



Exploring the Influencing Factors of Rural-to-Urban Migration in Kandahar from 2001 to 2021

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Abstract: Rural-to-urban migration is the movement of people from rural areas to urban areas in search of improved living conditions, employment opportunities, education, healthcare, and other services. The study draws on the push-pull migration theory and related literature to establish a conceptual framework for understanding population movements driven by structural challenges. This research starts with an introduction to rural-to-urban migration in Afghanistan, particularly over the last two decades. Despite increased rural-to-urban migration in Kandahar between 2001 and 2021, there remains a significant research gap in understanding the specific socio-political, economic, and security-related factors that uniquely influenced this trend within the regional context. This quantitative research is based on primary information collected through a survey of 449 families in 15 districts of Kandahar City who urbanized from 2001 to 2021. The study is conducted in a quantitative research design, and data analysis is performed using SPSS software. Following this, the analysis demonstrates that the rapid rural migration to urban centers in Kandahar, southern Afghanistan, is attributed to several factors, particularly conflict (42.00%), unemployment (34.90%), and drought (10.2%). More than half of the respondents preferred to settle permanently in Kandahar City rather than return to their villages. So, the findings imply that sustainable urban planning and targeted rural development policies are essential to address the long-term needs of displaced populations in Kandahar, as migration is increasingly driven by chronic structural challenges rather than temporary conflict.

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INTRODUCTION

For decades in Afghanistan, the approach to reducing risk and protecting families from human security problems, particularly in rural areas, has been to migrate to adjacent urban centers (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2005a). Over 76 per cent of Afghans have experienced migration at least once in their lifetime (IOM, 2024). Afghanistan experienced a

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dramatic increase in the volume of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) from 0.18 million in 2003 to 3.20 million in 2022, due to three main factors: conflict, drought, and unemployment (Global Report on Internal Displacement, 2019). The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (2020) also found that the ongoing conflict and political turbulence forced many rural dwellers to seek refuge in urban areas in Afghanistan. Perceptions of push factors, such as insecurity and unemployment, and pull factors, such as security and employment opportunities, encouraged more than 90 per cent of rural migrants to seek residence in cities in Afghanistan (Majidi, 2011). The decade's continuing armed confrontations had forced millions of Afghans to endure the adverse consequences of internal displacements. They abandoned rural areas in favor of cities to gain greater opportunities (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016). The rate of rural-to-urban migration in Afghanistan is remarkably speedy (Akbari et al., 2023).

West African Science Service Center on Climate Change and Adapted Land Use (2023) claimed that Climate change factors, including low rainfall, reduced crop yields, extreme weather conditions, and others, have strongly encouraged rural people to move to urban centers (WASCAL, 2023). Changes in the surrounding environment can increase the incentive to move, as drought contributed to migration in rural areas (Black et al., 2011). Climate change causes severe environmental degradation and prevents rural dwellers from sustaining their livelihoods, leading them to seek refuge in cities (International Organization for Migration, 2012; IOM, 2022). Moving towards cities is an ordinary act in Afghanistan, driven by insecurity and exacerbated by drought and inflation (MacLeod, June 23, 2008). Income sources such as livestock and agriculture are hardly affected by drought in Afghanistan, and these factors acted as a push factor, forcing families to move to cities (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2016). Water scarcity is a key factor driving the rural population towards urban centers, as cities offer better services and amenities (World Bank, 2011).

According to a report by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), about 70 per cent of Afghans live in rural areas, while rapid population growth is seen in the cities (UNDP, 2017). Afghanistan's major cities — Kabul, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Kandahar — have been attracting migrants from rural areas; the influx of IDPs from surrounding regions is considerable (UN-Habitat, 2014). According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (2020), 1.1 million people would be displaced, with most preferring to migrate to urban centers. UNHCR (2022) found that a large proportion of the involuntary migrants left their homes for cities. AREU (2005b) revealed that, due to higher income, 13.4 per cent of migrants had already settled in urban areas, while the remaining 86.6 per cent intended to settle permanently in the largest cities of Afghanistan.

