

POLICY BRIEF: Youth and Population Dynamics in Botswana



INTRODUCTION

The ongoing review of Botswana's National Youth Policy (BNYP-2010) and Revised National Population Policy (RNPP-2010) offers a key chance to evaluate progress on population and development challenges, while aligning policies with Vision 2036 and the Botswana Economic Transformation Programme (BETP).

The review of BNYP-2010 and RNPP 2010 goes beyond assessing past achievements and gaps, it ensures that the revised policies will address emerging global, regional, and national trends shaping Botswana's future. Central to this process is the role of youth, who make up the largest share of Botswana's population. Youth are directly impacted by policies on education, health, employment, gender equality, and governance. Their meaningful participation is crucial to crafting inclusive and forward-looking policies that reflect their realities and aspirations.

Engaging youth in policy review is both essential and strategic. It helps identify emerging issues and priority actions, advancing Botswana's development goals. Youth-centered population policies are vital to unlocking the demographic dividend and achieving Vision 2036.

OBJECTIVE:

The main objective of this policy brief is to guide youth engagement in the national policy processes by collating the relevant evidence and analyses on youth and population dynamics.

HIGHLIGHTS

- In 2022, Botswana's youth population (ages 15–35) was about 830,000 people i.e. 35.2% of the total population.
- Right now, almost 2 out of every 5 young people are unemployed
- Most of the unemployed young people have completed secondary education only, and they constitute 68.7% of all unemployed youth.
- Over half of the youth (58%) say they don't have practical skills or qualifications that employers are looking for, or that they can use to create their own income
- Botswana's narrowing demographic dividend window means the time to act is now.
- Over 4 in 10 young people (41.3%) are currently Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET).
- Prevalence of sexual violence before the age of 18 is higher for females at 9.8 percent as compared to that of males at 5.5 percent.
- One quarter of the new HIV infections are among adolescent girls and young women.
- Botswana has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, with 19 out of every 100,000 people affected (UNICEF, 2022), and the rate is especially high among young men

METHODOLOGY

The development of this policy brief adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining both desk-based research and youth participation.

First, important documents such as the Botswana National Youth Policy (2010), the Revised National Population Policy (2011), and reports on the demographic dividend. We also looked at studies and reports from organizations like UNFPA, SAT, UNDP, UNICEF, and UN Women, plus national strategies, evaluations, and academic research were reviewed.

Second, relevant information from Statistics Botswana, government reports, and international databases was gathered. This gave us numbers and evidence to understand youth issues better.

Third, youth population indicators and demographic trends were analyzed using the reviewed documents and secondary data sources such as Population and Housing Census (2022) Botswana Multi Topic Surveys, Botswana AIDS Impact Surveys.

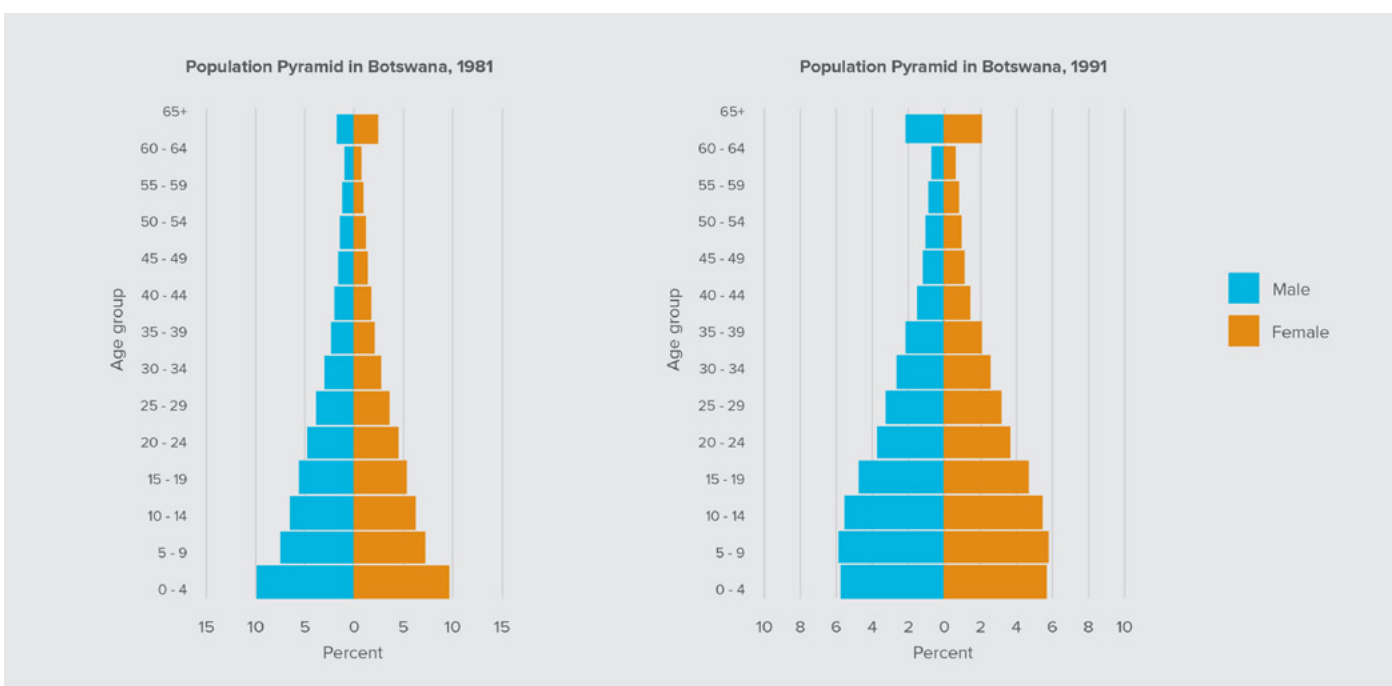
Lastly, youth-led community dialogues where young people shared their views, challenges, and ideas were held. These conversations were captured in notes and recordings, which we analysed to bring out youth priorities, concerns, and recommendations for the future. Including youth ensured that their voices would be integrated into the policy review processes, aligning with the principle of inclusive participation.

