many believe that decisions about resource extraction and infrastructure development are made without local consultation or benefit-sharing. Projects like the Saindak copper-gold mine and the Reko Diq mining venture have been cited as examples where provincial interests were sidelined in favor of corporate or federal priorities (Siddiqui, 2019). These perceptions are not merely emotional—they are grounded in statistics. For instance, Pakistan Petroleum Limited has operated in Sui since the 1950s, yet the district remains underdeveloped and plagued with poverty.

This perceived resource injustice has fueled feelings of exclusion and has become central to the narratives propagated by nationalist and insurgent groups.

Baloch youth are increasingly aligning their identity with the call for "ownership over resources," which they view as essential for dignity and self-determination. Researchers such as Akhtar and Malik (2021) argue that the gap between resource control and local benefit is not just a developmental issue—it is a symbol of political domination and institutional neglect, reinforcing alienation.

6.2. Youth Perception of Govt Policies and Development Projects

Youth perception of Govt-led development initiatives in Balochistan is marked by skepticism, mistrust, and disappointment. Government programs aimed at infrastructure development or economic upliftment—such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—are often seen as externally driven, extractive, and non-inclusive. Although CPEC includes major projects in Balochistan, including the development of Gwadar Port, youth often perceive these efforts as benefiting outsiders rather than local communities (Baloch & Iqbal, 2020). The absence of clear employment quotas, transparency in project implementation, and local consultation further damages the credibility of such initiatives.

Youth voices are largely excluded from decision-making processes regarding development planning. Even where development packages are announced—such as the Balochistan Package in 2009 or recent federal-provincial agreements—their execution remains limited and inconsistent. According to Khan and Yousaf (2021), the lack of follow-through on policy commitments erodes the trust of the younger generation and reinforces the belief that the state uses development rhetoric to mask deeper issues of control and marginalization. Development is thus seen as a "public relations exercise" rather than a transformative effort.

Moreover, youth, particularly in southern districts like Kech and Gwadar, frequently report being treated with suspicion or hostility rather than as stakeholders in national progress (Raza & Jamil, 2022). This undermines the potential for development to serve as a bridge between the state and society and instead reinforces the gap between them.

6.3. Role of Tribal Structures, Informal Networks, and Social Exclusion

Tribalism remains a defining feature of Baloch society, particularly in rural and semi-urban regions. While tribal structures can serve as important mechanisms of social cohesion, they also contribute to inequality and exclusion, especially for youth outside dominant tribal lineages. Power and resources within tribal systems are often concentrated in the hands of a few sardars (chiefs), leaving ordinary youth with limited access to education, employment, or political platforms (Yaqoob, 2020). This imbalance restricts merit-based mobility and perpetuates social stratification.

Informal networks, including patronage systems and ethnic affiliations, often determine access to jobs, scholarships, and business opportunities. In areas where state institutions are weak or distrusted, these networks substitute as gatekeepers of opportunity. However, they are often opaque and discriminatory, favoring individuals connected to tribal elites or politically influential families (Jaffer & Khilji, 2020). This marginalization of unaffiliated youth—who may be well-educated or skilled—creates widespread frustration and a sense of social powerlessness.

For youth from marginalized tribes or mixed ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Baloch-Pashtun), exclusion is compounded by cultural and linguistic differences. These intersecting barriers not only limit access to formal opportunities but also foster feelings of identity crisis. Akhtar (2021) notes that this social exclusion often drives youth to alternative ideologies and groups—some of which offer a sense of community and purpose that formal institutions fail to provide. In this context, insurgent narratives find fertile ground among youth seeking recognition and belonging.

6.4. Alienation from Formal Political Processes and Institutions

Baloch youth have historically been alienated from formal political institutions in Pakistan, both at the provincial and national levels. Despite constitutional guarantees, genuine political participation remains limited. Mainstream political parties are often perceived as ineffective, corrupt, or co-opted by federal interests. The dominance of tribal or elite families within provincial politics further limits the

entry of youth into decision-making spaces (Shah, 2021). As a result, many young people see politics not as a pathway to change but as a domain of manipulation and betrayal.

Electoral processes in Balochistan are frequently marred by low turnout, allegations of rigging, and a lack of credible representation. According to FAFEN reports (2020), youth participation in elections across conflict-prone districts is significantly lower than the national average. This disengagement is not due to apathy but rather a reflection of political disillusionment. The frequent use of force to suppress dissent—such as during student protests or nationalist rallies—reinforces the notion that the state is unwilling to listen to or accommodate Baloch voices (Ali, 2022). In the absence of meaningful political engagement, many youths gravitate toward non-state actors, ideological groups, or remain completely detached from public life. This political alienation weakens democratic culture and fosters a dangerous vacuum where radical alternatives gain ground. Scholars such as Malik (2021) argue that without institutional reforms that promote youth inclusion, transparent governance, and electoral fairness, the cycle of exclusion and resistance in Balochistan will persist and deepen.

