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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7gh7d4r7>

Journal

Population and Development Review

ISSN

0098-7921

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Publication Date

2026-09-15

DOI

10.1111/padr.70092

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INTRODUCTION

How Political Events Become Demographic: Toward a Cumulative Demography of Conflict and Violence

Mathis Ebbinghaus, Liliana Andriano, Patrick Heuveline
Guest Editors

Political conflict and violence shape the core demographic processes of mortality, migration, and fertility, while also influencing union formation, health, and kinship networks. Existing studies have often asked whether conflict is positively or negatively associated with demographic outcomes, yet findings remain strikingly mixed. This reflects the heterogeneous nature of conflict and violence themselves, the institutional and social contexts in which they occur, and the multiple, interacting processes through which they influence demographic outcomes. To advance a cumulative research program for conflict demography, we identify three priorities. First, researchers should distinguish exposure to conflict and violence from the extent to which individuals are affected by them and take seriously the processes of meaning-making through which conflict events acquire demographic significance. Second, researchers should identify a limited set of generalizable social mechanisms that connect conflict and violence to demographic outcomes, recognizing that the same mechanism can produce different empirical results in different contexts. Third, researchers should develop macro-level analyses of conflict-affected populations because changes in population size, composition, and distribution are population-level processes that cannot be derived solely from micro-level mechanisms. The articles in this issue exemplify these three priorities and together outline a methodologically plural program for a cumulative conflict demography.

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This article is part of the *Population and Development Review* special issue, **Social and Demographic Consequences of Political Conflict and Violence**

Heterogeneous Findings and the Problem of Cumulation

The conflicts and uprisings of the present decade – in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, Myanmar, and Iran, to name a few – have returned mass violence to the center of demographers' attention. Indeed, few forces move every component of the demographic balancing equation at once. Conflict and violence kill and maim, displace populations within and across borders, postpone some births while accelerating others, dissolve unions, create widows and orphans, and strip households of kin, and often do so while destroying the censuses, registers, and surveys through which these population changes would usually be measured. By conflict and violence, we mean armed conflict between and within states, one-sided and communal violence, forced resettlement, political imprisonment, and social unrest, which often activate similar mechanisms.

Demographic research has generally approached conflict through outcome-specific questions. Does violence depress fertility? Does war hasten marriage or delay it? Does displacement damage health? Does insecurity drive migration, and for whom? More than two decades ago, Hill's (2004) review showed that fertility responses to war and humanitarian crises varied substantially across settings. Subsequent studies have reinforced that heterogeneity, documenting declines and post-war rebounds (Agadjanian and Prata 2002; Castro Torres and Urdinola 2019; Cetorelli 2014; Heuveline and Poch 2007; Khawaja 2000; Randall 2005; Woldemicael 2008). Research on marriage and family formation has likewise shown both acceleration and delays, sometimes alongside countervailing changes in contraceptive behavior (Andriano and Ebbinghaus 2025; Elnakib et al. 2024; Ghose and Pandey 2025; Shemyakina 2013; Williams et al. 2012). Similarly mixed evidence runs through the literatures on mortality and health and on displacement and migration. Thus, decades of research have established the impact of conflict across demographic processes without producing a clear expectation about the direction, magnitude, or timing of its effects.

We argue that such heterogeneity shows that conflict is not a treatment administered in the same amount to comparable populations. It is a compound process that bundles together violence, disruption, resource loss, selective mortality, the separation of kin, uncertainty, and the degradation of data systems. These components need not operate in the same direction and need not unfold over the same horizon (Vesco et al. 2025). Consider the evacuation orders issued across the Gaza Strip from October 2023 that directed residents to designated zones. The same order, addressed to the same street on the same morning, was not the same event for the households that received it. One family loaded what it could carry and moved within hours, other families with bedridden parents, or without fuel, money, or anywhere to go could not move at all, others yet sent only some members away. A fourth moved into a registered shelter and so entered the administrative record of the displaced; a fifth crowded in with relatives and vanished from every list. An estimate of “the effect of evacuation orders” in such a setting is an average over such different realizations that tells us little about the process by which a disruptive event affects mobility, and about the population that the sum of such effects produced (on which see Darin et al. in this special issue).

This article argues that conflict demography can become a cumulative field of study by addressing three tasks. The first task is to distinguish exposure to conflict and violence from being affected by them, and to take seriously the meaning-making through which disruptions are constituted as events to which demographic behavior responds. The second task is to identify a limited set of general social mechanisms linking conflict and violence to demographic outcomes. This issue advances three such mechanisms: uncertainty and insecurity, resources and institutional access, and linked lives. These mechanisms connect conflict and violence to demographic outcomes, while recognizing that the same mechanism can produce different outcomes across contexts. The third task is distinctively demographic: to develop macro-level analyses of conflict-affected societies that examine population loss,

distortion in population structures, cohort scars, the depletion of kinship, and spatial redistribution of populations. These population-level changes are explananda in their own right and cannot, as we shall argue, be adequately explained by micro-level mechanisms alone. We close by stressing that these three tasks of a demography of conflict demand methodological pluralism.

