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Examining the Patterns of Internal Displacement from 2009 to 2025 in Pakistan due to Conflict and Violence

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan has experienced numerous waves of internal displacement as a result of terrorism, conflict and military operations. Little attention has been paid to how patterns of internal displacement have changed over time, how populations remain displaced, and the demographic composition of those affected. This study examines conflict-induced internal displacement within Pakistan from the years 2009 to 2025. Quantitative data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) have been used to analyse trends in new and stock displacement. Furthermore, demographic patterns of age and sex are used to assess the prevalence and persistence of displacement and its implications for vulnerable populations. National policy documents and reports documenting the on-ground experiences of displaced communities are examined in order to evaluate Pakistan's legal and institutional response. The analysis shows that conflict-induced displacement in Pakistan is episodic in nature, peaking during periods of intensified military operations. The consequences can persist long after immediate causes of displacement have subsided. The study highlights that Pakistan's existing constitutional provisions and legal framework do not adequately address the needs of conflict-induced internally displaced persons (IDPs). It therefore recommends that the national and provincial governments take steps to create a single national legal framework for internal displacement, drawing on the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and the comparative approaches adopted by Colombia and Honduras.

Keywords: *Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Pakistan, Policy, Conflict and violence*

INTRODUCTION

Each year, millions of people worldwide are forced to leave their homes and livelihoods as a result of armed conflict, violence and disasters (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, IDMC, 2025). Unlike refugees, who have crossed an international border, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are people who have been forced to flee their homes but remain within the borders of their own country (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, n.d.). IDPs remain under the jurisdiction of their own governments and do not acquire the international legal status afforded to refugees (UNHCR, n.d.). According to 2024 estimates, about 83.4 million people live in internal displacement across 117 countries. Many of these nations are often relatively poor and lack the humanitarian infrastructure needed to accommodate large influxes of internally displaced populations (IDMC, 2025).

Living conditions of IDPs are often poor, with a lack of access to basic facilities such as drinking water, education, healthcare, and electricity. The primary responsibility for their protection and care falls upon national authorities, which, in many cases, may be unable or unwilling to do so (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA, 2019). IDPs do not qualify for protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention, even though the difficulties and hardships they face are similar to those faced by refugees. The particular problems faced by IDPs, along with gaps in their legal protection, have made their security and safety a significant concern to both national governments and the international community (Cohen, 1998).

In recent years, armed conflicts have become more widespread and intense, affecting civilian populations worldwide. In 2024, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) recorded 20.1 million conflict-related internal displacements worldwide (International Organisation for Migration [IOM], 2025). The following year, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) registered 65 active conflicts (Uppsala University, 2026). Pakistan provides an important case study of IDPs, having experienced repeated waves of displacement from turbulent parts of the country, with IDPs moving to relatively safer areas since the mid-2000s. This has primarily been the result of massive military operations and terror-induced uncertainty in the peripheries of the state. Since the early 2000s, Pakistan has experienced significant internal conflict and instability in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and Balochistan (Yamin & Malik, 2014).

Existing works on conflict-induced internal displacement in Pakistan have examined the issue from humanitarian, social, gendered and legal perspectives. Din (2010) specifically conducts an early, rights-based assessment of IDPs, examining institutional frameworks with a focus on vulnerable groups. Orakzai (2012) similarly analyses displacement within Pakistan's post-9/11 conflict and counterterrorism operation, highlighting the political and humanitarian consequences of large-scale population movements. Studies have also examined Pakistan's response to conflict-induced displacement, with Ahmad et al. (2016) and Sayeed and Shah (2017) analysing official data on IDPs and the return of displaced individuals to their local areas.

Specific research following periods of operations also takes place, with documented difficulties for residents of North Waziristan in Khan et al. (2022), while Rafiq et al. (2022) found that, although conditions among returnees in Swat improved following rehabilitation, satisfaction with government and social support remained comparatively low. Lots of studies also examine the effects of displacement on vulnerable groups. Mujeeb (2015), in a study in an IDP camp in Jalozai, identified poorer psychological outcomes for women, and Levine et al. (2019) show that displacement from FATA produced substantial economic hardship while altering existing gender roles, including attitudes towards girls' education and domestic violence.