7. Discussion and Analysis

Youth and Insurgency: A Sociological Analysis

7.1. Patterns of Youth Recruitment into Insurgent Groups

The involvement of youth in insurgent movements in Balochistan is a phenomenon rooted in complex identity, social, economic, and political dynamics. Recruitment into insurgent groups is often driven by a combination of coercion, ideology, and necessity. Scholars like Baloch and Siddiqui (2021) note that youth are particularly vulnerable due to chronic unemployment, lack of govt engagement, and feelings of systemic exclusion. Many join insurgent groups not necessarily out of ideological conviction but because, a sense of identity.

Recruiters often target disillusioned youth through informal networks such as, local intermediaries, and student organizations. In several documented cases, insurgent operatives have approached students in universities, exploiting their frustration over political repression and economic marginalization (Rana,

2020). Recruits are then socialized into narratives of sacrifice, resistance, and revenge against perceived injustices by the state. This grooming process often replaces a young person's existing identity with one rooted in militancy and nationalism.

Family and community breakdown also contribute to vulnerability. In areas with prolonged conflict, young men who have lost relatives to enforced disappearances are more likely to join armed movements. Akhtar (2022) points out that in regions such as Awaran and Kech, whole families may quietly endorse insurgent activity out of resentment or fear. These patterns highlight how youth recruitment is not merely an individual decision, but a social process embedded in the structural violence of the region.

7.2. Role of Ideology, Identity, and Frustration

Ideology plays a significant role in reinforcing insurgent commitment among youth. In Balochistan, the ideology of Baloch nationalism—rooted in grievances over resource control, cultural identity, and political autonomy—provides a potent counter-narrative to the state's vision of national unity. Young people, in the absence of meaningful civic engagement, often find solace and purpose in the ideological promise of a liberated or autonomous Balochistan (Harrison, 2009). This belief is frequently reinforced through emotional appeals tied to historical injustices and symbolic struggles.

Frustration over unfulfilled aspirations—educational, economic, and social—deepens this ideological affinity. The gap between what youth is promised and what they experience in daily life leads to cognitive dissonance, which can turn into political anger or radical resistance. Gurr's theory of relative deprivation (1970) is particularly useful in this context; it suggests that when people perceive a discrepancy between expected and actual conditions, they are more likely to rebel. In Balochistan, many educated youths feel betrayed by the state, as degrees and qualifications rarely translate into jobs or respect. Cultural identity also plays a crucial role. For Baloch youth, participation in insurgency is often framed as a form of cultural defense. As Rafiq (2019) notes, the promotion of Baloch language, dress, music, and collective memory within nationalist movements gives recruits a sense of pride and belonging. This cultural affirmation, juxtaposed against perceived Punjabi

hegemony or federal dominance, helps convert personal frustration into collective ideological resistance.

7.3. Role of Digital and Social Media in Shaping Radical Thought

Digital and social media have transformed the landscape of insurgent communication and youth engagement in Balochistan. Platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram are now routinely used by insurgent groups to disseminate information and propaganda, celebrate martyrs, share news of “successful operations,” and coordinate logistics. This has created an alternative media ecosystem where Baloch youth—disillusioned by mainstream narratives—consume and reproduce content aligned with separatist ideologies (Khan & Khan, 2021).

The anonymity and accessibility of these platforms allow youth to engage with radical content without immediate risk. Insurgent groups post emotionally charged videos, images of human rights violations, and symbolic poetry that glamorizes the struggle and demonizes the state. These digital materials are often tailored to resonate with the lived experiences of young people in conflict zones. According to Raza and Jamil (2022), such content acts as a catalyst for radicalization by reinforcing victimhood, dehumanizing opponents, and romanticizing martyrdom.

However, the impact of social media is not one-sided. It also provides a platform for counter-narratives—voices advocating peace, dialogue, or non-violence. Yet, due to limited internet access and the digital divide in rural areas, radical voices often dominate the online discourse. Furthermore, the govt's tendency to shut down internet services during unrest (especially in Makran) has paradoxically fueled more mistrust and dependency on underground digital networks, limiting transparency and dialogue (Ali, 2023).