The articles we assembled in this special issue put this program to work. They examine reproductive intentions in wartime Ukraine (Popovych et al. 2026); displacement from Myanmar shaped by anticipatory, chronic, and imminent insecurity (Koning et al. 2026); displacement within Gaza traced through digital data (Darin et al. 2026); fertility under conditions of “polycrisis” (Plach et al. 2026); homicide shocks and suicide (Caudillo and Lee 2026); the bereavement burden that conflict deaths impose on surviving kin (Acosta et al. 2026); intimate partner violence in war’s shadow (Lin and Smith-Greenaway 2026); child health under joint conflict and climatic stress (Thiede et al. 2026); the wartime redistribution of a national scientific workforce (Zaslavsky and Akbaritabar 2026); population projections in conflict settings (Silva and Snyder 2026); the sampling of hidden and legally precarious populations (Blanton et al. 2026); and the construction of conflict-exposure measures themselves (Luetke et al. 2026).

Armed Conflict, Violence, and Core Demographic Processes

Conflict demography studies how war, violence, social unrest, displacement, and state repression shape demographic processes such as mortality, migration, fertility, or union formation, and affect health or kinship.¹ The field first consolidated around mortality—“an obvious starting point” and forced migration—“a common consequence” (Korinek et al. 2026). This may partly be a result of the fact that deaths and displacements are directly observable demographic consequences, and partly because violence often destroys the censuses, surveys,

and administrative records on which the measurement of population relies (Brunborg and Urdal 2005). Early contributions were thus preoccupied with the problem of counting. That is, with estimating excess mortality where enumeration had itself been a casualty of conflict, as in Heuveline's (1998) reconstruction of Cambodian mortality under the Khmer Rouge, in the Bosnian and Srebrenica war-death estimates assembled by Brunborg et al. (2003), or, more recently, in estimates of mortality during the Iraq invasion, the Guatemalan civil war, or the Second Karabakh war (Alburez-Gutierrez 2019; Hagopian et al. 2013; Karlinsky and Torrisi 2023). Over the past two decades, however, the field has widened to encompass marriage, fertility, education, physical and mental health, sexual and reproductive health, intimate partner violence, and a range of intergenerational effects (Korinek et al. 2026; Vesco 2025). Conflict-related sexual violence, whose forms and extent vary strikingly across armed groups and settings (Wood 2006), likewise carries demographic consequences of its own for health and wellbeing.

Research on fertility, marriage, and family formation illustrates the diversity of demographic responses to conflict. As Agadjanian and Prata (2002) find for Angola's civil war, Heuveline and Poch (2007) document a fertility decline followed by a rebound after the Khmer Rouge regime. Fertility decline also appears to have accelerated during the Eritrean conflict (Woldemicael 2008), while Castro Torres and Urdinola (2019) show an interruption of the decline during the Colombian internal conflict. In Iraq, Cetorelli (2014) showed that aggregate total fertility remained essentially stable across the 2003–2011 war—as it had through the Malian conflict (Randall 2005)—even though the age pattern of childbearing shifted. New research on the timing of marriage has also generated heterogeneous results. Communal violence in Gujarat lowered women's age at marriage and raised the probability of marriage before eighteen (Ghose and Pandey 2025), as did the conflict-induced displacement in Yemen (Elnakib et al. 2024); yet exposure to armed conflict in Tajikistan and to protests in Ethiopia

appears to have delayed first marriage rather than accelerated it (Andriano and Ebbinghaus 2025; Shemyakina 2013). Williams and colleagues' (2012) micro-level, event-centered analysis of the Nepalese insurgency found that violent and destabilizing political events accelerated both entry into first marriage and initiation of contraception – two responses that could have countervailing implications for fertility. In post-genocide Rwanda, fertility responded through two distinct channels – the death of a child or sibling and the genocide-induced changes in the local sex ratio – with effects that differ between the channels (Kraehnert et al. 2019). Thiede et al. (2020) have shown that, across sub-Saharan Africa, conflict exposure is associated with modest reductions in both realized fertility and preferred family size, with substantial heterogeneity across contexts. The point is not that these studies are in error, nor even that they conflict with one another. Each is, on its own terms, an account of a particular population responding to particular circumstances. Indeed, Randall (2005) concluded from such population-specific responses that only a “demography of conflicts,” never a demography of conflict, is attainable.