Recent legal scholarship identifies continuing gaps in Pakistan's framework, particularly the absence of dedicated national legislation specifically governing the rights and protection of conflict-induced IDPs

(Baig et al., 2024). Taken together, this literature demonstrates that conflict displacement in Pakistan has significant humanitarian, socioeconomic and legal consequences. Less attention is paid to the long-term humanitarian costs of these conflicts. Few studies have examined long-term conflict-induced displacement trends in Pakistan, considering their implications for marginalised groups such as women and children. This study aims to fill this research gap by analysing trends in displacement in Pakistan between 2009 and 2025. It will consider what the data and patterns reveal about conflict-induced displacement in Pakistan and whether Pakistan's existing legal and institutional framework adequately addresses the needs of conflict-induced IDPs. It further considers how this framework could be strengthened to provide greater support and protection to these vulnerable populations.

To understand these changing displacement patterns, it is important to understand the political tensions and violence in Pakistan that led to displacement in the first place. Following the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan by the United States in 2001, the Pakistani government was forced to take action along its northwestern border with Afghanistan (Khattak, 2011). In response to U.S. demands, Islamabad took steps to capture terrorist leaders and fighters of the Taliban who had fled into areas of Pakistan following the war (Khattak, 2011). Accordingly, the Pakistani state deployed upwards of 70,000 troops to its tribal areas (Khattak, 2011).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2005-2007

Operation Ali-Mizan (2002-2006) was the first of these, comprising several smaller operations, including Operation Kalosha II, in which militants were targeted in South Waziristan (Jones & Fair, 2010). These operations took place in response to specific militant leaders within South Waziristan, who were suspected of harbouring foreign fighters (Jones & Fair, 2010). During this period, the Pakistani state entered into negotiations. It launched operations in Swat, with the first phase of Operation Rah-e-Haq beginning in November 2007 in response to militant uprisings in the region (Khattak, 2011). By the end of 2007, the militant commander Baitullah Mehsud announced that the various local Taliban groups had united under his leadership and adopted the name Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP; Abbas, 2008). In January 2008, about 300 of TTP's men captured the historic Sararogha Fort (a colonial-era outpost) in South Waziristan, which was manned by only 40 members of Pakistan's Paramilitary Frontier Corps (Witte & Ali, 2008). The TTP started launching attacks across Pakistan, where two separate suicide bombings in Islamabad (2008) killed at least 70 and 60 people, respectively (U.S. Department of State, 2009). Following this incident, Pakistani military operations shifted in scale and focus to primarily target TTP strongholds in districts throughout North-Western Pakistan (Jones & Fair, 2010).

2008

Operation Zalzala (earthquake), launched in January 2008, was the first large-scale operation targeting South Waziristan (Jones & Fair, 2010). Reports suggest that forces destroyed over 4,000 houses in South Waziristan in January alone (Ali, 2008) and displaced roughly 200,000 locals, thus causing significant

animosity amongst local populations (Khan, 2011). Families took refuge in makeshift shelters, camps, and host communities in neighbouring districts like Dera Ismail Khan, where often entire villages and settlements were found destroyed, damaged or burnt on families' return (Khattak, 2011). Pakistani forces, in coordination with its coalition partner, the US, had cleared numerous villages in South Waziristan, confiscating heavy weaponry from the insurgents (Jones & Fair, 2010) at the expense of local populations. Data compiled by the Pakistani Institute of Peace Studies reported that there were 2,148 terrorist, insurgent, and sectarian attacks in 2008 alone, primarily affecting areas with internally displaced persons (Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2009).

2009

In Swat, continuous operations under Operation Rah-e-haq had led to increasing violence, where the Taliban destroyed infrastructure in Swat, blowing up bridges and burning down school buildings (Khattak, 2011). Reports of dozens of locals being beheaded and shot to death on charges of spying were common in this district (Khattak, 2011), which led many communities to abandon their homes and flee due to increasing violence (Khattak, 2011). Operations took place following the collapse of the previous ceasefire, and it culminated in a major offensive in 2009 in Mingora, which displaced upwards of 2.4 million people (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2010). By January of 2009, the army had imposed shoot-on-sight curfews in major cities in Swat, with local terror forces responding by destroying schools and starting to attack security forces (Khattak, 2011). The TTP attacked police stations, Frontier Constabulary personnel, NGO offices, schools, and set up their own checkpoints along the road (Khattak, 2011). The operation was not a complete success.

Militants would move into districts such as Orakzai because Pakistan’s military was not present in the area (Shah, 2010). According to the US State Department, fighters led by Baitullah Mehsud (TTP) moved north through FATA, with a growing presence in Bajaur and Khyber as military operations intensified (U.S. Department of State, 2010). By October 2009, 50,000 people had left the Bajaur district; by December 2009, more than 250,000 civilians from Bajaur and 180,000 from Mohmand were registered as IDPs in Lower Dir and Nowshera (Khan, 2011). By the end of 2009, there were approximately 428,000 IDPs from South Waziristan alone (Khan, 2011).

