

## Translating Demographic Potential into Human Development: An Innovative Initiative of YUWA- JOSH on National Youth Building in India

Santosh Kumar, Sakshi Gautam

Department of Community Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Rishikesh

### CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Dr Santosh Kumar, Additional Professor, Department of Community Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Rishikesh 249203

Email: [Santosh.cfm@aiimsrishikesh.edu.in](mailto:Santosh.cfm@aiimsrishikesh.edu.in)

### CITATION

Kumar S, Gautam S. Translating Demographic Potential into Human Development: An Innovative Initiative of YUWA- JOSH on National Youth Building in India. *Indian J Comm Health*. 2026;38(1):212-217.

<https://doi.org/10.47203/IJCH.2026.v38i01.041>

### ARTICLE CYCLE

Received: 20/02/2026; Accepted: 26/02/2026; Published: 28/02/2026

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### ABSTRACT

India's demographic dividend presents a time-bound opportunity where investments in youth health and wellness can decisively influence human development outcomes and long-term economic growth. Young people increasingly face multidimensional vulnerabilities including mental health challenges, lifestyle-related morbidities, substance use, social stressors and elevated suicide risk. While global initiatives such as the Global Youth Wellbeing Index, UNICEF's Youth-led Action Initiative and the WHO Youth Council and national frameworks including the National Youth Policy 2025, National Education Policy 2020 and Supreme Court guidelines on student suicide prevention underscore the urgency of holistic youth development, structured and preventive wellness models at the institutional grassroots level remain limited. YUWA-JOSH (Youth Upliftment and Wellness through Awareness: A Journey towards Optimism, Strength and Harmony), implemented by the Social Outreach Cell, AIIMS Rishikesh, offers an innovative, university-based, multidimensional youth wellness framework. The programme conceptualises health beyond the absence of disease and assesses wellness across physical, mental, social, spiritual, occupational and financial domains. To date, YUWA-JOSH has reached over 5,000 youth across universities and educational institutions and demonstrated feasibility and acceptability in diverse academic settings. The model provides a scalable, multi-pronged framework for embedding university health and wellness ecosystems aligned with national priorities for youth empowerment and sustainable development.

### KEYWORDS

Mental Health, Life Style, Health Behavior, Health Education, Suicide Prevention, Students, Universities

### BACKGROUND

Youth form a crucial global demographic, central to economic growth and integral to achieving the interconnected Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda.(1) To accelerate economic growth it is essential to empower the working-age population (15–64 years), however, the 15–29 years age group is often treated as part of the workforce despite a large share of its members not actually being employed which overstates its contribution and obscures the real challenges in harnessing youth potential.

Reflecting a similar situation in India, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) quarterly bulletin reports that the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for persons aged 15 years and above was only about 55.8 % in the October–December 2025 quarter highlighting that nearly half of the adult population remains outside the active workforce.(2) Also, the Demographic Dividend situation is temporary and will alter in the future. When the mortality and fertility rates have decreased, India will have an elderly population. At that point, very few people will be employed to support the nation's economic

growth and the current independent youth population will fall under the elderly population making them dependent and raising the dependency ratio.(3)

This creates exigency to focus on country's young population and promote their multidimensional, skill-based development including their health and wellness. Young people face a range of serious problems including mental health challenges, social pressures and economic uncertainties and alarmingly suicide that was the third leading cause of death among 15–29-year-olds globally in 2021 underscoring the urgent need for better support systems and interventions to protect youth wellbeing.(4,5) In India also, suicide is a severe and growing public health concern. In 2016, the suicide death rate was 16.5 per 100,000 compared to the global average of 10.5 per 100,000. The elderly, people with special needs and those aged 15 to 29 are the most at risk.(6)

The multidimensional development of the youth population is essential to ensure that young minds are meaningfully represented in national growth processes and development systems. In India, according to Census

2011, youth constitute a substantial share of the population, that is, 27.6% and nearly 43% of the country's workforce belongs to this age group, focused investment in their quality of life and holistic development across physical, mental, social and spiritual domains is crucial for nurturing an educated, skilled and resilient workforce to drive nation-building.

Keeping an eye on the existing burden of youth morbidity in terms of physical mental, social and spiritual health in India to uplift and transform the youth through optimism, strength, resilience and harmony an innovative model has been created by Social Outreach cell AIIMS Rishikesh to in terms of youth upliftment and wellness through awareness. This initiative is named YUWA-JOSH (Youth Upliftment and Wellness through Awareness: Journey towards Optimism, Strength and Harmony in objective with to address young morbidities like life style disease,

suicidal tendency, emotional regulation, social and environmental health.