A second body of scholarship investigates mortality, physical health, and mental health. Although estimates differ in magnitude and pathways, studies of mortality and health overwhelmingly document adverse consequences of conflict. The literature suggests that many conflict-related deaths do not result directly from violence but from “the destruction of the essentials of daily living, including food, water, shelter, and health care” (Wise 2017). Wagner et al. (2018) studied the contribution of armed conflict to child mortality across Africa and estimated that “a child born within 50 km of an armed conflict had a risk of dying before reaching age 1 year of 5.2 per 1000 births higher than being born in the same region during periods without conflict.” A parallel strand of scholarship has documented the long-reaching consequences of conflict for health across the life course and across generations. Building on the Developmental Origins of Health and Disease framework (DOHaD), Ramirez and Haas

(2021), for instance, find that children born during World War II had poorer health in both childhood and adulthood. Akresh et al. (2012, 2023) show that women exposed to the Nigerian Civil War during childhood or adolescence were not only shorter in adulthood but their children also experienced poorer health and developmental outcomes. Akbulut-Yuksel (2014) documented analogous “children of war” effects for the bombing of German cities, and Korinek et al. (2020) linked exposure to wartime violence and adverse living conditions during the Vietnam War to cardiovascular conditions in later life among older Vietnamese adults. Mental health sequelae have also received attention: Heuveline and Clague (2024) examined the association between parental loss before age 20 and later mental health in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia. Young et al. (2022) found that among older Vietnamese war survivors, men had experienced more wartime stressors, whereas women exhibited stronger Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) responses to specific types of wartime exposure.

A third research cluster concerns migration, displacement, and immobility. Rather than treating forced and voluntary migration as discrete categories, this literature emphasizes how threats to safety interact with the motivation and opportunity to move (Schon 2019; Williams 2015). Threats to personal integrity are a major driver of displacement, but violence does not mechanically lead to flight: even under extreme threat, some people stay because employment, income, attachment to home, and local social ties raise the cost of leaving, whereas the loss of property can weaken incentives to stay, and access to transportation or destination networks can lower the costs of flight (Adhikari 2013; Davenport, Moore, and Poe 2003). The aspiration to leave does not necessarily produce movement when people lack the capabilities, opportunities, or resources to migrate. This distinction separates voluntary immobility from involuntary immobility including “trapped populations:” people who aspire to leave but cannot do so. Refugees tend to move to nearby countries and to destinations where people from the same origin have previously settled; relocation costs, diaspora networks, colonial ties matter

here, while the association between destination-country wages and refugee flows depends on proximity (Moore and Shellman 2007). Among Syrian refugees in Turkey, earlier departure occurred only when motivation coincided with *wasta* – money and social connections (Schon 2019). Displacement also depends on political circumstances: armed groups may use it as a tactic to secure territorial control by expelling rival civilians or targeting them (Balcells and Steele 2016). A complementary literature on development-induced involuntary resettlement shifts attention from mobility decisions to the consequences of displacement which include among others loss of land, job, and home (Cernea 1997).

These three research clusters share an advantage and a limitation. Their advantage is to have established, case by case, that conflict and violence reach into every demographic process. Their limitation is that they cumulate as contextual knowledge rather than as general theory. Conflict is a bundle of distinct processes (Vesco et al. 2025). When a study asks “what is the effect of conflict on outcome Y?”, it is in effect asking about the net resultant of several such processes, weighted by an institutional and social context that varies from case to case. It is therefore unsurprising – indeed it is exactly what one should expect – that the estimated “effect” differs in direction and magnitude across studies. Descriptive estimates of excess mortality, changes in fertility, and patterns of displacement and return migration remain indispensable for humanitarian interventions, legal accountability, and historical records.

With a view to forging a cumulative conflict demography, this literature leaves two tasks in view. The first is to build a toolkit of specific mechanism families: recurring micro-to-macro pathways through which violence, insecurity, displacement, resource loss, and institutional disruption affect demographic outcomes. The second is to move beyond micro-level mechanisms toward macro-level analyses of conflict-affected societies: denominators and composition, age structures and sex ratios, marriage markets and marriage squeezes, kin

networks and the loss of kin, and migration systems. A marriage squeeze is a property of a marriage market, not of any individual within it; the bereavement multiplier that determines how many survivors each death leaves grieving is a property of a kinship network (Alburez-Gutierrez 2022). Yet before either task can proceed, the relevant conflict condition must be specified. The next section therefore distinguishes exposure to conflict and violence from the ways individuals and populations are affected by them and asks how disruption acquires demographic significance in the first place.

Exposure, Affectedness, and Meaning-Making

There are prerequisites before an event – say, a battle, a bombardment, or an occupation – can become demographically consequential. First, people must be affected by it rather than just exposed. Exposure is a necessary but not sufficient condition for demographic consequences; individuals may be exposed to the same conflict event yet differ substantially in how, and whether, it affects their lives. Second, its demographic relevance is constituted through interpretation. Interpretation occurs through two processes: collectively, in the processes through which an occurrence is constituted as an event of a particular kind; and individually, in the deliberations that people make within a given situation (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Wagner-Pacifici 2010, 2017).

