

Demographic Shifts in Algeria: from High Growth to Structural Strain

Sabeur Chouiref Mokhtaria

University of Oran2 (Algeria), Laboratory for LMEDE,
sabeurchouiref.mokhtaria@univ-oran2.dz

Received: 05-08-2025 Accepted: 10-10-2025 Published: 01-12-2025

Abstract:

This study examines Algeria's demographic transformation from 1961 to 2024 using official statistics, academic research, and policy analysis. It reveals a major demographic shift: fertility dropped from 8.4 children per woman in 1970 to 2.8 in 2024, and life expectancy rose to nearly 80 years. While the working-age population represents 66%, Algeria has not fully benefited due to high youth unemployment and labor market barriers. Aging is accelerating, with 7% of the population now over 65. Marriage rates are falling, and divorce rates are rising, reflecting deep social changes. Urbanization driven by internal migration has strained infrastructure, while international emigration of skilled youth fuels a growing brain drain. The lack of reliable migration data hampers policymaking. The study calls for integrated reforms: improve reproductive health, reform pension and healthcare systems, boost employment especially for women and youth and create a National Migration Observatory to support evidence-based, inclusive demographic planning.

Keywords: Demographic transition, fertility, labor market challenges, migration, population aging

I. Introduction

At the 1984 World Population Conference in Mexico, Algeria declared that “the demographic issue constitutes the main cause of underdevelopment.” This stance had already been articulated in the general report of the 1980 Five-Year Plan, which stated that “active efforts to reduce birth rates have become essential to improving the

efficiency of our economic development and to sustainably and satisfactorily meeting the population's social needs." In response, a demographic policy was adopted with the goal of reducing the population growth rate from 3% to 2% by the year 2000. A national family planning program was progressively implemented through a growing number of maternal and child health centres, aiming to reduce what was then considered an excessively high fertility rate. Since then, population growth control has been treated as a key national economic objective.

This strategy was largely inspired by international programs and recommendations, later adapted to Algeria's specific context. In 1989, a cooperation agreement with the UNFPA. The primary donor was established to support the National Population Growth Control Program (PNMCD). Key goals included increasing contraceptive prevalence and raising public awareness about the risks that rapid population growth poses to individual, familial, and societal stability.

The Algerian government expressed its commitment to expanding access to various contraceptive methods, with the aim of doubling the usage rate. The program emphasized the development of service infrastructure, along with public education and awareness campaigns, all within a voluntary framework that respects individual freedom of choice and avoids coercive measures.

As a result, by 1986, the natural population growth rate fell below 3% for the first time since independence. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) also dropped to 5.42 children per woman, down from nearly 8 in 1970.

This study seeks to address the following core question: What are the recent demographic trends in Algeria?

The adopted methodology is structured around two main components:

- Data collection methods
- A descriptive and analytical assessment based on official statistics from the National Office of Statistics (ONS).

II. Literature Review:

a) **Flici, Farid & Hammouda, N.-E: *Mortality Evolution in Algeria: What Can We Learn About Data Quality?***

The authors analyze mortality trends in Algeria from 1977 to 2015, focusing on the reliability and coverage of statistical data. They demonstrate that, despite significant improvements in public health, data quality remains uneven, particularly in rural areas. The study confirms the ongoing decline in general and infant mortality rates while emphasizing the growing challenges associated with demographic aging. This work is essential to understanding the methodological basis underpinning demographic indicators in Algeria (Hammouda, 2021).

b) **Belaroussi, C. : *Changes in Population Structure in Algeria***

This article explores the progressive transformation of Algeria's demographic structure over the past two decades. Belaroussi highlights a decline in fertility, a reduced proportion of youth within the population, and a projected increase in the elderly population. He underlines how these demographic shifts are reshaping the country's economic and social dynamics, particularly through a shrinking demographic dividend and future strains on health and pension systems. The article also outlines policy pathways for adapting to these structural changes (Belaroussi, 2024).

c) **Saidi, F. A., Phinzi, K., & Molnár, E. (2023): *Urbanization in Algeria: Toward a More Balanced and Sustainable Urban Network?***

This article examines the relationship between urbanization and demographic distribution in Algeria. The authors emphasize the overconcentration of population along the coastal areas and inter-wilaya imbalances. They advocate for a more equitable territorial development strategy through the strengthening of intermediate cities and the modernization of inland infrastructure, with the aim of reducing internal migratory disparities and fostering spatial demographic equilibrium (Saidi, 2023).