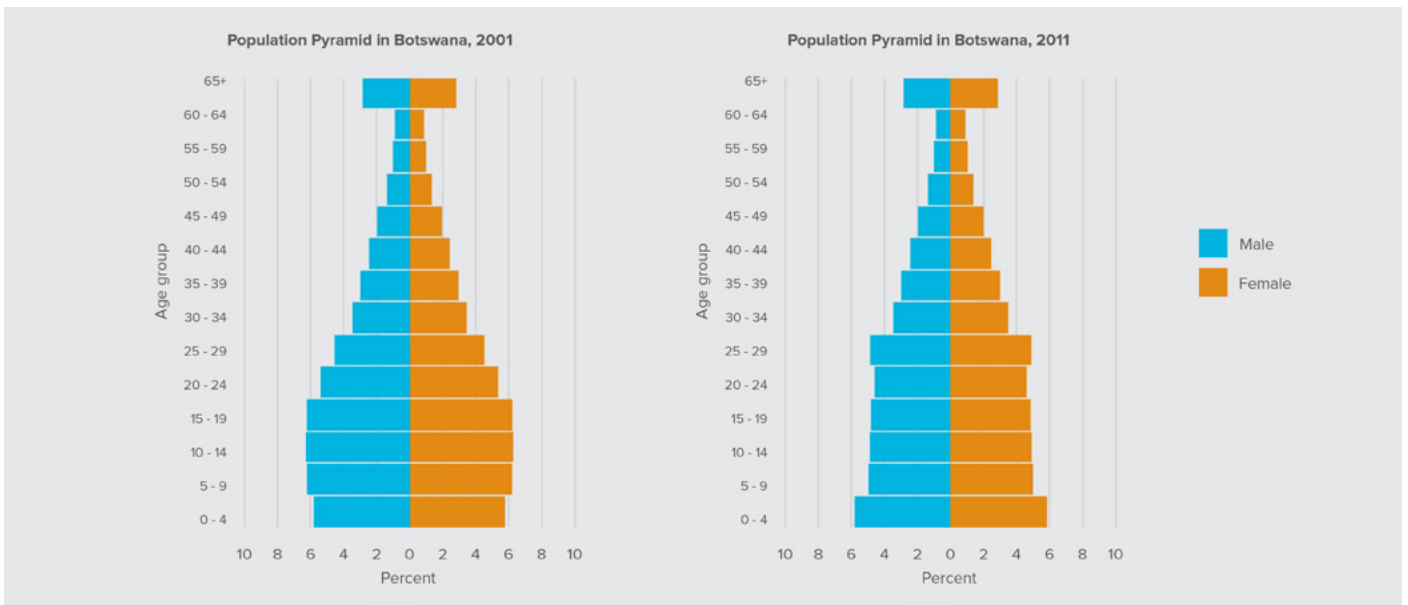
THE CHANGING POPULATION AGE STRUCTURE

Over the years, Botswana's population has been changing because both birth and death rates have gone down. This shift means that most of the population is now young. If you look at the population pyramids from 1981 to 2011, there is a big “bulge” in the middle—showing that young people make up the largest share of the population.

This change has big implications for the country's future. On one hand, having many young, educated people is a huge opportunity to drive economic growth, innovation, and wealth creation. On the other hand, many young people are still left out when it comes to key opportunities like jobs, land, and resources.