By exposure we mean contact with conflict or violence. A person is exposed when a battle is fought nearby, when their district is bombed or occupied, when an evacuation order is issued, or when a border closes. Exposure is, in principle, observable and it is what demographers of conflict measure through geocoding events within a given radius of a recorded event. But exposure is not randomly assigned: residential sorting, anticipatory moves, and the targeting by armed actors shape which civilians are displaced in the first place (Balcells and Steele 2016). Even setting selection aside, such measurement is insufficient. Two persons

equidistant from the same recorded incident may stand in entirely different relations to it. By affectedness, we mean the ways in which exposure alters a person's material, bodily, institutional, or relational circumstances – for example through bereavement, injury, the loss of a home or income, or disrupted access to a clinic or school. This distinction echoes work that treats conflict as changing the context in which demographic decisions are made (Williams et al. 2021). These changes may constrain behavior directly, but their demographic significance can also depend on the collective signification through which an occurrence becomes an event of a particular kind. This interpretive dimension is best illustrated by Sewell's (1996) account of the taking of the Bastille, in which an armed assault on a fortress became a revolution through the collective articulation of popular violence with popular sovereignty. Sewell argues that such signification was constitutive of the event, produced through oratory, ritual, the press, and parliamentary debate. Translated into conflict-demographic terms, a bombardment thus becomes "the beginning of the war;" a movement of people becomes "refugee flight;" or a period of disorder becomes a "state of emergency." These collective significations constitute the event to which demographic behavior responds. The Sewellian point is that the condition to which the individual responds is not the occurrence as such but the constituted event. Where destruction forecloses options directly, say a road cut, behavior responds to the material fact; interpretation then governs the interpretation of the situation and the remaining available choices. Thus, whether a household treats a nearby explosion as an isolated incident or as the opening of a war that makes flight necessary depends partly on the collective signification available to it; whether that reading results in behavior depends further on resources, obligations, and risks.

These two prerequisites are exhibited by two contributions to this issue. First, Koning et al. (2026) show that people living within the same protracted conflict may experience different forms and timings of insecurity, and that the harms driving displacement are not

always reducible to exposure to a discrete violent event. Studying women who migrated from Myanmar to Thailand, the authors use latent class analysis of pre-displacement experiences to identify three profiles of insecurity: anticipatory, chronic, and imminent. Only a small minority of people left under imminent threat, characterized by the acute violence that event-based measures are best equipped to capture. Most moved either anticipatorily, in response to signs of escalating danger, or under chronic insecurity associated with prolonged structural violence, dispossession, and the degradation of livelihoods.

The second prerequisite – that the event to which behavior responds is interpretively constituted – is examined by Popovych and colleagues in this issue. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with women in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odesa, the authors analyze how women reason about whether and when to have a child during Russia’s full-scale invasion. At the collective level, “the war” is understood as a shared context encompassing aerial attacks, economic disruption, separation from partners, loss, and uncertainty about the future. At the individual-level, reproductive decisions are shaped by how these conditions are interpreted through preexisting cultural schemas (Sewell 1992). When childbearing is understood to require financial security and a stable partnership, war encourages postponement. When children are viewed as central to family, lineage, and a meaningful life, existential uncertainty can instead encourage women not to delay childbearing. Where the schemas cannot be reconciled, childbearing is neither actively planned nor necessarily prevented. The study thus shows that demographic behavior responds not simply to wartime conditions, but to the meanings through which those conditions are interpreted.

It does not follow that affectedness and meaning-making, by themselves, yield a cumulative conflict demography. They specify no toolkit of mechanisms linking conflict to demographic outcomes and do not explain population-level change, but they identify the conditions under which conflict becomes demographically relevant.