Recent global studies indicate a marked increase in rural-to-urban migration, primarily influenced by socioeconomic factors rather than climate-related causes. (Niva, 2023). There are significant internal migration flows from rural to urban areas in developing economies (Brueckner & Lall, 2015). People living in poverty are more likely to migrate when rising incomes are accompanied by growing income inequality in their local areas (Kafle et al., 2020).

Rural families in developing countries face several types of unpredictable events that put their livelihoods in danger; among them are economic shocks such as price fluctuations and natural disasters such as droughts or floods (Nguyen et al., 2015). Involuntary migration due to climate change, wars, and conflicts is becoming increasingly frequent in developing countries (Selod & Shilpi, 2021). The majority of migrants in Juba Metropolitan City migrated in search of employment, education, and basic amenities, as inferred from the findings (Moses et al., 2017).

Likewise, in Afghanistan, rural-to-urban migration has also occurred in neighboring Pakistan, but the primary factor in leaving the rural areas was limited educational facilities; in addition, lower income status forces some families to move to cities (Jamil & Mohyuddin, 2015). The flow of a large number of people from rural villages to already congested cities has increased tremendously in Pakistan from 2001 to 2011 (Malik, 2015). Recent studies in Iran also identify village population pressure, the emergence of advanced agricultural technologies that reduce rural labor demand, and expanded transport infrastructure and mass media access in cities as key drivers of rural-to-urban migration (Rostamalizadeh, 2018). The major determinant in many rural Indians changing their destination was the prospect of better employment opportunities (Mitra & Murayama, 2009). Studies indicate that Burundi is projected to have the fastest urban population growth between 2020 and 2025, with an annual urbanization rate of 5.43 per cent, primarily fueled by rural-to-urban migration, high fertility rates, and economic restructuring (Worldstats, 2024).

Rural-to-urban migration refers to the movement of people from rural areas to urban areas in search of better opportunities, improved living conditions, and access to amenities and services (Liao & Wang, 2019). Rural-to-urban migration is the movement of people, temporary or permanent, from rural areas to urban centers (Shamshad, 2012). Rural-to-urban migration refers to the movement of individuals and households from rural areas to urban centers (Fan, 2022). This is a common feature of urbanization, driven by factors such as economic disparities, employment prospects, educational opportunities, and improved infrastructure (Rakotonirina & Cheng, 2015). Rural-to-urban migration is a worldwide phenomenon that has significant social, economic, and environmental implications (Guresci, 2022). Chen (2019) found that economic factors underpin rural-to-urban migration in China, emphasizing that differences in wages and job availability in cities are key drivers of rural migrants. As is usually the case, average living standards are higher in urban areas; therefore, rural-to-urban migration occurs (Østby, 2016). On the contrary, it should be inferred that the procedures for becoming urban are not similar for all migrants (Brogger, 2019).

Over the past two decades, thousands of families from various parts of the province have come to Kandahar City, found shelter, and settled here. The main push factors influencing rural-to-urban migration from 2001 to 2021 and the intensity of rural-to-urban migration are not examined; as a result, the researchers in this study will do their best to provide a clear and comprehensive account of rural-to-urban migration in Kandahar.

By grounding the analysis in the push-pull theory of migration and drawing on comparative literature, this study aims to investigate the major drivers behind rural-to-urban migration in Kandahar City from 2001 to 2021. Particular emphasis is placed on identifying the intensity and nature of conflict, economic deprivation, and climate-related challenges, as reported by migrant families. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the primary push and pull factors influencing rural-to-urban migration in Kandahar?
2. What are the implications of rural-to-urban migration for long-term urban planning and rural development in southern Afghanistan?

RESEARCH METHOD

Primary data collection has been conducted using a structured questionnaire. Since the research aims to identify and measure the influence of factors such as conflict, unemployment, and drought on rural-to-urban migration in Kandahar from 2001 to 2021, a quantitative approach enables objective data collection, numerical analysis, and the identification of statistically significant trends.