2011

Operation Koh-e-Sufaid was launched by the Pakistani army in the Kurram district in 2011 with the official goal of clearing out local TTP strongholds blocking the Thall-Parachinar highway, which connected minority Shia populations to the rest of the country (Jan & Worby, 2011). This operation was, however, ineffective in dealing with the sectarian violence in the region. It is alleged that the army used this as an opportunity to dismantle local anti Taliban resisting tribes and factions in support of the Haqqani Network (Taliban; a tool which the Pakistani State is alleged to have supported to achieve its goal of “strategic depth” in Afghanistan; Dressler, 2011). The operation then resulted in 13000 families being displaced, with little assistance given to IDPs (Dawn, 2011).

2014

By 2014, Pakistan was again facing a significant escalation in attacks, and in that year alone 2,147 terror attacks were reported (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism [START], 2022). Attacks had also been increasing on the Pakistani military (START, 2022), following the beheading of 23 Pakistani soldiers by the TTP (Sherazi, 2014) and the killing of a three-star general by the TTP (Yousaf, 2015). The military started to consider operations targeting TTP militants within North Waziristan. Public pressure mounted on the government following an attack on the Jinnah International Terminal of Karachi Airport, which resulted in the killing of 28 security personnel (Roul, 2015). Consequently, in June 2014, Pakistan launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb (Jan, 2014). The operation was deemed a success by the Pakistani government (Roul, 2015). Roughly one million people were forced to leave their homes as a direct result of Operation Zarb-e-Azb (Kakakhel & Farooq, 2015). The total registered displaced population from North Waziristan was 992,649 individuals (90,756 families): 256,272 males, 284,191 females, and 452,186 children (OCHA, 2014). The FMDA registered 80% of the IDPs residing in Bannu district (Javaid, 2016).

In comparison to previous operations such as those conducted in South Waziristan and Swat in 2009, the conflict-induced displacement remained much higher at the end of 2014, with roughly 2,000,000 people remaining displaced at the end of 2014 - which was almost double that of the previous year of 2009, which hovered around 1.2 million (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, IDMC, 2015). The scale of destruction in Operation Zarb-e-Azb was significantly greater than in earlier campaigns (Jan, 2014). The Pakistani military was aiming to target and destroy infrastructure which created explosive devices, suspected camps used to train fighters, underground tunnels and routes used by militant groups, as well as buildings which were suspected to be used as storage hubs (Jan, 2014). This meant that significant public infrastructure, including bridges, roads, and important local markets, was rendered inoperable, which, when coupled with the destruction of local housing, complicated the return of IDPs (Kakakhel & Farooq, 2015).

2015-2017

Following Operation Zarb-e-Azb, there was a decrease in the number of attacks in Pakistan, whereby by 2018 Pakistan recorded 584 terrorist incidents in 2018 which represented a 68% decrease in attacks from 2014 (National Counter Terrorism Authority, 2019). This eliminated the need for major operations, shifting the focus primarily to intelligence gathering and intelligence-based operations within communities, thereby avoiding population displacement (National Counter Terrorism Authority, 2019). Small spikes can be noted in 2017 with 59,000 new IDPs as a result of Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad in the Khyber district (IDMC, 2020); however, it is worth noting that this did not interfere with the continuous return of IDPs that was taking place, with nearly 260,000 conflict-displaced households being returned between 2015 and 2017 (United States Agency for International Development, 2017).

2025

In 2025, the IDMC tracked 250,000 new internal displacements within Pakistan, a significant spike from 2024 and the highest level Pakistan had experienced since 2014 (IDMC, 2026a). According to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), combat-related deaths in 2025 rose 74% to 3,413, compared with 1,950 in 2024 (Mumtaz, 2026). 2025 also marked the deadliest year since 2011 for deaths among security personnel (Mumtaz, 2026). This sudden increase was partly due to military operations, during which, according to the IDMC report on internal displacement in 2026, evacuations before Operation Sarbakaf resulted in 152,000 movements between July and September (IDMC, 2026a). Furthermore, due to further localised military operations and border clashes with Afghanistan, IDMC's preliminary event records additionally identify 61,200 movements in Tirah and 15,000 in Kurram (IDMC, 2026b).