7.4. Narratives Used by Insurgent Groups to Attract Youth

Insurgent groups in Balochistan employ carefully crafted narratives that resonate deeply with youth grievances and cultural values. These narratives often begin with the theme of victimhood—highlighting incidents of enforced disappearances, military operations, or economic exploitation. Martyrdom is

glorified through songs, posters, and online tributes, positioning young fighters as heroes sacrificing for their land and people (Baloch, 2021). The frequent use of historical references to resistance against colonialism and the Pakistani state serves to legitimize current armed struggle as a continuation of a just and noble cause.

Another central narrative is the dichotomy between “us” and “them,” where “we” (the Baloch) are portrayed as brave, oppressed, and proud, while “they” (the state or security forces) are depicted as corrupt, violent, and colonial. This simplification of complex realities creates emotional appeal, especially among youth who have witnessed or experienced loss and trauma. As Malik (2020) notes, such black-and-white narratives serve to dehumanize the opponent, making violence seem justified and even necessary. Additionally, insurgent narratives increasingly incorporate contemporary themes such as self-determination, indigenous rights, and anti-extractive resistance. These globalized discourses are localized to appeal to educated Baloch youth who are connected to transnational ideas but feel isolated from national inclusion. Rafiq (2021) emphasizes that these evolving narratives are crucial to sustaining the insurgency, as they continuously adapt to the psychological and emotional needs of new generations of youth. Understanding and countering these narratives require not only security responses but also inclusive policies and cultural engagement.

A sociological analysis of the core research questions concerning youth, unemployment, and insurgency in Balochistan. Drawing on literature, field insights, and empirical trends, the findings reveal a complex interplay between socioeconomic deprivation and political disillusionment among Baloch youth. The lack of opportunities not only shapes attitudes and identities but also fuels radicalization and alternative allegiances. Youth perceptions of state interventions—whether developmental or security-driven—are deeply influenced by historical grievances, cultural dislocation, and the visible absence of inclusive governance. These findings collectively underscore that without structural reforms addressing opportunity deficits, the gap between the state and Baloch youth will continue to widen, undermining efforts toward peace and integration.

1. How does the lack of socioeconomic opportunities shape the attitudes, behaviors, and identities of Baloch youth?

The scarcity of socioeconomic opportunities—especially employment, education, and skill development—has a profound impact on how Baloch youth perceive themselves and the world around them. Many grow up in an environment marked by inequality, where their aspirations remain unfulfilled due to a lack of pathways for upward mobility. This fuels a sense of disenfranchisement, hopelessness, and exclusion. Attitudinally, youth become skeptical of state institutions and increasingly disillusioned with formal channels of advancement. Behaviorally, this may manifest in political disengagement, migration, drug abuse, or alignment with alternative networks—both benign and militant. Culturally and psychologically, the repeated experience of marginalization alters identity formation. Youth begin to define themselves not within a national framework, but in opposition to it. The dominant state narrative is viewed as alien or oppressive, while local and nationalist identities become more salient. Insurgent and ethno-nationalist groups often exploit this identity vacuum, offering meaning, pride, and direction. Therefore, opportunity deprivation does not only create economic hardship—it reconfigures identity and belonging in ways that can be deeply antagonistic to state integration.

2. To what extent do inequalities and neglect contribute to political radicalization among the younger population?

Inequalities—whether real or perceived—play a central role in political radicalization. In Balochistan, these include uneven resource distribution, ethnic discrimination, educational disparities, and lack of representation in federal institutions. Neglect is both infrastructural and emotional: underdevelopment of schools and hospitals exists alongside a perceived absence of state empathy or accountability. When youth experience this dual marginalization, the idea of systemic bias becomes embedded in their worldview, feeding into a cycle of mistrust and resentment. Political radicalization often begins not with ideology but with frustration. As Robert Gurr’s theory of relative deprivation suggests, the gap between expectations and reality fuels unrest. Baloch

youth, particularly those with education but no employment, feel betrayed by a system that promises development but delivers exclusion. Radical ideologies then find fertile ground, providing explanations for their suffering and offering a path—however destructive—for agency and resistance. Thus, inequality and neglect are not just background conditions; they are active catalysts of politicization and, in some cases, militancy.

3. What are the pathways through which opportunity deficits translate into support for or participation in insurgent activities?