Figure 1: Botswana's population pyramid 1981-2011





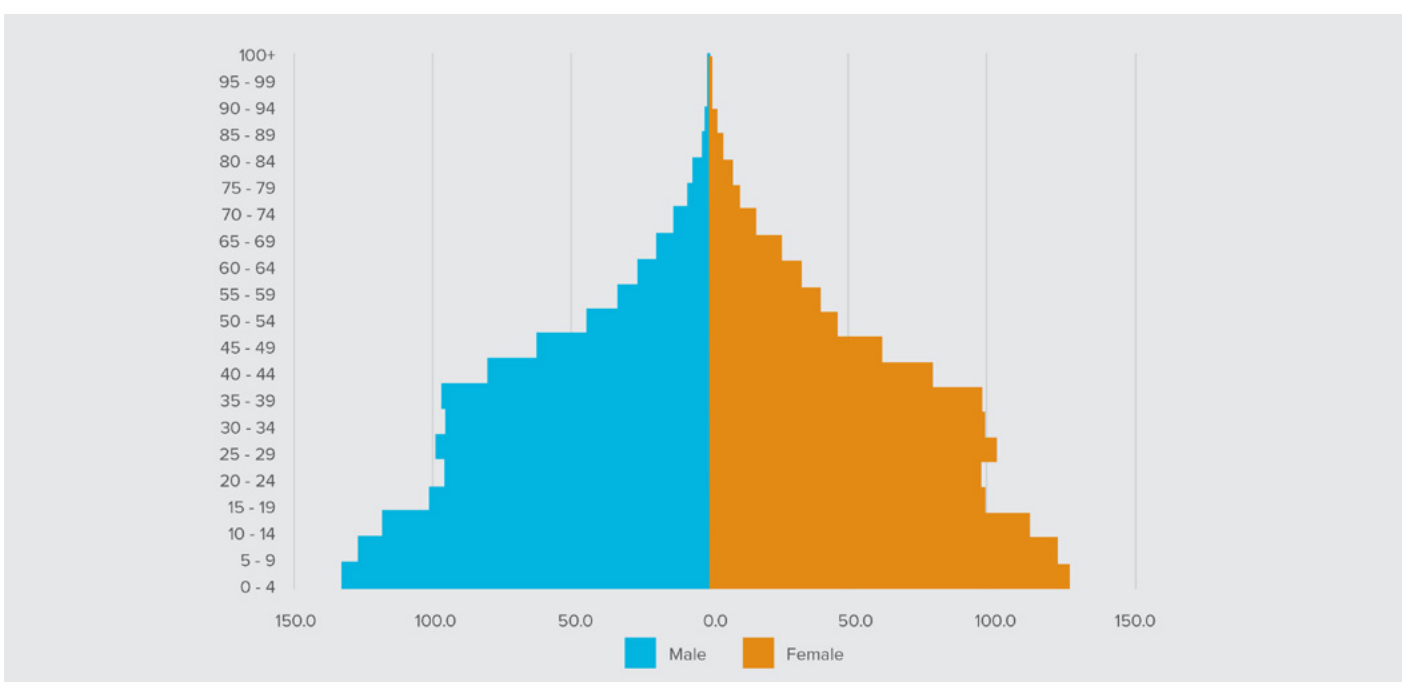
Source: Computed from Botswana Population and Housing Censuses, 1981-2011

CURRENT YOUTH POPULATION

In 2022, Botswana's youth population (ages 15–35) was approximately 830,000 and is projected to grow by 1.3% annually, reaching 1.1 million by 2040 and peaking at just over 1.15 million in the mid-2060s before declining (Statistics Botswana, 2024). Despite this increase, the youth share of the total population has decreased from over 40% in the early 2000s to 35.4% in 2022, with an expected drop to around 31% by the mid-2060s. The 15–24 age group also declined from 22.5% in the early 2000s to 16.7% in 2022 and is projected to fall below 14% by the late 2060s (Statistics Botswana, 2024).

What does this mean? It means that right now is the best time to invest in young people, through education, skills, jobs, and opportunities. If we act while youth numbers are still high, Botswana can benefit from the demographic dividend and build a stronger, more prosperous future.

Figure 2: Botswana's youth bulge, 2022 Population & Housing Census



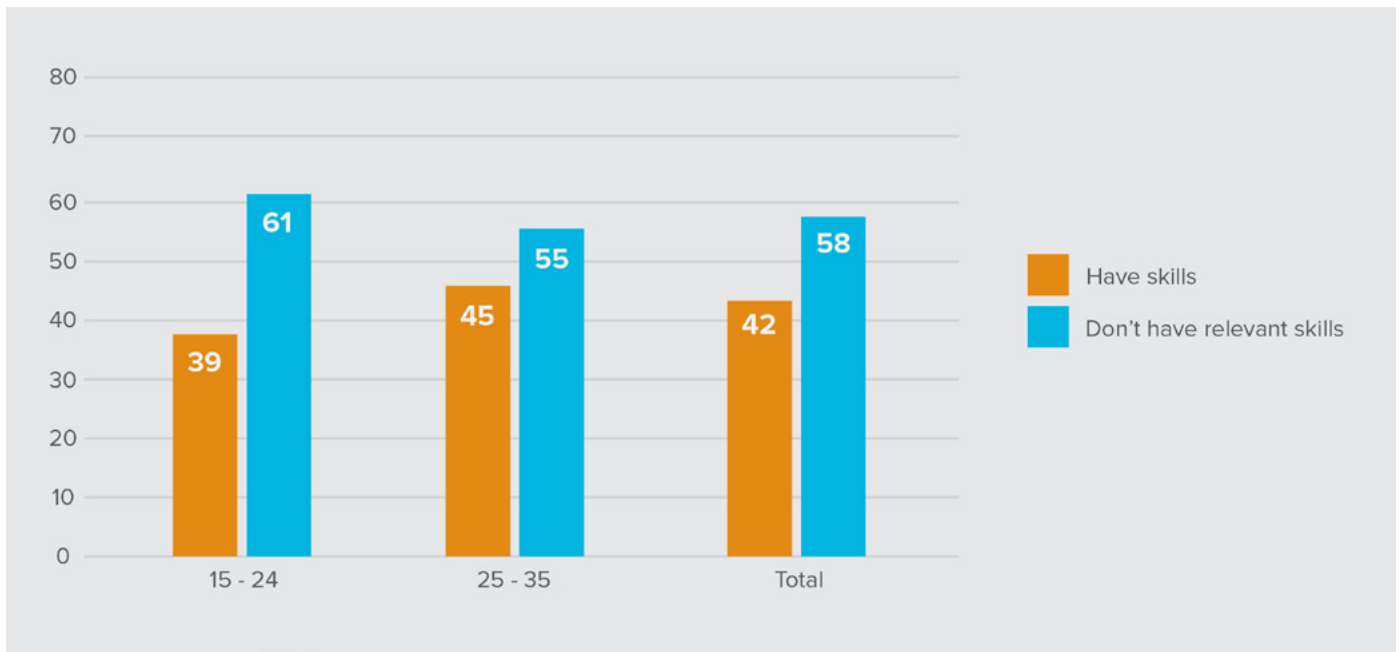
Source: Statistics Botswana, 2022

SKILLS MISMATCH AND LABOUR MARKET NEEDS

Botswana's working-age population is growing faster than the number of children who depend on them. This creates a big chance for the country to grow faster and enjoy the demographic dividend, i.e. when more people are working and contributing to the economy.