While the vast majority of IDPs in Pakistan have been from the KPK province, where spikes in newly reported internal displacements have occurred due to operations there, this doesn't mean that conflict-induced displacement is limited to the KPK and NWFP region (IDMC, 2019). Violence has persisted in Balochistan, with attacks by separatist groups such as the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), Baloch Republican Army (BRA) and the Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA) and terrorist groups such as the TTP (Verma et al., 2025) all increasing in recent years where in the first seven months of 2026 there were 1,148 terrorist attacks in Balochistan according to official military data released by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) (Business Recorder, 2026). This has led people to flee violence from within Balochistan; however, the Pakistani State has not conducted any military operations at the scale of those conducted in KPK; thus, this has not led to large-scale displaced populations (IDMC, 2019). Furthermore, the government has refused to classify displaced people from Balochistan as IDPs and reporting, along with the movement of the press, is significantly restricted in Balochistan, leading to significant underrepresentation of figures (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2025; IDMC, 2019). The government has also not set up any formalised IDP camps in Balochistan, unlike in other provinces, and currently none are active; hence, the vast majority of IDPs opt to live in informal settlements and housing without ever being registered in official government databases (South Asians for Human Rights, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopts a quantitative secondary data research design, relying on existing displacement estimates. This method is appropriate because the study is concerned with identifying patterns across multiple years, comparing annual changes, and determining whether any specific periods were associated with unusually high levels of displacement.

The research analyses various indicators, including the total affected population, new conflict-induced displacement, stock displacement, and age and sex estimates. In this study, stock displacement refers to the number of people estimated to be living in internal displacement at a given point in time and, in contrast, new displacement records displacement movements occurring during a particular year (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC], n.d.-b). These figures are expressed as percentages to understand the relative share of vulnerable groups within the total displaced population. Data are drawn from the IDMC, which maintains a database that provides annual estimates of internal displacement caused by conflict, violence, and disasters. This study uses only the conflict-related data for Pakistan between 2009 and 2025 (IDMC, n.d.-a).

In addition to the quantitative analysis, the study conducts legal and policy analyses. Pakistan's constitutional provisions, legislation and disaster-management policies applicable to IDPs are examined alongside reports by international and humanitarian organisations and other secondary literature documenting the experiences of displaced populations. These sources are used to analyse the patterns identified in the IDMC data and to understand the particular challenges experienced by vulnerable groups. Pakistan's current framework is assessed against the *United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*. At the same time, the laws of Colombia and Honduras are used as comparative examples to identify ways to strengthen Pakistan’s legal framework to better protect these vulnerable populations.

Data Characteristics

The dataset provides annual estimates of conflict-induced displacement in Pakistan from 2009 - 2025, covering stock displacement and demographic breakdowns by sex and age. The primary variables used in this study include the year, the total affected population, and the total numbers of adult men and women (18–59), children (0–17), adults, and older persons (60 and above). These variables allow the study to examine both overall displacement trends and the extent to which vulnerable groups were affected. The data are appropriate for this study as they are standardised across years and allow for comparison over time. However, it also has limitations, such as displacement figures being estimates rather than exact counts, and some people may be displaced more than once in a single year. Therefore, the analysis treats the data as an indicator of broad trends rather than a perfect count of every displaced individual. Furthermore, there is no data which shows how many individuals returned within the same year they were displaced; thus, we cannot add stock displacement and internal displacement numbers. Stock displacement is calculated by counting the number of displaced persons at the end of the year; however, if they were initially displaced within the same year, they would be counted twice if we combined both figures.

Data Analysis Strategy

The data analysis is divided into four main stages: descriptive statistics, longitudinal trend analysis, graphical representation, and event-based analysis. First, descriptive statistics are used to summarise the overall scale of displacement in Pakistan between 2009 and 2025. This includes calculating the total number of people affected, the mean annual displacement, and the years of maximum and minimum displacement. Descriptive statistics are also used to calculate the average percentage share of women, men, children, adults, and people aged 60 and above within the affected population. Second, longitudinal trend analysis is used to examine how displacement changed over time. This involves plotting year-wise displacement figures on line graphs to identify increases, decreases, and major spikes. Line graphs are used to show annual changes in overall displacement, the number of women and men affected each year, the number of children affected each year, and vulnerable groups over time. Stacked or percentage charts are used to show the demographic composition of displaced populations, especially the percentage share of children, adults, and older people. Finally, the study uses event-based analysis to connect major changes in the data with historical and political developments in Pakistan. The graphs are not interpreted in isolation, as major increases in displacement are linked to conflict events, military operations, militancy, and insecurity in affected regions. IDMC figures are estimates and underrepresent sparsely populated areas, such as Balochistan. Demographic estimates may also be incomplete, as new displacement data, unlike stock displacement data, does not record demographic breakdowns.