The term "demographic dividend" describes the rise in economic growth that typically coincides with increases in the proportion of the working-age population basically, the labour force to dependents.(7) In other words, economic growth has frequently accompanied rises in the percentage of a country's population that is of working age.(7)

The working age population (15-64 years) makes up most of the population of India, according to Census 2011 data and has similar projections for the year 2036 too.(8,9) It is interesting to note that 15-29 years of individuals make 43 percent that is approximately half of those in working age population in the national census data and thus becomes imperative to define this age group separately.(8)

Figure 1: Actual population pyramid: India-2011

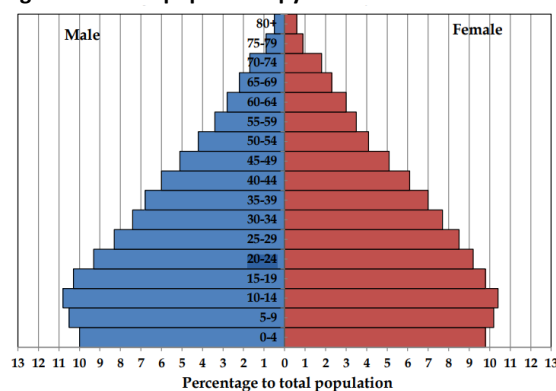
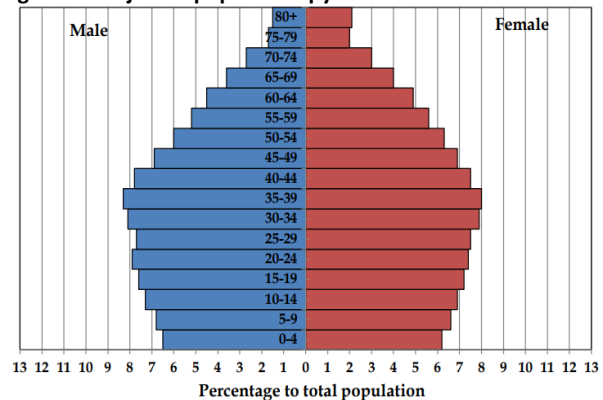


Figure 2: Projected population pyramid: India-2036



Source- Population Projections for India and States 2011 – 2036 Projections

It should be mentioned that there isn't a single, widely accepted definition of youth.(10) Nonetheless, regardless of various definitions by Member States, the United Nations classifies individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 as youth for statistical reasons.(10) In Indian context, National Youth Policy defines 15-29 years as 'Youth' age group.(11)

The three components of the Human Development Index (HDI) are economic conditions, health and education that represents country's growth. Four variables that are used to quantify these at the national level are the logarithm of Gross National Income per capita (PPP\$), the mean and predicted years of education and life expectancy at birth.(12,13) The human development and economic growth of a country is evaluated through these parameters. (13)

But the global evidence is reflecting the opposite. According to South Asia Development Update: Jobs for Resilience Report of World Bank Group, the South Asian region that includes India is headed in a direction that could waste its demographic dividend of growth meaning the region's employment growth is insufficient to meet the demands of its expanding population.(14) This becomes the reason why the developing countries despite the growing youth and working population their economic growth is halted.(7)

Only with sufficient investments in education, healthcare and job creation for the youth, this youth bulge can have

a beneficial impact on economic growth of the country otherwise, it might hinder human development by increased unemployment, underutilisation of human resources, etc.(15)

Global Initiatives: The World level initiatives have been started to involve youth more for their holistic development eventually leading to country's progressive development and growth. The initiatives also integrate a strong health component, recognizing it as an essential pillar of youth empowerment and holistic development. Global Youth Wellbeing Index is one such measure, developed by International Youth Foundation (2017). The Index's goal is to pinpoint areas that require immediate attention in order to ensure that today's youth can prosper in a world full of growing obstacles. The Index can operate as a tool to monitor and analyse progress towards the 2030 sustainable goals and to recognise the many crucial ways in which investments in youth can advance the global development agenda. It does include young people's own views on how they feel they are doing in different areas by using survey responses from thousands of youth across 30 countries, along with selected questions from the Gallup World Poll, to complement the objective data used in the Index. When talking about the health domain of the index of the index, it has indicators specifically that are youth- focussed. It talks about youth fertility, self-harm fatalities, stress,

perceptions of health and tobacco use. According to the Global Youth Wellbeing Index, almost half of the youth in the indexed countries feel their lives are too stressful and in country like India the suicide rate was found to be 49 per 100,000. India overall ranked 26th and individually 25th in the health domain among the 30 countries surveyed.(16) Because a skilled, healthy and well-supported youth population is crucial to ensuring sustained national prosperity and preventing economic growth from being undermined, the Global Youth Wellbeing Index represents one of the major international efforts undertaken to systematically assess the needs and challenges of youth providing evidence to guide the formulation of youth-focused policies and programs.