Opportunity deficits act as enabling conditions that insurgent groups strategically exploit through several sociological pathways. First is the narrative pathway: insurgents frame lack of jobs, poor education, and state neglect as deliberate acts of suppression by a Punjabi-dominated federal system. These narratives resonate with youth who experience daily hardship, creating a shared sense of injustice. Second is the identity and recognition pathway, whereby youth seek dignity, purpose, and community in spaces that valorize resistance. Insurgent groups promise not only income but honor, history, and belonging. This is particularly attractive to marginalized youth whose personal ambitions have been thwarted. In conflict zones, where state institutions are weak or repressive, insurgents fill the governance void—offering dispute resolution, social services, or protection. As such, opportunity deficits create a vacuum, and insurgent actors are often the only visible players offering an alternative path.

4. How do youth perceive the Govt's development and counterinsurgency efforts?

Youth perceptions of Govt efforts in Balochistan are shaped by skepticism, historical trauma, and ongoing exclusion. Development projects—such as Gwadar Port, CPEC routes, or job quotas—are often seen as benefiting outsiders or the military-industrial complex rather than local communities. Even well-funded schemes fail to gain trust due to lack of consultation, transparency, or equitable implementation. For many youths, development appears extractive rather than empowering, reinforcing their belief that the state is indifferent to their welfare. Counterinsurgency efforts, particularly those involving heavy-handed security operations, deepen these negative

perceptions. The widespread use of force, allegations of enforced disappearances, and internet shutdowns create an atmosphere of fear and surveillance rather than peacebuilding. Youth often conflate development with securitization, seeing projects as instruments of control rather than progress. This perception gap severely limits the state's ability to win hearts and minds, especially in districts like Kech and Awaran, where militarization has displaced governance. Therefore, without trust-building, development and security measures risk being counterproductive.

Govt Responses and Gaps in Policy

8.1. Government Employment and Youth Development Schemes

Over the past two decades, both federal and provincial governments have introduced various employment and youth development schemes aimed at addressing youth marginalization in Balochistan. These include programs like the Prime Minister's Youth Loan Scheme, Internship Programs, and Youth Skills Development Initiatives. While these initiatives have had some success nationally, their reach and impact in Balochistan have remained limited due to administrative inefficiencies and regional disparities (Kakar & Khan, 2020). Local youth often complain that such programs are urban-centric and fail to reach remote districts.

One of the central issues is the lack of transparency and merit in the recruitment and implementation process. Development funds and job quotas meant for Balochistan frequently fall victim to corruption or are diverted toward politically favored regions. A report by the National Commission for Human Rights (2021) revealed that youth in southern Balochistan districts like Kech, Gwadar, and Awaran rarely benefit from such schemes. This results in deepened frustration, as educated but unemployed youth perceive these initiatives as symbolic rather than substantive.

Furthermore, youth development policies often lack continuity and long-term planning. When new political governments take office, existing programs are discontinued or reshaped without assessing their impact. Researchers such as Yousaf and Nazir (2022) argue that without localized ownership, feedback loops, and equitable targeting, youth policies in

Balochistan will continue to underperform and remain irrelevant to those they are designed to help.

8.2. Analysis of Security-First Approach vs Development Approach

The gov't's response to unrest and insurgency in Balochistan has historically followed a security-first model, wherein military presence and surveillance take precedence over inclusive governance and development. While this approach has led to temporary stabilization in some areas, it has also entrenched resentment among local populations, particularly the youth. Scholars such as Akhtar (2020) argue that militarizing civilian spaces erodes the possibility of social cohesion and deepens the perception of Balochistan as a colony rather than a federating unit.

This heavy reliance on coercion undermines the gov't's own developmental efforts. For instance, even where infrastructure projects are initiated—such as under CPEC—their association with security zones and army-controlled contractors makes local youth suspicious of their real motives. Many perceive such initiatives as extractive, meant to benefit the center or external actors, rather than as genuine tools for provincial uplift (Raza & Jamil, 2021). In doing so, the gov't unintentionally delegitimizes its own development discourse.

By contrast, a development-first approach—centered on education, employment, and inclusive governance—has been sporadic and weakly institutionalized. Policy analysts like Farooq and Baloch (2019) suggest that unless the state shifts its priority toward human development and local empowerment, security measures alone cannot resolve underlying grievances. A durable peace in Balochistan requires a deliberate transition from militarized control to participatory development.

8.3. Education Policy Failures and Technical/Vocational Gaps

Education policies in Balochistan have consistently failed to meet the demands of its growing youth population. Public schooling remains underfunded, poorly managed, and deeply unequal, especially in rural and conflict-hit areas. According to the Pakistan Education Statistics Report (2022), over 40% of children in Balochistan are out of school, with youth

literacy rates far below the national average. The lack of trained teachers, outdated curricula, and absent infrastructure further limits the quality of learning, especially at secondary and post-secondary levels.