But this opportunity is not being fully used. Jobs are not being created fast enough to match the large number of young people entering the labour market. Right now, almost 2 out of every 5 young people are unemployed, showing just how serious the challenge is. That's why tackling youth unemployment is one of the most urgent priorities for Botswana's future.

Figure 3: Possession of relevant skills among youth by age group (%)



Source: Computed from voice of the youth survey data

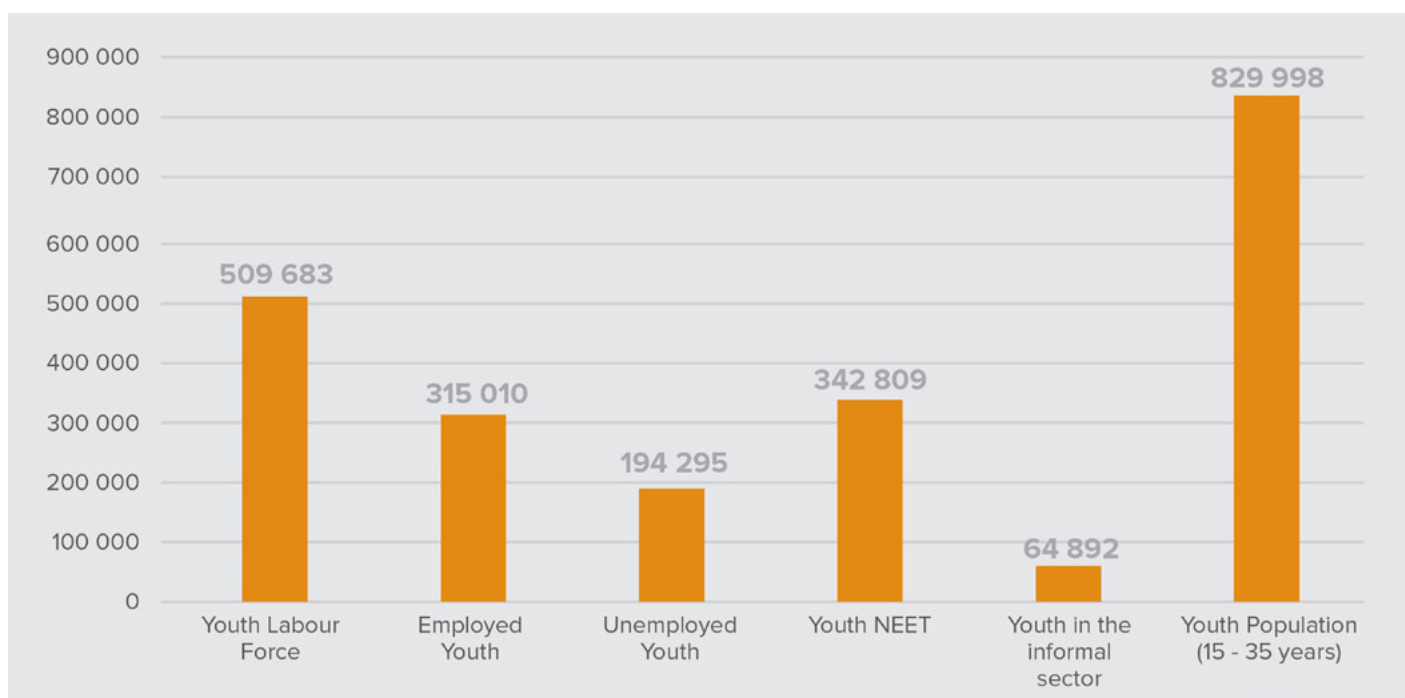
One of the main reasons many young people in Botswana struggle to find jobs is the mismatch between education and the needs of the job market. Over half of the youth (58%) say they don't have practical skills or qualifications that employers are looking for, or that they can use to create their own income (Figure 3). Among the 15–24 age group, this figure is even higher (61%) showing that our education system is still not fully preparing young people for the world of work.

Many young people also face challenges in school. Secondary education often falls short, with high dropout rates and poor results that make it harder to move on to university. Vocational training, which could provide practical skills, also faces problems: slow approval of new courses, low enrolment, not enough qualified trainers, and negative perceptions that make it less attractive.

All these gaps make it harder for young people to get the skills needed for good jobs and sustainable livelihoods. The good news is that the government is working to improve the quality of vocational training, which is expected to make a real difference in the future.

Internship placement opportunities proved insufficient to meet demand, with a long waiting list and a mismatch between youth qualifications and the requirements of available internship vacancies.