Mechanisms as Toolkit

Mechanisms provide conflict demography with a repertoire of recurrent, recognizable set of causal patterns through which conflict and violence bear upon demographic outcomes. In Elster's terms, mechanisms are causal patterns that are often triggered under unknown conditions or have indeterminate consequences; they can explain a realized outcome without, on their own, yielding a determinate prediction (Elster 2015). This general indeterminacy does not make mechanism-based claims immune to empirical scrutiny. Researchers can specify the populations, institutional arrangements, and temporal forms of violence under which a mechanism is expected to operate and identify the observable processes and outcomes that would support or contradict that claim. Thus, a claim that a specified mechanism produces a specified demographic outcome under defined conditions can be shown to be false. A mechanism-based explanation therefore does not move directly from conflict to population change. Instead, it reconstructs a macro-micro-macro sequence: a situational mechanism through which conflict affects individuals' beliefs, desires, and opportunities; an action-formation mechanism by which those beliefs, desires, and opportunities generate action, and a mechanism through which many such actions aggregate into population-level outcomes (Coleman 1990; Hedström and Swedberg 1998; Hedström 2005; see also Raub 2026). This issue distinguishes three mechanism families by the element of the actor's situation that conflict alters. Conflict shapes the beliefs against which demographic decisions are taken (uncertainty and insecurity); it affects the material and institutional opportunities for acting on them (resources and institutional access); and it alters the relational structure within which any actor is situated (linked lives). The first two are channels into individual behavior in the strict sense. Through linked lives the micro level opens onto the structural transformations of the following section, since who is alive, widowed, and partnered after conflict is a property of a network rather than of anyone's individual deliberation.

Uncertainty and insecurity

Conflict revises expectations. It alters what people can anticipate about their safety, their income, the enforcement of rules, their freedom of movement, and the survival of those on whom they depend; and because the decisions that compose demographic behavior are taken under expectations about the future, conflict shapes fertility, union formation, migration, and health by changing what people expect the future to hold. Its direction is not given in advance. Insecurity may depress fertility where households anticipate scarcity and defer childbearing until conditions become more certain (Agadjanian and Prata 2002); it may accelerate early marriage where families view marriage as protection from conflict-related threats (DiGiuseppe and Haer 2023); and it may either prompt migration or constrain it, since the decision to leave depends on whether leaving is perceived as safer than staying (Bohra-Mishra and Massey 2011). The same disturbance, in short, can push demographic behavior in opposite directions according to what insecurity is understood to threaten and what response it is seen to justify – an instance of the opposed pairs that, as Elster notes, leave a mechanism's net effect indeterminate in advance. He illustrates such indeterminacy through the story of a young boy from Gaza who, as he was watching Israeli bombers, asked himself: "Is this going to make me more or less likely to fire rockets at Israel when I grow up?" (Elster 2015: 31).

Plach and colleagues argue in this issue that the fertility-relevant uncertainty is tied to specific material conditions and expectations – including living costs, housing and energy prices – so that the same shock is experienced differently across countries. The authors estimate monthly deviations from country-specific pre-pandemic fertility trends ("excess" total fertility rates) for twenty-six high-income countries and treat Russia's invasion of Ukraine as the defining shock of the second phase of the "polycrisis" preceded by the pandemic. Whereas fertility declines during the pandemic were short-lived, excess fertility became increasingly negative across Eastern and Central Europe and parts of Western and Northern Europe.

Caudillo and Lee identify a more transient mechanism in this issue. Using municipality-level death-certificate data from Mexico, the authors find that local homicide rates were positively associated with deaths by suicide, but primarily over short periods. The authors interpret the absence of a longer-term association as consistent with adaptation, while acknowledging that sustained violence could increase suicidal ideation without raising suicide levels. The study extends the insecurity mechanism beyond armed conflict to criminal violence, and beyond the high-income settings where contextual determinants of suicide are usually studied. The contrast with Plach and colleagues is one of timing. A sudden spike in violence is associated with an immediate but short-lived increase in suicide, whereas insecurity that recurs or compounds may shape demographic behavior more gradually and over a longer period. What decides which demographic processes unfold, and for how long, may depend less on insecurity itself than on its temporal dynamics.

Resources and institutional access

Conflict affects not only the beliefs that provide an orientation for demographic decisions, but also the material and institutional opportunities available to people. Conflict and violence often disrupt transportation, food distribution, schooling, aid delivery, and the administrative capacity of the state; and these material and institutional opportunities affect whether a given threat or need is translated into one demographic outcome or another.

In this special issue, Thiede and colleagues examine how the consequences of conflict depend on the conditions that shape households' capacity to respond. Combining georeferenced anthropometric data for children aged 0–23 months across 32 sub-Saharan African countries with conflict-event data and high-resolution temperature and precipitation data, they find that nearby armed conflict and heat are each associated with lower weight-for-height. More importantly, the negative association between conflict exposure and child health

is strongest when conflict occurs under heat stress, which is consistent with the argument that environmental and sociopolitical risks can compound, constraining households' capacity to absorb conflict-related disruptions.

Darin and colleagues, also in this special issue, show the migration component of the resource-and-access mechanism. Confronting the collapse of conventional data collection under bombardment, they develop a high-frequency displacement toolbox and apply it to the Gaza Strip from October 7, 2023, to May 15, 2024. Their estimates combine daily snapshots of Facebook Marketing API monthly active-user audiences with pre-war population estimates, deaths, and border crossings to reconstruct changes in the adult population across governorates. The series shows displacement at daily resolution and at an exceptional scale: up to roughly 70 percent of the population displaced, with movement becoming increasingly volatile as the war progressed. Their findings are consistent with displacement being a constrained response to the changing geography of danger and refuge. The study makes visible how conflict shapes migration by shaping the field of possible movement. People move when and where movement remains possible, but that field is itself continually remade by military orders, destruction, and the shrinking of putative safe zones, showing how conflict reshapes not only incentives to move but also the set of destinations that remain accessible.