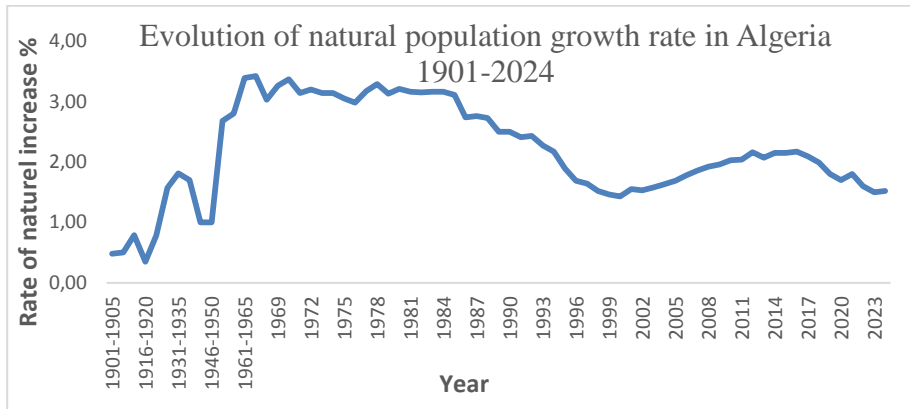
III. Demographic Trends in Algeria (1961–2024)

Algeria's demographic trajectory from 1901 to 2024 illustrates a gradual shift from a traditional demographic regime characterized by high birth and death rates to a more modern profile marked by declining natural population growth. In the early 20th century, crude birth and death rates stood at approximately 37.6‰ and 32.8‰, respectively, resulting in a natural increase of less than 0.5% (ONS, 2024).

The demographic transition began accelerating in the 1930s, spurred by colonial-era public health initiatives that reduced mortality. Following independence in 1962, Algeria experienced a demographic surge: the crude birth rate peaked at 50.1‰ in 1970, while natural population growth reached a record 3.42% in 1967. This boom was fueled by ongoing declines in mortality (UNFPA, 2019), driven by expanded access to primary healthcare and improved living standards.

In the 1980s, Algeria institutionalized a national family planning policy with support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). This program promoted contraceptive access and public awareness to reduce fertility. As a result, the birth rate fell from 48.5‰ in 1961 to 31.0‰ in 1990, and further to 18.5‰ by 2024, according to recent figures from the National Office of Statistics. Mortality rates continued to decline, stabilizing around 4.5‰ from the 2000s onward (see Figure 1). The natural growth rate, which exceeded 3% in the 1970s, dropped to 1.52% in 2024, indicating Algeria's transition into an advanced stage of demographic change.

Figure 1: Evolution of Natural Population Growth Rate in Algeria (1901–2024)

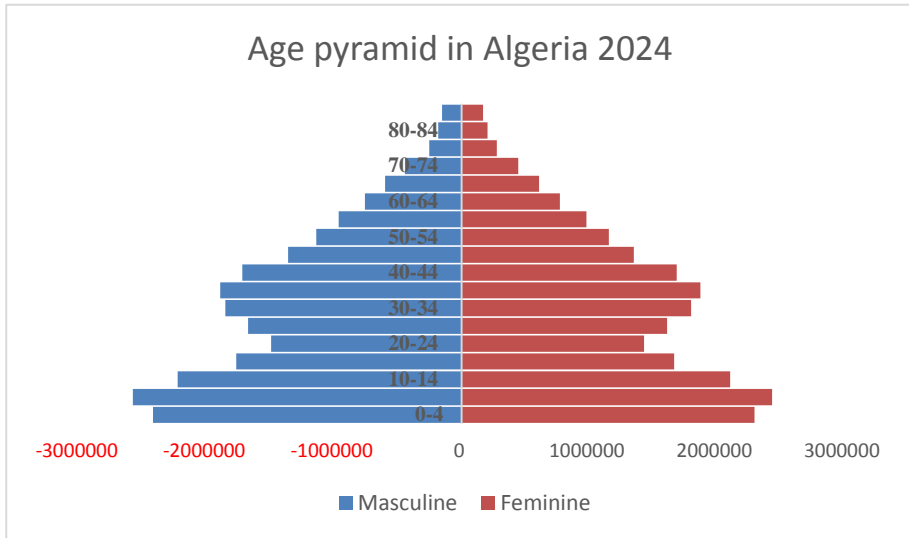


Source: Compiled from National Office of Statistics (ONS) data.