Vocational and technical education—which could offer a practical pathway to employment—has also been neglected. NAVTTC and TEVTA programs are available in urban centers like Quetta but are largely inaccessible in southern and western districts. The few institutions that do exist often lack modern equipment, industry linkages, or job placement mechanisms. As a result, many youth complete technical programs without acquiring marketable skills (Iqbal & Shahid, 2021). This mismatch between training and labor market needs results in disillusionment, as education fails to deliver economic mobility.

Moreover, education planning has not been integrated with conflict-sensitivity or regional context. For instance, local languages and cultural perspectives are often absent in curricula, and there is limited engagement with local communities in education reform. As Jaffer (2020) notes, this failure to localize and modernize education contributes not only to unemployment but also to the broader narrative of cultural alienation and systemic neglect.

8.4. Lack of Trust in State-Led Development Initiatives

One of the most persistent obstacles to state-led development in Balochistan is the **crisis of trust** between Baloch and government institutions. Many development programs, even when well-intentioned, are met with suspicion due to the history of broken promises, exploitative policies, and lack of transparency. According to a **PILDAT survey (2021)**, trust in provincial and federal institutions among Baloch youth is among the lowest in the country. This lack of credibility severely undermines development outcomes.

Several high-profile projects have contributed to this skepticism. The development of Gwadar Port, for example, has been criticized for failing to benefit local communities in terms of employment, education, or housing. Despite international visibility, local youth often view Gwadar as a symbol of occupation rather than opportunity (Baloch & Khilji, 2021). Similar sentiments have been echoed regarding mining

operations in Saindak and Reko Diq, where profits are seen to leave the province while local populations remain impoverished.

Development programs are also frequently associated with militarization. The presence of security forces around project sites, restrictions on movement, and limited community consultation reinforce the image of top-down imposition rather than inclusive planning. Researchers such as Malik (2022) suggest that restoring trust requires decentralizing development, ensuring local participation in decision-making, and demonstrating tangible benefits in the daily lives of Baloch youth.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Conclusion

The study reveals that the youth crisis in Balochistan is not merely a challenge of unemployment or poor education, but a broader sociopolitical issue rooted in marginalization, identity alienation, and broken trust between the state and society. Baloch youth, who represent the province's largest demographic, remain structurally excluded from economic opportunities, political representation, and meaningful participation in national development. The repeated failure of state-led initiatives—whether developmental or security-based—to address the core grievances of the youth has created a vacuum increasingly filled by insurgent narratives that offer identity, purpose, and resistance. The intersection of socioeconomic deprivation, weak institutional presence, and cultural neglect continues to fuel youth disillusionment, making peace fragile and development exclusionary.

A sustainable solution demands a shift from reactive, security-first measures to inclusive, participatory governance and long-term social investment. Addressing opportunity deficits requires not only job creation but also the restoration of dignity, representation, and belonging. Empowering Baloch youth through targeted policies that are locally rooted and transparently implemented can reverse the cycle of alienation and insurgency. While the conflict in Balochistan is complex, investing in its youth is the most direct and meaningful path toward peace, social harmony, and national integration.

Recommendations

1. Vocational Training and Entrepreneurship Programs

The government must establish well-funded, district-level technical and vocational training centers aligned with local market demands (e.g., fisheries, mining, border trade, tourism). Public-private partnerships should be encouraged to support youth entrepreneurship through micro-finance, business incubation, and skills mentoring. Priority should be given to women, youth from rural areas, and conflict zones.

2. Youth Political Inclusion and Civic Engagement

Introduce youth quotas in local government, advisory boards, and peace committees. Baloch youth must be engaged in policy formulation through regular consultations, leadership workshops, and democratic education. Revival of student unions and civic forums in colleges and universities should be supported to create responsible, politically aware citizens.

3. Social Integration and Deradicalization Efforts

Design community-based deradicalization programs focused on psychological counseling, skill-building, sports, and arts. Former insurgents or at-risk youth should be rehabilitated through inclusive reintegration schemes rather than punitive measures. Cultural initiatives that celebrate Baloch identity within the national framework can promote positive self-recognition and reduce identity-based alienation.

4. Reform in Education-Employment Pipeline

There is a need to overhaul the education system to ensure it equips students with employable skills. Curriculum reforms must integrate vocational education, peace studies, and digital literacy. Strengthening the linkage between technical education institutions and industry is essential. Local recruitment in government jobs and development projects should be monitored through independent oversight.

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