Linked lives

Conflict does not act on individuals one at a time. It changes who is alive and who is dead, who is present and who is missing, who is partnered and who is widowed, who is caring and who is left to be cared for. A death produces orphans, widows and widowers, bereaved parents and siblings; it reassigns care, redistributes inheritance claims, reorganizes households, and alters the availability of kin to those who remain. People who are never directly attacked may nevertheless be affected, because the consequences of violence radiate outward from the point

of impact through networks and social relationships. What sets linked lives apart is that the relational structure is altered independently of the actor's own deliberation. The relational structure changes at the level of the couple, the household, or the kin network. It is therefore the channel by which the micro-mechanism opens onto the structural transformations discussed further below.

Acosta and colleagues illustrate such a mechanism. Applying demographic kinship models to Colombian records of conflict-related homicide and enforced disappearance, they estimate the burden of bereavement between 1985 and 2018. They find that by 2018 roughly two in five Colombians had lost at least one biological family member to conflict, and about 7.5 percent had lost a close relative. Even under the deliberately optimistic assumption of no further violence after 2018, they estimate that bereavement will remain visible in the population into the 2080s. Because each person is situated within a kin network, a single killing or disappearance bereaves many survivors, causing the population burden of bereavement to exceed the mortality burden by a wide margin. Reading these estimates alongside the Colombian Truth Commission's qualitative record, the authors argue that armed actors made kinship itself a mechanism of terror, using violence against individuals to fracture families and weaken community cohesion.

Lin and Smith-Greenaway, in this special issue, carry the linked-lives mechanism into marriage. Using couple-level data from the 2008 Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey to examine the long-term marital consequences of the Nigerian Civil War, they show that the association between a woman's childhood exposure to war and her later risk of intimate partner violence is largely attributable to assortative exposure within marriage. War-exposed women tend to marry war-exposed men, and once the husband's war exposure is accounted for, the wife's own exposure no longer predicts her victimization. The husband's exposure remains

consequential: women married to war-exposed men have higher odds of intimate-partner violence. The findings suggest that an outcome recorded as belonging to the woman may partly reflect experiences carried into marriage by her partner, underscoring how the social consequences of war travel through linked lives. War reaches a woman's life, here, also through the man whose life it had already marked.

Because lives are lived interdependently, conflict produces demographic consequences beyond those directly exposed, thereby extending its impact to surviving kin and spouses, and across decades.

From Mechanisms to Population Structures

The preceding section followed Billari (2015) in showing that demographic inquiry into conflict should not stop at the level of “macro-level discovery” in the form of establishing conflict effects on demographic outcomes, but should also analyze the “transformational mechanisms” through which macro-level outcomes are generated by the “aggregation of individual outcomes or the interaction among individuals” (Billari 2015:14). In Billari's formulation, “an account of how the micro shapes the macro can close the explanatory circle” (ibid. 14). However, such a promise of explanatory closure is too strong for the purposes of conflict demography. We hold that the appeal of a mechanism-based toolkit lies less in explaining the net population outcome than in building a shared vocabulary for analyzing heterogeneous findings. No single mechanism is likely to explain more than a small share of the population-level change in demographic outcomes associated with conflict. Indeed, violence often activates several pathways at once, and these need not point in the same direction: uncertainty may depress fertility while contraceptive disruption or pronatalist meaning-making sustain it; violence may induce flight among those with resources while

trapping others. The aggregate demographic effect of a given mechanism is therefore indeterminate in advance.

Nor should all conflict-demographic explanations assign the main explanatory work to individual decision-making. The point is not that aggregate patterns lack individual-level components, but that individual-level accounts often fail to explain the population regularity of interest. The timing of marriage, for instance, is routinely modelled through individual preference and search; yet a sex-ratio shock constrains marital outcomes regardless of any one person's desires or beliefs – one cannot marry a person who is not there – as Brainerd's (2017) study of the Russian marriage market after the Second World War shows. Equally, the number of survivors a death leaves grieving is shaped by the structure of the kin network. Therefore, aggregating individual reports of loss without modelling that structure would misstate the bereavement burden (Verdery et al. 2020; Alburez-Gutierrez 2022). In each case, individuals remain in the account; the explanatory work is done by a configuration that no individual instantiates. Aggregate phenomena are thus legitimate objects of causal investigation that need not be routed through micro-foundations to be explained. Demographers should not, as Ní Bhrolcháin and Dyson (2007) and Smith (2003) caution, cede the population-based perspective to the search for micro-foundations. Higher-level explanation is in this sense warranted where a regularity is robust to changes in its individual-level realization (List and Spiekermann 2013). The appropriate level of explanation is not fixed in advance at individual action merely because accounts framed in terms of individual desires, beliefs, and opportunities are often intuitively intelligible (Watts 2014; Weber 1922).