This study employs a quantitative research design to examine the key factors influencing rural-to-urban migration in Kandahar province. The research is based on primary data collection through a structured questionnaire. The methodology section outlines the research type, population, sampling technique, data collection instruments, and methods of data analysis.

Research Design

The research follows a descriptive-analytical approach within a quantitative framework. It aims to describe patterns of rural-to-urban migration and analyze the socio-economic and environmental factors driving this trend.

Population and Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was employed to target a specific population and gather opinions from individuals who have experienced rural-to-urban migration. This method was justified because it enabled the selection of respondents with direct experience of the migration process and therefore could provide relevant, informed insights. The population for this study consisted of households in Kandahar City whose members had migrated from rural areas during the specified period.

The study focused on individuals who met the following two key criteria:

1. Belonging to households that migrated from rural to urban areas during the specified period.
2. Being at least 18 years old and capable of providing informed responses about the migration process.

Fifteen districts of Kandahar City were selected to ensure geographic and socio-economic diversity within the sample. A total of 475 questionnaires were distributed across these districts, targeting individuals from families that had experienced rural-to-urban migration. Out of these, 449 valid responses were received and included in the final analysis. The purposive sampling method ensured that the participants were appropriate representatives of the population relevant to the research objectives.

Instrumentation

The primary data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire composed of five sections:

1. Demographic Information (e.g., age, gender, education, income level)
2. Migration History (e.g., place of origin, year of migration, reasons for migration)
3. Push Factors (e.g., conflict, insecurity, drought, unemployment)
4. Pull Factors (e.g., access to services, safety, job opportunities in Kandahar City)
5. Post-Migration Experience (e.g., employment status, housing, intention to return)

The questionnaire was initially drafted in English, translated into Pashto, and reviewed by subject matter experts for content validity. It was also pilot-tested with 25 individuals from the target population to refine clarity and ensure cultural relevance.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the instrument's validity, the questionnaire underwent expert review and pilot testing with a small group of respondents before the primary survey. To assess reliability, internal consistency was tested using Cronbach's Alpha in SPSS, which confirmed the measurement tool's reliability.

SPSS Output – Reliability Analysis (Pilot Testing)

Table 1. Case Processing Summary

	n
Valid Participants	35
Excluded	0
Total	35

Table 2. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.83	42

Data Analysis

Data from the questionnaires were entered into SPSS software for analysis. Frequency and percentage tables were generated to visualize and interpret the data.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed of the study's purpose, and their consent was obtained before data collection. The confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents were maintained throughout the research process.

FINDINGS

The Afghan nation experienced tough days, particularly in Kandahar province, which was continuously hit by human-caused calamities and natural disasters. People in the sub-districts suffered heavy damage from conflicts between US-led forces and the Taliban, as well as unemployment and severe droughts, which finally forced thousands of families to move from rural areas to urban centers. Overall, rural-to-urban migration has been a continuous process over the last two decades in Kandahar province. This study found that war, unemployment, and drought were the most important factors that accelerated rural-to-urban migration in the area.

Table 1. *When did you come to Kandahar City?*

Year	Frequency	Per cent
2001 – 2005	100	22.3
2006 – 2010	122	27.1
2011 – 2015	110	24.5
2016 – 2021	117	26.1
Total	449	100.0

As shown in Table 1, the internal displacements were approximately similar across all periods. However, it must be inferred that the reasons for living in their settlements and for choosing to reside in Kandahar city differ among families. Many families were relocated from fear of losing their dependents, as usually their residential area was the front line for the war between the US-led Forces and the Taliban. In comparison, a bigger portion chose to relocate for better job opportunities in the city.

Generally speaking, the trend of urbanization is high; however, all households left their homes due to push factors at the beginning of their departure from the villages.

Table 2. *What caused you to move to Kandahar City?*

The main cause was	Frequency	Per cent
war in our region	189	42.1
unemployment	153	34.1
drought	46	10.2
lack of schools	40	8.9
lack of health centers	9	2.0
hostility with people	6	1.3
peace in my home country (Returnee)	6	1.3
Total	449	100.0

Table 2 discusses the major factors that forced villagers to leave their homes and seek settlement in Kandahar city.