The Youth-led Action Initiative by UNICEF seeks to accelerate youth's ability to positively transform themselves, their well beings and the community. Encouraging youth to take initiative and bring about change is the straightforward objective of this initiative with additional focus on them being active change pioneers at all levels. UNICEF works with its partners to implement the Initiative by providing training, funding, mentoring and networking for youth while also engaging governments and community leaders to create a supportive environment for youth-led change. This initiative is guided by three principles, namely, 1) building long-term systems by strengthening local networks, government bodies and communities so they can independently support and sustain youthful changemakers beyond UNICEF's involvement, 2) Through a peer-to-peer cascade model, the trained youth "Champion Trainers" return to their communities to train others enabling UNICEF to reach large numbers of even the most 'hard-to-reach' youth effectively and sustainably, and 3) making the initiative flexible and locally adaptable, offering open-source, youth-friendly tools and guidelines that help countries, partners and young people tailor activities to their own contexts and change goals.

For the delivery of youth training, the Youth Action Guide was developed through consultations and discussions with young people ensuring it reflects their experiences and supports peer-led and participatory learning approaches. The Guide provides a structured yet flexible framework that equips young people to identify priority issues, undertake fact-finding through desk research and community engagement, analyse social and policy contexts and design locally relevant advocacy plans. Champion Trainers facilitate the development of core advocacy competencies among peers including networking and allyship building, strategic communication and storytelling, engagement with decision-makers and collective action to build momentum for change. By embedding these evidence-informed, youth-friendly processes within community settings the model enables scalable outreach and sustained engagement allowing large numbers of young people particularly those traditionally excluded from formal programming to participate meaningfully in youth-led change initiatives.

Across all aspects of the Initiative there is a strong focus on mental wellness as a foundation for effective youth-

led change. Using the UNICEF/WHO Helping Adolescents Thrive (HAT) evidence-based package young people are supported to build resilience, manage emotions and stress, strengthen coping and problem-solving skills and recognize when and how to seek help.(17) This integration ensures that young changemakers are equipped with the mental wellbeing capacities needed to sustain their engagement and impact.(18)

The WHO Youth Council's mission is to promote meaningful youth engagement within the organization by strategically using its advisory capacity to the organization's senior leadership and utilising the perspectives and knowledge of diverse young people worldwide to shape health policies and strategies. The WHO Youth Council is governed by the aftermentioned principles, 1) to have a varied and inclusive membership and structure guaranteeing sufficient participation from various stakeholder groups, geographical areas and socioeconomic backgrounds; 2) to be open and honest about all procedures including the operations and operational plan; 3) to ensure all actions correspond with WHO's norms and standards; and 4) to make it easier for interested parties to coordinate in order to further WHO's priorities on youth's contribution to the public health agenda.

The WHO Youth Council is an advisory network not a decision-making body, and is structured around a Steering Committee and Working Groups. The Steering Committee provides strategic direction, oversees working groups, advises on membership, and supports coordination of Council activities, with members serving two-year terms and decisions guided by consensus. All participants of the WHO Youth Council engage in working groups. The purpose of the working groups is to bring together people with similar interests to share information and collaboratively work on specific initiatives that line with the WHO Youth Council's general mission and objectives. The Steering Committee will establish a workplan for each working group's area of concentration, outlining its goals, primary deliverables, priorities and methods.(19)

National Initiatives: Following the lead of global initiatives, India has also launched national youth-focused efforts including the National Youth Policy to promote the holistic development and meaningful participation of young people. In order to efficiently harness young people's constructive and creative energies, the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports manages youth-related policies, initiatives and programs targeted at youth upliftment following the dual aims of personality building and country building.(20)

With the goal of utilising youth potential for inclusive development, responsible governance, and the realisation of *Viksit Bharat* by 2047, the National Youth Policy (NYP) 2025 outlines a forward-looking vision to match the goals of India's youth with the country's development priorities. Enabling access to high-quality education and future-ready skills to create a productive workforce, encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation, promoting holistic health, well-being and resilience, increasing participation in sports and recreation and developing environmentally conscious

youth that lead climate action and contribute to sustainable communities are its main goals.(21)