Aggregate demographic change is not merely a descriptive outcome awaiting explanation through micro to macro transformation. Put in the familiar language of causal inquiry, much conflict demographic research has asked effects-of-causes questions: what does exposure to

violence do to fertility, marriage, migration, mortality, or health? Population-level demographic analysis asks the complementary causes-of-effects question: what combination of mortality, fertility, and migration produced the observed population configuration? Mechanisms can inform both questions, but they do not exhaust the second. One reason is that the micro-to-macro transformation, as it is famously depicted in Coleman's diagram, is a social process awaiting specification; in the demography of conflict, however, population-level outcomes also depend on formal demographic relations. Once conflict has altered age-specific rates of dying, moving, partnering, or childbearing, the balancing equation and the arithmetic of cohort translation explain how those changes combine to produce a population of a given size and structure (Ryder 1964). They do not explain why each rate changed, but they are indispensable for explaining why the resulting population took the structure that it did. For example, uncertainty may operate through the postponement of births, but whether those births are later recuperated or foregone depends on the duration of conflict and on how far the affected cohorts advance through their childbearing years (Bongaarts and Feeney 1998). Establishing the resulting change in fertility levels therefore requires macro-level analyses, not mechanism identification alone.

To ask what a conflict did to a population is to compare the observed population with a plausible projection of the population that would have existed without the conflict, and to decompose the difference into its components. An early example is Heuveline's (1998) demographic reconstruction of Cambodia during the 1970s. Using the age-sex distribution recorded in the 1992–1993 UN electoral registration, together with forward and backward cohort-component projections, he compared Cambodia's reconstructed population with the population expected under counterfactual normal mortality. Silva and Snyder in this issue similarly use cohort-component projections to project populations by age and sex in Haiti, Mozambique, and Sudan, integrating fertility and mortality estimates from official

demographic sources with international migration and internal displacement data from UNHCR, IOM, national registers, and other humanitarian agencies. As described above, Acosta et al. (2026) follow a similar logic by estimating the number and proportion of Colombians who became bereaved and projecting bereavement disappearance through cohort replacement into the 2080s.

Zaslavsky and Akbaritabar examine in this issue conflict-related population change within a national science system rather than within Ukraine's population as a whole. Drawing primarily on OpenAlex, the authors reconstruct migration histories from changes in the institutional affiliations of actively publishing researchers, aggregate those movements to the oblast level, and trace the internal and international mobility of Ukraine-based researchers from 2009 to 2022. They find a depletion of regional scientific capacity: in the three years after the conflict began in 2014, well over fifty researchers per thousand left the eastern oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk for destinations elsewhere in Ukraine or abroad. Their finding captures selective migration since researchers are not a random subset of the population; their credentials and networks may make them differentially able to move under conflict. Their departure therefore changes not only the number of people in a region, but the occupational and institutional composition of the population left behind. Though these analyses differ in the strength of the causal claims they support, they do not operate through micro-foundations. They answer "what did the war do to the population," rather than why individuals acted the way they did.

Recognizing the distinction between mechanism-based explanation and population-level demographic analysis allows conflict demography to cumulate rather than become a catalogue of heterogeneous effects and case-specific accounts. Mechanisms cumulate as a vocabulary of interpretation: a pathway whose direction is shaped by context is recognizable

across cases without built-in signs. Insecurity, for example, remains the same analytical object even where it is associated with earlier marriage in one setting and delays in another. What accumulates is a vocabulary for explaining why a macro-level outcome of conflict took the form that it did. Macro-level demographic evidence cumulates differently. Cohort scars, distortion in sex ratios at marriageable ages, and excess mortality are comparable population-level outcomes. They can be expressed in common quantities, decomposed through demographic methods, and analyzed against counterfactual scenarios. The first accumulates as a vocabulary of causal pathways; the second, as counterfactual knowledge of population transformations. A field that seeks to explain how conflict impacts populations, and to compare those impacts across cases, must account for both.