Despite this slowdown, population growth remains positive, necessitating adaptive public policies. These must address key challenges including job creation (Bessaoud, 2018), urban expansion, population aging, and rising pressure on social infrastructure and public services.

3.1. Age Structure of the Algerian Population

An analysis of Algeria's 2024 age pyramid shows a population that remains relatively young but clearly reflects the demographic deceleration initiated in the 1990s.

Figure 2: Age Pyramid of the Algerian Population, 2024

Source: Compiled from National Office of Statistics (ONS) data.

Approximately 29% of the population is considered economically inactive and biologically non-reproductive. This ratio was even higher in earlier decades; for example, in 1977, the birth rate was 45.02‰, a reflection of post-independence fertility and traditional family norms. The peak birth rate of 50.12‰ was recorded in 1967. Since the late 1980s, Algeria has seen a marked fertility decline, driven by multiple factors: widespread adoption of family planning, broader access to modern contraceptives, delayed marriage, rapid urbanization, and shifting social norms.

By 2024, the working-age population (15–64 years) is estimated at around 31.4 million representing 66% of the total population (see Figure 2). This proportion has remained relatively stable since 2008 but remains above the global average. Theoretically, this demographic structure presents an opportunity for a “demographic dividend,” (Bloom, 2003) wherein a large working-age population can drive economic growth. However, this potential is constrained by persistent structural issues, including high unemployment, labor market rigidity, and pronounced regional disparities. These challenges

continue to exert pressure on social services, particularly in housing, education, and healthcare. The elderly population (65 years and over) is projected at 3.34 million in 2024, accounting for 7% of the total population. Although still modest, this share has been steadily rising, pointing to the growing structural impact of aging. Addressing this shift will require long-term planning, particularly regarding healthcare infrastructure, pension systems, elder autonomy, and sustainable financing for social protection.

Life expectancy at birth rose significantly from 51.15 years in 1965 to 77.80 years in 2019a gain of 26.65 years. Gender-wise, women experienced a greater increase (27.43 years) compared to men (26.08 years) over the 1965–2019 period. This upward trend reflects both advancements in medical science and a general improvement in living conditions, contributing to Algeria's remarkably low mortality rates.

3.2. Mortality Trends

Between 1990 and 2023, mortality in Algeria followed a generally declining trajectory, disrupted briefly by the COVID-19 pandemic. The crude deathrate fell from 5.80‰ in 1990 to 4.68‰ in 2019, before rising sharply to 5.99‰ in 2020 as a direct result of the pandemic. It then resumed its downward trend, reaching 4.15‰ in 2023. In absolute terms, the number of deaths ranged from 145,000 in 1990 to 192,000 in 2023, with a pandemic-related peak of 258,000 deaths recorded in 2021. This exceptional surge is directly attributable to the health crisis, which overwhelmed the national healthcare system, generated significant excess mortality, and delayed the treatment of chronic diseases.

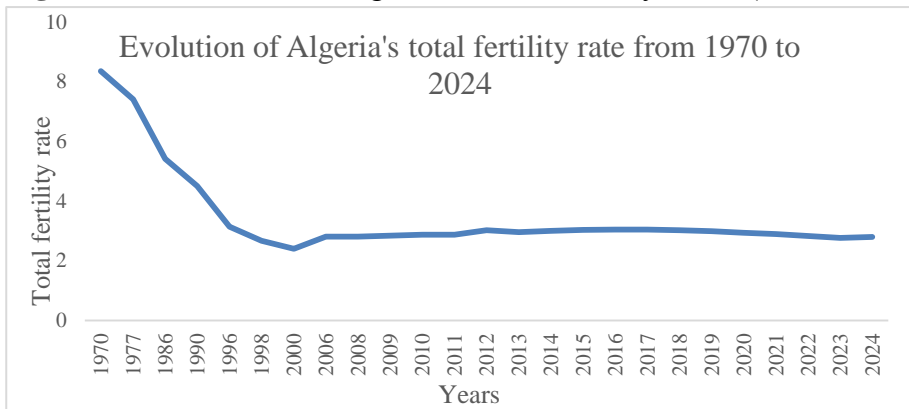
Despite this temporary disruption, life expectancy at birth continued to rise, averaging 79.6 years between 2020 and 2023, and surpassing 81 years for women in 2023a historic national milestone. These gains reflect Algeria's progression through the epidemiological transition, characterized by reduced infant and maternal mortality, improved access to healthcare, and sustained investment in medical

infrastructure. Nonetheless, chronic non-communicable diseases particularly cardiovascular illnesses and cancer remain the leading causes of death, especially among older adults (APS, 2020). These trends may constrain future improvements in life expectancy. Overall, the long-term decline in mortality reflects substantial public health progress, but it also signals new challenges related to aging and the rising burden of non-communicable diseases.