**Figure 3 Focus Areas of NYP 2025**



Source- Draft National Youth Policy 2025, Department of Youth Affairs and Sports

To create a workforce prepared for the future, the National Youth Policy (NYP) 2025 places a high priority on improving the connections between education and employment. The policy encourages experiential learning, demand-driven skilling, digital literacy and industry-aligned training through reforms like the National Education Policy 2020, Skill India Mission, PM Kaushal Vikas Yojana, National Skills Qualification Framework and National Credit Framework. Special emphasis is given on first-time employment, STEM involvement among women, inclusion of marginalised youngsters and hyperlocal job possibilities to increase employability and economic resilience.(21)

Through initiatives such as the Trillion Rupee Research Development and Innovation Fund and programmes like Stand-Up India, NYP 2025 supports youth-led enterprises in emerging sectors such as green industries, AI, healthcare and digital services. The policy emphasizes inclusive and women-led entrepreneurship, mentorship and academia-industry collaboration to foster innovation and strengthen India's job-creating ecosystem.(21)

NYP 2025 incorporates preventive healthcare, mental wellness and physical fitness since it recognises that holistic health is essential to young productivity. The policy encourages healthy lifestyles, mental health awareness, substance addiction prevention and community-based support systems, building on programs like Eat Right India, Fit India Movement, Tele-MANAS and Nasha Mukta Yuva Bharat. To create a resilient and healthy youth population, emphasis is placed on yoga, mindfulness, sexual and reproductive health education and preventative health practices.(21)

According to NYP 2025, sports and leisure are important factors that promote social, mental, and physical growth. In accordance with the National Sports Policy 2025, the policy encourages physical education, grassroots sports, and inclusive access for women, rural youth, and Divyangjan. Additionally, it promotes media literacy, safe digital participation, cyber hygiene, and possibilities in the creator economy while bolstering youth spaces and community sports infrastructure in order to address cultural, artistic, and digital recreation.(21)

NYP 2025 highlights volunteering as a means of fostering social cohesion, civic participation, and leadership development. The policy seeks to mainstream institutionalised youth volunteerism and acknowledge

service contributions through initiatives like Mera Yuva Bharat and the National Service Scheme. It intends to identify and support one lakh young leaders, particularly from marginalised backgrounds, empowering them to drive community action and contribute effectively to national development initiatives.(21)

A key component of NYP 2025 is environmental stewardship and climate leadership. The strategy encourages climate knowledge, green skills, conservation efforts, and sustainable lifestyles, building on programs like the National Action Plan on Climate Change and Mission LIFE. In order to build climate-aware citizens and a generation of green leaders dedicated to sustainable and resilient development, youth involvement in afforestation, waste reduction, recycling, and circular economy practices is encouraged.(21)

Under NYP 2025, the Mera Yuva Bharat (MY Bharat) portal was launched to empower young citizens through meaningful and seamless engagement. As a physical platform, it integrates digital access with on-ground opportunities in volunteerism, experiential learning and community development fostering an inclusive youth ecosystem and strengthening the spirit of Jan Bhagidari. Also a network of 80 MY Bharat youth hostels will be converted into MY Bharat Resource Centers (MYBRCs) in each district as one-stop centers for youth participation. These hostels offer reasonably priced lodging, encourage youth exchanges and promote development initiatives. MYBRCs will address multiple

MYBRC- My Bharat Resource Centre domains of youth development with a strong focus on mental wellbeing as a key component of the holistic development of young people.(21,22)

**Figure 4 Domains covered at MYBRC**



Source- Draft National Youth Policy 2025, Department of Youth Affairs and Sports; MYBRC- My Bharat Resource Centre

Various schemes are being run under Department of Youth Affairs, one of them is Rashtriya Yuva Sashastikaran Karyakram (RYSK) which is an umbrella scheme namely, (i) Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (ii) National Youth Corps (iii) National Young Leaders Programme (NYLP) (iv) National Programme for Youth and Adolescent Development (v) International Co-operation (vi) Youth Hostels (vii) National Discipline Scheme, etc.