Figure 4: Number of youths in labor force participation, NEET and employment, 2024



Source: UNDP, 2024

Figure 3 shows that out of Botswana's 829,998 youth (ages 15–35), only 315,010 of the 509,683 eligible for work are actually employed. At the same time, about 342,809 youth are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET). This means that over 4 in 10 young people (41.3%) are currently not engaged in anything productive. The 2024 NEET rate stood at 41.3% overall. Breaking it down, the rate was 40.6% for young men and slightly higher at 42.0% for young women (Table 1). The challenge is even bigger among certain age groups:

- 18–19-year-olds had the highest NEET rate at 52.9%.
- 20–24-year-olds followed at 47.2%.
- 25–29-year-olds were at 44.0%.

These numbers show that a large share of Botswana's youth is being left behind, and tackling the NEET challenge is critical for building a brighter future.

Table 1: NEET rate by Age Group and Sex

NEET Rate (%)			
Age group	Male	Female	Total
15 -17	24.5	18.6	21.6
18 -19	56.3	49	52.9
20 - 24	46.3	48.1	47.2
25 - 29	41.7	46.2	44
30 - 34	39.1	44.2	41.8
35 years	32.6	42.1	37.3
Total	40.6	42	41.3

Source: UNDP, 2024

The youth NEET rate is higher among young women, and consistently highest among young people in urban villages

(Statistics Botswana, 2024)

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Unemployment remains one of the biggest challenges facing young people in Botswana. Among youth aged 15–35, the unemployment rate was 38% in 2024, up from 34% in 2022. This rise shows that the problem is getting worse and continues to directly affect a large share of the working-age population.

There's also a clear gap between younger youth (15–24) and older youth (25–35) when it comes to joblessness. At its highest point in 2020, the difference in unemployment rates between these two groups was 14.2 percentage points.

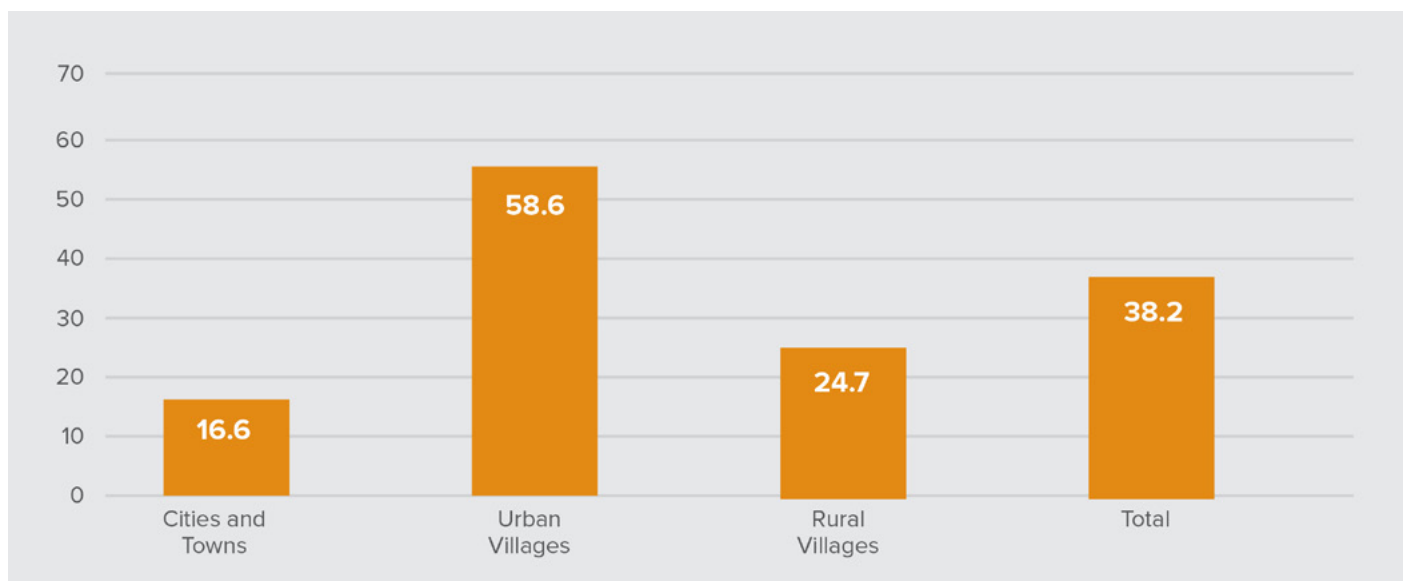
Females recorded unemployment rate of 39.3 percent compared to the 37.2 percent recorded by their male counterparts.

(UNDP, 2024)

In 2024, unemployment was highest among the youngest age group (15–17 years), with a shocking 76.7% jobless rate (Statistics Botswana, 2024). For those aged 18–19, unemployment was 56.3%, while the 20–24 group recorded 44.9%.

Looking at education, most of the unemployed young people had only finished secondary school, making up 68.7% of all unemployed. Surprisingly, even university graduates were not spared, as they accounted for 13.8% of unemployed youth. These numbers show that unemployment is hitting hard across all levels, but especially among young people with just secondary education, highlighting the urgent need for better skills training, job creation, and opportunities for all young people.

Figure 4: Number of youths in labor force participation, NEET and employment, 2024



Source: Statistics Botswana, 2024

Unemployment among young people is highest in urban villages (58.6%), followed by rural areas (24.7%) and then cities and towns (16.6%) (Figure 4). Youth with secondary school or TVET qualifications face higher unemployment compared to those with university or higher education. A big part of this comes from students who drop out during or after junior secondary school and are not able to find jobs.