3.3. Fertility Trends

All recent demographic studies and national surveys confirm a significant and sustained decline in fertility in Algeria. As illustrated in **Figure 3**, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was exceptionally high in 1970 around 8.50 children per woman partially due to a rebound effect following the postponement of births during the War of Independence.

Figure 3: Evolution of Algeria's Total Fertility Rate (1970–2024)



Source: Compiled from National Office of Statistics (ONS) data.

Fertility began to decline steadily in the 1980s, with the TFR dropping to 6.24 by 1985 and 4.5 by 1990. This decline was largely driven by the implementation of the National Population Growth Control Program (PNMCD). However, between 1986 and 1993, the pace of decline slowed, becoming more gradual. Over the long term, Algeria has experienced a dramatic reduction in fertility. The TFR fell from 8.4 children per woman in 1970 to 2.8 in 2024. This decline marks a profound transformation in reproductive behavior beginning

in the late 1970s. The TFR dropped to 6.9 by 1977, 5.3 in 1986, 3.5 in 1996, and reached 2.7 by the year 2000.

This sustained decline is the cumulative result of multiple interrelated factors: widespread access to family planning, improved availability and use of contraceptive methods, increased female education, and a general trend toward delayed marriage. Since the early 2000s, fertility has stabilized around three children per woman, with minor fluctuations. In 2024, the TFR stands at 2.8, approaching the generational replacement threshold. This demographic shift carries significant implications for Algeria's age structure, labor market outlook, and long-term policy planning particularly concerning population aging, healthcare demand, and social protection systems.

3.4. Marriage and Divorce Trends in Algeria

Between 1990 and 2024, Algeria's marriage and divorce patterns underwent substantial shifts, mirroring deep-rooted socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural transformations. From 1990 until the early 2010s, the country saw a consistent increase in marriages, culminating in a peak of nearly 388,000 unions in 2013. However, beginning in 2014, this trend reversed, with a progressive decline becoming more pronounced after 2020.

By 2023, the number of registered marriages had dropped to 278,664, reducing the crude marriage rate to 6‰ a level comparable to the early 2000s (see Table N°01). This contraction correlates with the shrinking cohort of individuals aged 20 to 34, who account for 80% of all marriages. This age group declined from 10.9 million in 2015 to 9.8 million in 2023 (ONS, 2019).

Economic hardship is a central driver of this decline. Persistent unemployment, precarious job markets, ongoing housing shortages, and the increasing financial burden of marriage including wedding expenses, dowries, and social expectations have become significant deterrents for young people, especially amid rising inflation. Simultaneously, Algeria is undergoing a cultural shift. Higher

educational attainment particularly among women increased access to the labor market, and a growing preference for personal autonomy are reshaping traditional perceptions of marriage. The decline in early unions, the rise of individualism, and the extension of the pre-marital singlehood period all point to a broader generational transition.

Table N°01: Trends in Marriage and Divorce in Algeria (1990–2023)

| Period | Marriage Trends | Divorce Trends | Key Drivers |
|-----------|--|---|--|
| 1990–2005 | Gradual increase in marriages | Moderate divorce rate (~11% in 2005) | Youthful population; traditional family norms |
| 2005–2013 | Peak nuptiality (~10‰ in 2013) | Rising divorce (~14% in 2010 → 16% in 2015) | Post-conflict recovery; demographic rebound |
| 2014–2019 | Onset of steady marital decline | Accelerated rise in divorce (~21% in 2019) | Structural demographic changes; rising female autonomy |
| 2020–2023 | Sharp drop in 2020, rebound in 2021, renewed decline | Crude divorce rate 2.02‰; 33.5% relative divorce rate | COVID-19; economic strain; evolving family structures |

Source: National Office of Statistics (ONS)

Meanwhile, divorce rates have increased dramatically. From 31,000 in 2005, the number of divorces surged to 93,402 by 2023 nearly athreefold increase (ONS, Démographie algérienne, N°890., 2024). The crude divorce rate reached 2.02‰ in 2023, up from 1.52‰ in 2019. The divorce-to-marriage ratio rose to 33.5%, indicating that one in three marriages now ends in separation.