After amalgamating the existing two volunteer schemes namely National Service Volunteer (NSV) and Rashtriya Sadbhawana Yojana (RSY) National Youth Corps was started and its goals are to develop a group of young people who are disciplined, committed and driven to

actively participate in the development of their country. By encouraging social and economic development it aims to promote inclusive growth while enhancing the role of young people as efficient conduits for sharing information and fundamental knowledge within their communities. The programme also aims to develop young individuals as group modulators and peer educators who can positively influence attitudes and behaviours and to encourage them to serve as role models for younger generations particularly in fostering public ethics, probity and respect for the dignity of labour.(23)

NYLP's goal is to help young people develop leadership skills so they can reach their full potential and help build their country. It is a Central Sector Scheme comprising five key components: the Neighbourhood Youth Parliament (NYP), Youth for Development Programme (YFDP), National Young Leaders Awards (NYLA), National Youth Advisory Council (NYAC), and the National Youth Development Fund (NYDF).(24) In order to actively involve youth leaders and other stakeholders in the decision-making process regarding youth-related issues, the National Young Leaders Programme (NYLP) scheme called for the establishment of a National Youth Advisory Council (NYAC). The NYAC is a broad-based body comprising representatives from central and state governments, key youth-related ministries, NGOs, UN agencies, industry bodies and young leaders from across all regions of India ensuring inclusive and effective youth representation.(25)

For youth development, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions an integrated student-centred education system that links learning with physical, mental and socio-emotional well-being recognising that healthy, well-nourished children learn better. It mandates regular health check-ups, universal immunisation, strengthened school nutrition, wellness clubs and structured health education covering nutrition, fitness, mental health, hygiene and preventive care.(26)

The Supreme Court of India directed Higher Education Institutions to take proactive responsibility for student mental well-being, mandating prompt FIR registration in campus suicide cases and adoption of comprehensive, institutional suicide-prevention frameworks based on the National Task Force's recommendations. The guidelines stress addressing structural stressors (academic pressure, discrimination, ragging, financial stress), strengthening counselling services, grievance redressal and creating safe and inclusive campus environments with trained faculty and referral systems.(27)

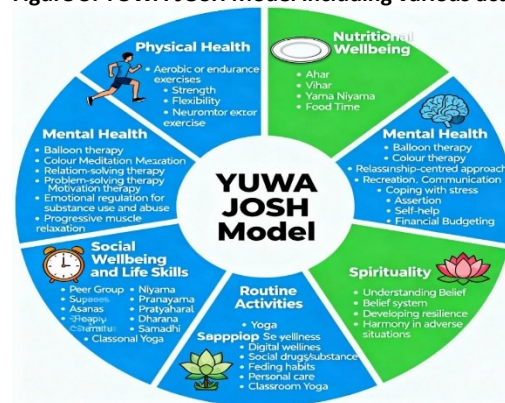
YUWA JOSH (Youth Upliftment and Wellness through Awareness: Journey Towards Optimism, Strength & Harmony) being implemented by Social Outreach Cell AIIMS Rishikesh involves a multifaceted framework that incorporates physical, mental, social, spiritual, occupational, and financial wellness to assess youth wellness. It is a youth-focused project based on the idea that health is more than just the absence of illness; it also includes general functioning and life balance. YUWA JOSH seeks to create a holistic picture of young people's wellbeing by methodically evaluating these interrelated wellness categories while also encouraging awareness,

introspection and proactive participation in healthy behaviours. The initiative aims to encourage the development of resilient, knowledgeable and health-conscious persons by empowering kids to actively engage in health and wellbeing activities.

The objective of this program is to promote holistic health — physical, mental, social, Spiritual wellbeing among university students and to address and mitigate morbidity related to contemporary youth issues, including depression, suicidal behaviour, substance abuse, drug dependence, and financial and psychological wellness challenges through fostering optimism, strength, and social harmony through expert-led, interactive sessions and workshops.

The innovative program among youth is assessed by YUWA JOSH validated tool and intervention is given through evidenced based behaviour change technique through balloon therapy, colour therapy, meditation and emotional regulation, progressive muscles relaxation and workplace yoga and wellness.

**Figure 5: YUWA-JOSH Model including various activities**



Till now more than five thousand youth has been reached at the institutions and universities to address the youth concern. This model is adopted by various schools and colleges.

### CONCLUSION

India's demographic dividend presents a time-bound opportunity where the health, wellbeing and capabilities of youth will decisively shape national development, human development outcomes and future economic resilience. While global and national frameworks increasingly recognise the urgency of investing in youth wellness as a pillar of HDI and sustainable growth, a coherent, robust and institutionalised youth health and wellbeing framework at the grassroots level remains limited. In this context, every higher education institution must evolve into a University Health and Wellness Ecosystem through a multi-pronged approach integrating preventive health, mental wellbeing, life-skills, social support and enabling environments, thereby translating youth potential into sustained national progress.

### AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

All authors have contributed equally.

### DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI ASSISTED

**TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS**

The authors haven't used any generative AI/AI assisted technologies in the writing process.

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