Another challenge is that many young people have negative perceptions about certain types of work, especially in fields like agriculture, manufacturing, plumbing, and carpentry.

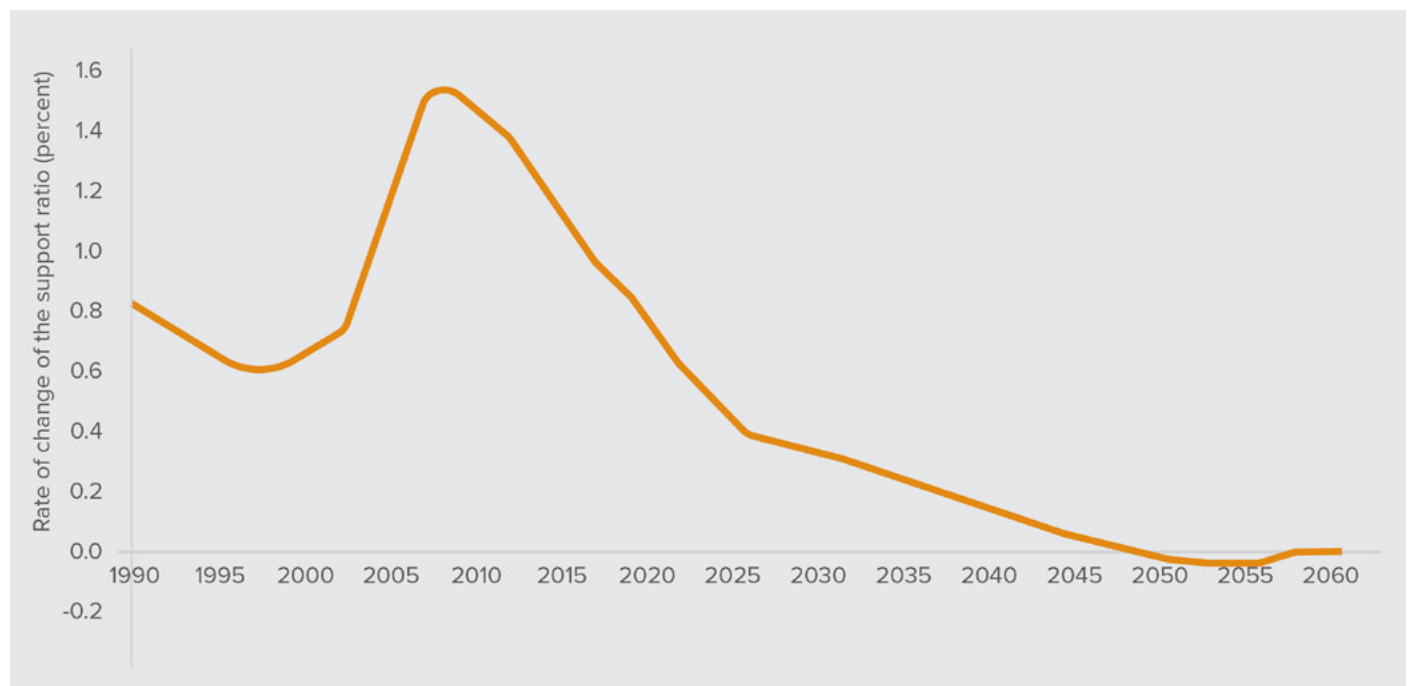
At the same time, Botswana's economy is not creating enough jobs fast enough, the country adds about 35,000 new job seekers every year, but the pace of economic diversification is too slow to absorb them all (UNICEF, 2022).

This means that tackling unemployment will require not only creating more opportunities but also changing mindsets about the value of technical and vocational work, which can be a powerful path to success.

HARNESSING THE DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND

Botswana's sizable working-age population offers a key opportunity to leverage the demographic dividend and fast-track its long-term development, if strategic investments are made.

Figure 5: Botswana's Demographic Dividend (UN medium fertility scenario)



Source: Botswana Demographic Dividend Report, 2018

By 1990, Botswana had already started benefiting from its first demographic dividend (DD) (Botswana Demographic Dividend Report, 2018). However, this opportunity peaked in 2008 and has been narrowing since then (UNDP, 2024). After 2008, the benefits of the first demographic dividend started to decline. Projections show it dropped to 0.7% in 2020, and will drop to 0.3% in 2030, and just 0.1% by 2040 (Figure 5).

The First Demographic Dividend happens when there are more working-age people compared to children who depend on them. This creates a short-term boost to the economy because more people can work and contribute.

The Second Demographic Dividend is about the long-term benefits. It comes from investing in education and skills, saving and investing money, and living healthier, longer lives, allowing people to work longer and contribute more over time.

In simple terms, Botswana's chance to fully benefit from this first demographic window is closing, making it urgent to invest in youth skills, jobs, and opportunities now, before the window closes completely.

The DD can last between 20-50 years, and its magnitude is dependent on the level of investments in human capital to increase productivity, creation of jobs, and an environment that encourages investments and savings.