Methodological Pluralism

Conflict demography is concerned with heterogeneous tasks and cannot be defined by a single method. The tasks for the field include understanding how disruptive events are interpreted, identifying the mechanisms through which conflict becomes demographically consequential, and estimating changes in population size, composition, and distribution. No single method can accomplish all three. Instead, the choice of method should follow in the part of the explanatory chain a study seeks to illuminate. The contributions to this special issue illustrate this methodological pluralism. Qualitative interviews reveal how exposure translates into affectedness and how war enters people's reasoning, as Popovych et al. (2026) show with respect to reproductive decisions in wartime Ukraine and Koning et al. (2026) show with respect to insecurity and displacement from Myanmar. Georeferenced data, surveys, and quasi-experimental designs measure exposure and its consequences for partnership, mental health, fertility, and child wellbeing, as in Lin and Smith-Greenaway (2026), Caudillo and Lee (2026), Plach et al. (2026), and Thiede et al. (2026). Digital traces recover high-frequency movement when retrospective surveys cannot, as Darin et al. (2026) show for Gaza. Formal kinship

models convert death counts into bereavement burdens, as in Acosta et al. (2026); demographic projections reconstruct uncertain denominators, as in Silva and Snyder (2026); and bibliometric records trace the wartime redistribution of an occupational stratum, as in Zaslavsky and Akbaritabar (2026).

Some methods also help constitute the analytic object that can be difficult to observe in conditions of conflict. In this issue, Luetke et al. demonstrate this point for conflict exposure. Linking battle-event data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) to the 2018 Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), they show that the relationship between conflict and contraceptive use depends on decisions about spatial and temporal aggregation and exposure operationalization: the radius or administrative unit within which violence is treated as proximate, the window within which it is treated as recent, and whether exposure is measured as a count, a binary condition, or an intensity category. Conclusions about whether conflict has a positive, negative, or null relationship with a demographic outcome can depend on these measurement choices.

Blanton et al. (2026) make a complementary point from the perspective of sampling. In the absence of a reliable sampling frame for migrants in need of international protection, they use telephonic respondent-driven sampling in Costa Rica to reach people whom status-based registries and service-based convenience samples often omit. Relative to the convenience sample, their approach produces a more systematically diverse sample by national origin, immigration status, pre-migration violence, and socioeconomic conditions. The people a study can reach determine which population becomes observable. As conflict frequently disrupts the conditions under which populations can be observed, conflict demography must develop methods that can recover populations and demographic outcomes.

Conclusion

Conflict demography has tended to seek the general effect of conflict and violence on demographic outcomes. That search has yielded weak generalizations, for conflict and the contexts in which it unfolds are highly heterogeneous, combining processes that can push the same outcome in opposite directions. We therefore argue that the field cannot build cumulative knowledge simply by accumulating estimates that leave these conditions unspecified. Its generalizations must instead be conditional. Given a form of exposure, a form of affectedness, an interpretation of the disruption, and a set of mechanisms operating under specified scope conditions, conflict demography can explain why particular demographic responses and transformations of population structures occurred, and why other responses might have occurred elsewhere. Such statements are weaker than universal laws but stronger than description. They are refutable, comparable, and portable across settings. They are, for that reason, the currency of a cumulative social science (Merton 1987; Elster 2015).

The three tasks are not parallel routes to one kind of knowledge, however. Distinguishing exposure from affectedness clarifies what the conflict condition was. Identifying a limited set of mechanism families – uncertainty and insecurity, resources and institutional access, and linked lives – offers a general vocabulary for why a pattern took the direction it did, while recognizing that direction is set by context. Treating population-level changes as explananda in their own right supplies commensurable population magnitudes. The first two tasks yield bounded generalizations and a common language; the third yields objects that can be measured and compared across cases. A cumulative conflict demography requires all three and requires not mistaking one kind of cumulation for another.

Read separately, each contribution to this special issue answers a question of its own: whether a husband's war exposure raises his wife's risk of violence, how quickly a population empties from a bombarded territory, how many relatives a single killing leaves bereaved. Read

together, they show that the guiding question of conflict demography should not be only what conflict does to a given outcome, but how conflict events become demographic: through what forms of affectedness, through which mechanisms, under which conditions, and with what consequences for populations as populations. We offer this special issue as a step toward a cumulative conflict demography.

Acknowledgements

We thank the editors of *Population and Development Review* for their support of the special issue and, in particular, Raya Muttarak for her excellent feedback on this manuscript. We are also grateful to Rachel Friedman, Associate Director/Managing Editor, for her careful editing, valuable coordination and support throughout the editorial process.

Funding

Mathis Ebbinghaus acknowledges support from a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship (ECF-2023-353), jointly funded by the Department of Sociology at the University of Oxford and the Leverhulme Trust. Liliana Andriano acknowledges support from the Jacobs CIFAR Research Fellowship. Patrick Heuveline acknowledges support from the California Center for Population Research at UCLA (CCPR), which receives core support (P2C- HD041022) from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development or the National Institutes of Health.

Notes

1 The reverse direction – how population size, composition, and distribution contribute to the onset of conflict – is the province of political demography and lies beyond the scope of this issue (Brunborg and Urdal 2005).

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