This rise in marital instability can be attributed to several factors: premature or impulsive unions, mismatched expectations, family or societal pressures in partner selection, and the influence of

social media. Early years of marriage have become particularly vulnerable to breakdown. Additionally, legal reforms especially the 2004 revision of the Family Code have eased divorce procedures and strengthened women's rights. Increased female education and financial independence have reduced tolerance for unfulfilling marital relationships.

In sum, the sharp drop in marriage rates, coupled with rising divorce rates, reflects a fundamental reconfiguration of family behavior in Algeria. The traditional model of lifelong marriage is in decline, giving way to more individualized life paths shaped by evolving norms and values. This transformation presents significant challenges for social policy, youth support mechanisms, and legal frameworks, which must now adapt to these emerging realities.

3.5. Migration Dynamics in Algeria: Trends, Challenges, and Implications

Migration patterns in Algeria are difficult to analyze due to scarce and fragmented statistical data, particularly concerning international migration and the recent influx of Sub-Saharan migrants. National population censuses offer limited insight into internal mobility, and data on Algerian emigrants often rely on foreign sources such as Eurostat or INSEE, raising issues of comparability. The absence of an integrated national system to monitor migration flows hampers accurate assessments of scale, profiles, and trends posing a major obstacle to policy formulation and demographic planning.

3.5.1. Internal Migration

Internal migration remains a defining feature of Algeria's demographic landscape. Population flows are largely directed from rural areas to urban centers, especially toward major cities such as Algiers, Oran, Constantine, and Annaba, as well as newer hubs in the south like Ouargla and Ghardaïa. This urban migration is driven by economic incentives (employment and services), environmental

pressures (land degradation and water scarcity), and social aspirations (better living conditions).

According to the National Statistics Office, around 65% of the population now lives in urban areas up from 30% in the early 1970s (ONS, bulletin statistique N° 769, 2023). This rapid urbanization has intensified pressure on infrastructure, worsened housing shortages, overwhelmed public services, and contributed to unregulated urban sprawl.

3.5.2. International Migration

Algeria has historically been a country of emigration. Since the 1960s, large numbers of Algerians have migrated abroad, primarily to France, but also to Spain, Canada, and Germany. Initially economically motivated, emigration patterns have evolved to include both low-skilled workers and highly qualified professionals resulting in a growing brain drain. Recent emigration is often driven by persistent unemployment, social stagnation, economic insecurity, and political dissatisfaction.

Irregular migration by sea particularly through the *harraga* phenomenon remains a visible symptom of youth disenchantment. In 2023 alone, the International Organization for Migration recorded over 6,000 attempted crossings from Algeria to Spain (IOM, 2023). On the other hand, Algeria remains relatively closed to international immigration. However, inflows from Sub-Saharan countries, such as Niger, Mali, and Guinea have increased. While many of these migrants are in transit toward Europe, a growing number settle temporarily in southern Algerian cities or work in the informal sector. Algeria lacks a comprehensive legal framework to manage this migration, raising concerns over migrant rights, integration, and public security.

To address this strategic data gap, it is essential for Algeria to establish a **National Migration Observatory**. This institution should be equipped with the legal, technical, and statistical tools necessary

for systematic tracking and analysis of migration flows. Such a body would enhance the state's capacity to formulate evidence-based migration policy, monitor regional demographic imbalances, and engage more effectively in international migration diplomacy.

Conclusion:

Algeria's demographic evolution from 1961 to 2024 reveals a marked transition from a regime of high natural growth to a structurally more complex configuration. The substantial decline in fertility, the steady rise in life expectancy, and the transformation of family behaviors reflect an advanced stage of demographic transition. However, these changes have not translated into an effective demographic dividend, due to persistent structural constraints such as youth unemployment, territorial disparities, and inadequate employment policies. The progressive aging of the population, the sharp rise in divorce rates, and migration dynamics characterized by significant brain drain and unbalanced urbanization pose major challenges to social cohesion, the sustainability of welfare systems, and spatial planning. The lack of reliable data on internal and international migration further hinders the development of informed and adaptive public policies.

In light of this demographic reconfiguration, Algeria must reassess its strategic priorities. An integrated, evidence-based approach is urgently needed to strengthen healthcare and pension systems, promote employment particularly among women and youth plan for the adaptation of urban infrastructure, and establish a National Migration Observatory. Without such a structural shift, the demographic-induced strains may intensify, ultimately undermining Algeria's medium and long-term socioeconomic development prospects.

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