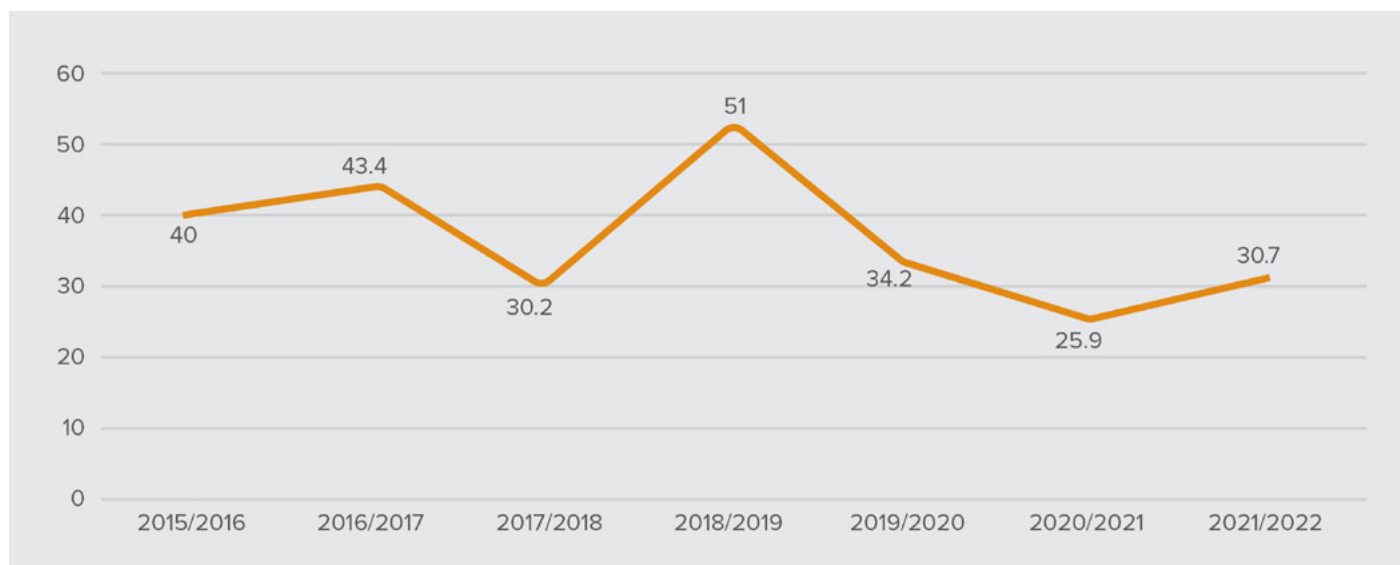
Maximizing the remaining potential requires strategic investments in young people's education, skills development, health, and productivity. Without such investment, high youth dependency and reliance on mineral revenues will continue to strain the economy and limit sustainable growth.

Botswana's narrowing demographic dividend window means the time to act is now.

EDUCATION

Botswana's education system is supported by strong laws and policies, including the Education Act, Children's Act, Revised Education Policy, and the General Education Curriculum and Assessment Framework (2021) (Government of Botswana, 2023). However, the quality of public education still needs improvement. Many young people who finish junior secondary school do not move on to senior secondary school, which limits their opportunities for further learning and future jobs (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Transition rates from secondary to tertiary education



Source: Computed from Human Resource Development Council Tertiary Education Statistics 2022.

About half of the boys and one third of the girls do not move to senior secondary EDUCATION.

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We need a major overhaul of the Youth Development Fund (YDF). Instead of just supporting general entrepreneurship, it should focus on funding actual industry productions. There also needs to be strong, practical training in high-potential areas like agriculture and digital fields.

(Youth Activists Dialogue)

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Around 38% of young people in Botswana have completed upper secondary school, while 41% have only lower secondary, primary, or no education (Figure 7). This means a large group of youth lack the education and skills needed for many jobs and may face challenges in the labour market. The situation is even more serious for younger youth (ages 15–25), where 46% have only lower secondary education or less.

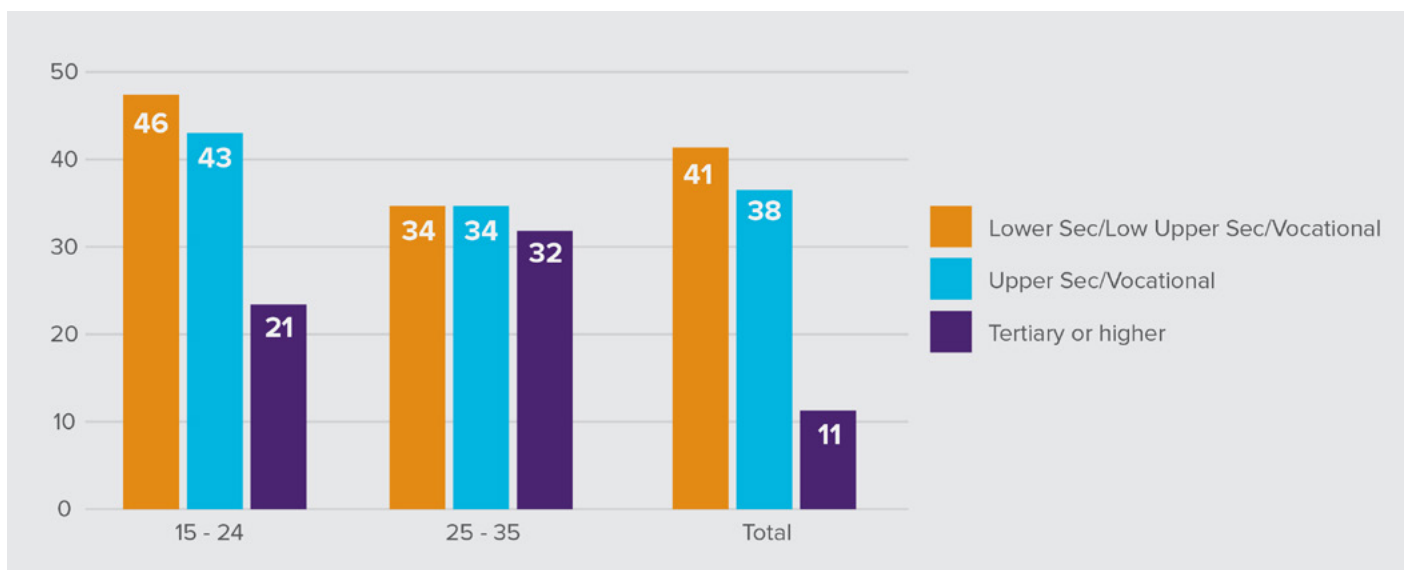
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We feel there's too much theory in our education. We think schools should start teaching vocational skills and soft skills like communication and problem-solving right from primary level. Instead of just traditional exams, we want assessments that consider different types of intelligence. Also, internships should be redesigned so we can work part-time while still learning.