War in our region: This was the most commonly cited reason for moving to Kandahar City, with 42.1 per cent of respondents (189 individuals) indicating that they relocated due to conflict or war in their home region.

Unemployment: The second most prevalent reason for moving was unemployment, with 34.1 per cent of respondents (153 individuals) stating that they relocated because they could not find employment opportunities in their previous location.

Drought: Approximately 10.2 per cent of respondents (46 individuals) mentioned drought as the primary factor that led them to move to Kandahar City.

Lack of schools: For 8.9 per cent of respondents (40 individuals), the absence of schools in their previous area was the main reason for their relocation.

Lack of health centers: A smaller percentage —2.0 per cent (9 individuals) —reported moving due to a lack of access to health centers or medical facilities in their previous location.

Hostility toward people: A tiny fraction —1.3 per cent (6 individuals) —mentioned interpersonal conflicts or hostility as their primary reason for moving.

Peace in my home country (Returnee): Similarly, 1.3 per cent (6 individuals) of respondents stated that they moved to Kandahar City because they perceived an improvement in the overall peace and stability of their home country.

In summary, the majority of respondents moved to Kandahar City due to the ongoing war in their region and unemployment, with other factors such as drought, the lack of educational and healthcare facilities, interpersonal conflicts, and the return of peace in their home country also contributing to a lesser extent. This data provides insights into the various factors driving migration to Kandahar City.

Table 3. *When will you go back to your birthplace/village?*

We will	Frequency	Per cent
not return to our village	232	51.7
return after confident peace	92	20.5
return as drought finishes	64	14.3
return after establishment of schools	41	9.1
return after establishment of health centers	11	2.4
return after the end of hostility	9	2.0
Total	449	100.0

The data in table 3 reveals that more than half of the families who have left their homes due to any reason would not return, other portion of the inquired in the survey would prefer to go back to the villages in conditional manner as the war stops in their region, drought finishes as well as a less than 12 per cent will leave the urban center. At the same time, they find a school and a health center in a rural area. Collectively, we realize from the assessment that more than half of the displaced population in the Kandahar rural area prioritizes staying in the urban center to support their families.

Table 4. *How many of your family members are employed?*

Our employed family members are	Frequency	Per cent
1 – 2	275	61.2
3 – 4	148	33.0
5 – 6	22	4.9
All males	4	.9
Total	449	100.0

One of the leading causes of rural-to-urban migration appears to be unemployment in rural areas of Kandahar province, as shown in Table 2. However, the study still reveals that more than 61 per cent of the migrated families are unemployed. Only 1 to 2 members of the whole family have succeeded in finding jobs or a way to support their families, as revealed in Table 4. Less than 1 per cent, or just four families among 449, are reported to be fully employed, meaning all the male members of those families were able to earn money and feed their families.

Table 5. *How much money does your family make per month?*

My family's monthly income in \$USD is	Frequency	Per cent
Less than 70	122	27.2
70 - 130	198	44.1
131 - 380	106	23.6
More than 380	23	5.1
Total	449	100.0

In Table 5, the data shows that approximately 5 per cent of the respondents earn more than \$380 per month, which is the highest amount in the table. In Kandahar, the normal family still has very little to provide an ordinary meal on the table.

The case shows the worst-case scenario, while the table shows that 27.1 per cent of newly urbanized families cannot afford more than \$70–130 per month for daily necessities and maintaining an everyday life in the city.

Table 6. *How many members are there in your family?*

Family member number	Frequency	Per cent
3 – 7	66	14.6
8 – 12	215	47.9
13 - 17	105	23.3
18 - 22	38	8.9
23 - 30	16	3.4
31 - 52	9	1.9
Total	449	100.0

Afghan families are usually large compared to those in other communities around the world (Global Data Lab, 2021), and Kandahar shares these traits; thus, the enlargement of families leads to low economic status. We observe in Table 6 that about 70 per cent of the families consist of more than 10 members. Considering Table 5, which reveals that household income is very low, and Table 4, which shows that approximately one-third of family members are not employed, many urbanized families must face various social and economic problems in their new habitat.