(In-School Youth dialogue, Gaborone)

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Figure 7: Highest completed education – total and by age groups (%), N=1303



Source: Computed from voice of the youth survey data, 2024.

Young Botswana more educated, less employed, less politically engaged than their elders.

ADOLESCENT HEALTH

Many adolescents and young people in Botswana are negatively affected by early sexual experiences. Some start sexual activity before age 13, and 22% of adolescents report that their first sexual experience was forced before age 15.

The adolescent birth rate is 43.7 births per 1,000 girls (World Bank, 2021), and maternal health remains a serious concern. Around 1 in 12 maternal deaths (8%) happen among girls aged 15–19 (UNICEF, 2024).

One quarter of the new HIV infections are among adolescent girls and young women.

Many adolescents and young people in Botswana are at risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. Nationwide, HIV prevalence is 14.1%, but it is higher among youth: 27% for females and 16% for males (Statistics Botswana, 2022).

Young women (15–24) are particularly affected, with one in four new HIV infections occurring among adolescent girls and young women (AGYW). Data also shows that HIV treatment adherence is low among 15–24-year-olds, meaning many are not consistently taking their antiretroviral medications (NAHPA, 2020).

Prevalence of sexual violence before the age of 18 is higher for females at 9.8 percent as compared to that of males at 5.5 percent.

Young people in Botswana face different forms of violence, i.e. physical, sexual, and psychological at home, in schools, and in their communities. Rates of rape and forced sex are also high, especially among adolescents aged 15 and below, with 25% reporting forced sexual experiences (Statistics Botswana, 2019).

On average, 28.4% of girls and 43% of boys experience physical violence before turning 18.
(NAHPA, 2022)

Another growing concern is overweight and obesity, which are not sufficiently addressed in national policies. Many young people consume too much high-fat, high-sugar, and salty foods and drinks (HFSS), putting their long-term health at risk.

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Cultural norms and parents feeling uncomfortable with SRHR education are a big problem. Because of that, most young people end up getting their information from friends or the internet. We think there should be early interventions like training for parents and health services in places where youth gather. For mental health, community workshops could help remove the stigma around asking for help.

(Youth Activists Dialogue)

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MENTAL HEALTH

Many adolescents and young people in Botswana use alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, which can lead to risky situations and harmful behaviours. At the same time, mental health services are limited and often not youth-friendly, making it hard for young people to get the support they need. As a result, issues like depression, chronic pain, substance abuse, and other mental health challenges are common among youth.

Botswana has one of the highest suicide rates in the world at 19 100,000 people

Botswana has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, with 19 out of every 100,000 people affected (UNICEF, 2022), and the rate is especially high among young men. As a result, there is an urgent need to train more healthcare workers to provide youth-friendly mental health and psychosocial support services, so young people can get the help they need before it's too late.

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We face real, structural barriers. There's a lack of money for job hunting, widespread corruption and nepotism, and a big gap in information and knowledge about opportunities. Unemployment affects our mental health deeply and pushes some of us into risky survival behaviors, like sex work.

(NEET Youth dialogue, Takatokwane)

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enhance the education system to align with labour market needs by upgrading TVET, promoting STEM and digital skills, and improving school-to-work transition pathways.
- Expand job creation and entrepreneurship opportunities, strengthen private sector involvement, and target support to young women and urban village youth while promoting positive perceptions of vocational and technical careers.
- Invest in youth education, health, and skills, promote entrepreneurship and financial literacy, and align strategies with Vision 2036 to fully leverage Botswana's demographic dividend for sustainable growth.
- Expand youth-friendly health services, strengthen reproductive and mental health support, and address adolescent pregnancies, substance abuse, and obesity to improve overall youth wellbeing.
- Institutionalize meaningful youth participation in policymaking by supporting youth-led dialogues, strengthening youth organizations, and ensuring their active role in policy processes.

CONCLUSION

Botswana's government is working to overcome youth challenges through Vision 2036 and the Botswana Economic Transformation Programme (BETP), targeting a 42% skilled workforce and reducing unemployment to 5%. Active labor market programs aimed to equip youth with skills for jobs and entrepreneurship, while political commitment supporting shifting to a knowledge-based economy are need strengthening. However, the main challenge remains ensuring investments effectively support young people's smooth transition from education to sustainable employment. Engaging youth in policy revision can help tailor strategies to bridge this gap, maximizing Botswana's demographic dividend and boosting labor force participation.

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