DISCUSSION

This study explored rural-to-urban migration in Kandahar Province, examining its underlying causes, socio-economic impacts, and migrants' intentions to return. Drawing on data from 449 valid responses, the analysis yielded significant insights that directly addressed the study's research objectives. The findings highlight key push and pull factors influencing migration decisions, such as insecurity, unemployment, and the pursuit of better services in urban areas. These insights can inform local policy efforts to improve rural conditions and manage urban development more effectively. Migration to Kandahar City peaked during 2006–2010 (27 per cent) and 2016–2021 (26 per cent), which correspond with periods of heightened conflict and environmental stress. These findings are consistent with those of IOM (2020) and UNHCR (2018), which report increased displacement during periods of insecurity and drought in southern Afghanistan.

The main drivers of migration were war (42 per cent), unemployment (34 per cent), and drought (10.2 per cent). These results confirm that both insecurity and structural deficiencies—such as lack of schools and health facilities—are key push factors. This aligns with previous studies by Siegmann & Mielke (2008) and the World Bank (2019), which emphasize violence, economic hardship, and poor infrastructure as central to internal migration in Afghanistan.

More than half of the respondents (51.7%) indicated no intention to return to their villages. Some respondents stated that they would consider returning only if peace is restored

or basic services are improved in rural areas. These findings suggest a growing shift toward long-term or permanent urban settlement among rural-to-urban migrants. This result supports UN-Habitat's (2021) observations, which note that many displaced Afghans choose to remain in cities due to better access to services and security.

Employment and income levels among migrant families remain low. Most families —61.2 per cent — have only 1–2 employed members, and 71.3 per cent earn less than \$130 per month. This suggests that migration has not significantly improved economic conditions and may, in some cases, have deepened dependency on informal or unstable income sources. These outcomes align with findings from Gonzalez et al. (2019) and the ILO (2020), which highlight underemployment and persistent poverty among displaced urban populations.

Family size is another contributing factor to financial strain. Nearly half (47.9 per cent) of families have 8–12 members, and over one-third have more than 12. Larger household sizes place additional pressure on limited resources, reducing per capita access to food, education, and healthcare. UNFPA (2020) similarly notes that high dependency ratios among Afghan migrant families compound social and economic vulnerabilities.

These results are consistent with Lee's (1966) push-pull theory of migration. According to this theory, certain conditions in the place of origin force people to leave. In the case of rural Afghanistan, insecurity, poverty, and lack of services act as push factors. At the same time, perceived safety and better access to services in urban areas serve as pull factors that attract migrants.

Future research could examine the long-term integration experiences of rural migrants in urban settings, particularly regarding housing stability, access to public services, and social cohesion. Additionally, comparative studies across different provinces or regions in Afghanistan could help assess whether the patterns observed in Kandahar reflect wider national trends. Investigating the specific needs of women, youth, and other vulnerable groups among migrant populations would also provide valuable insights for targeted policy development.

CONCLUSION

Rural-to-urban migration in Kandahar is driven mainly by insecurity, unemployment, and drought. Most migrants view urban settlement as long-term, yet economic hardship and large household sizes continue to strain families. These findings highlight the need for policies that improve rural livelihoods, enhance services, and manage urban growth to reduce forced migration and support sustainable development.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Mr. Wahidullah Yaqubi was responsible for distributing and collecting questionnaires and contributed to multiple rounds of revisions throughout the manuscript. Atal Barai developed the introduction and actively participated in its review and refinement across several revision

cycles. Zamarai Fana conducted the literature review and repeatedly revised the section to ensure clarity and comprehensiveness. Nisar Ahmad Arghandwal led the data analysis, coordinated all aspects of the study, and contributed to numerous revisions across all sections to enhance the overall quality and coherence of the manuscript.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All research data are presented in this paper. Further details can be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest

“The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.”

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