RESULTS

The tables and graphs in this section present patterns of internal displacement in Pakistan, show changes in overall and conflict-related displacement over time, and provide a demographic breakdown by sex and age group. Together, the figures highlight the years when displacement was highest and how the number and composition of displaced people changed over the period studied.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of people displaced internally from 2009-2025 in Pakistan.

Measure	Value
Total overall displacement	5,401,601
Mean yearly overall displacement	360,106
Maximum overall displacement	3,000,000 in 2009
Minimum overall displacement	160 in 2020

Table 1 shows that approximately 5.4 million instances of displacement were recorded between 2009 and 2025. The mean annual displacement was 360,106. The highest figure was recorded in 2009, with 3.0

million displacements, while the lowest was in 2022, at only 160. This large difference indicates that displacement varied considerably over the period, with particularly high levels in certain years.

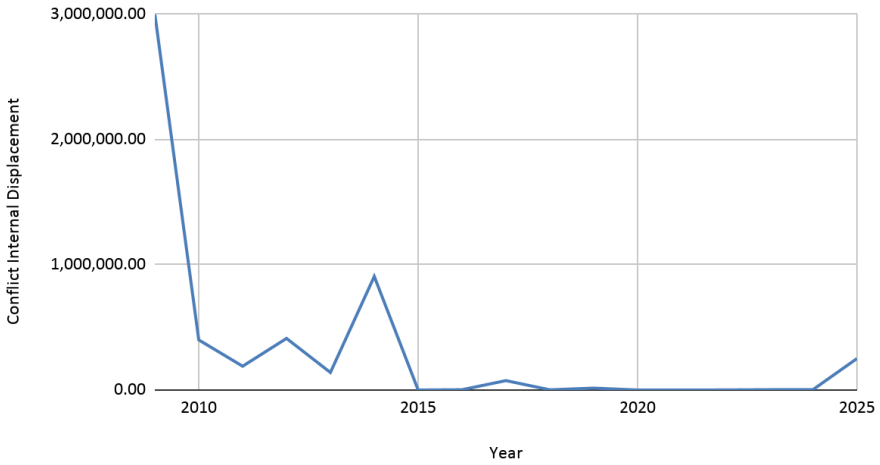


Figure 1: Graphical representation of conflict-induced internal displacement in Pakistan from 2009 to 2025.

Figure 1 depicts that the number of new conflict-related internal displacements in Pakistan has fluctuated considerably over the past sixteen years. The highest figure occurred in 2009, when almost three million people were displaced. Although new instances of displacement declined sharply after this period, subsequent years still saw repeated spikes, particularly in 2012 and 2014. From 2015 onwards, annual displacement fell to relatively low levels. Between 2017 and 2024, new conflict displacement remained minimal, although the increase recorded in 2025 suggests that conflict and violence continue to cause displacement in parts of the country.

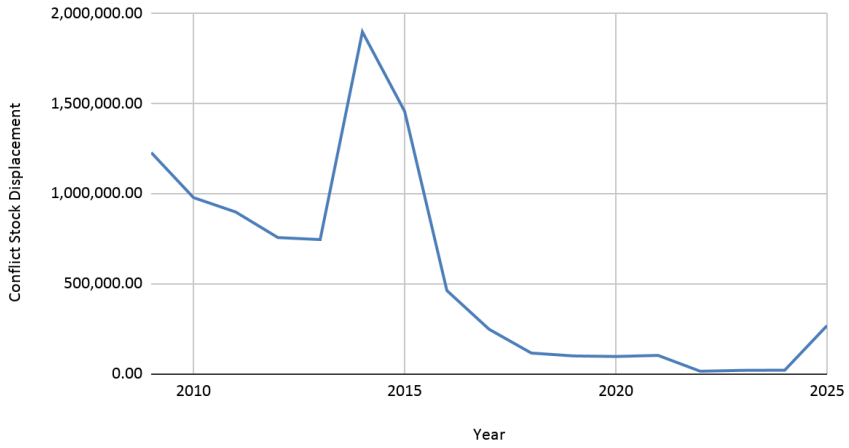


Figure 2: Graphical representation of the total number of people living in displacement due to conflict in Pakistan from 2009 to 2025.

In Figure 2, the total number of people living in displacement due to conflict follows a different pattern. Conflict stock displacement refers to the total number of internally displaced persons residing in a region or country at any given time, minus those who have returned home or settled elsewhere. While new displacement fell after 2009, many families were unable to return home, leaving the overall displaced population at over one million people for several years. The stock reached its highest level in 2014. After 2015, the number declined steadily as security conditions improved and many internally displaced persons returned to their areas of origin. By the late 2010s, the conflict-displaced population had fallen to its lowest level in more than a decade. However, there was a rise in 2025.

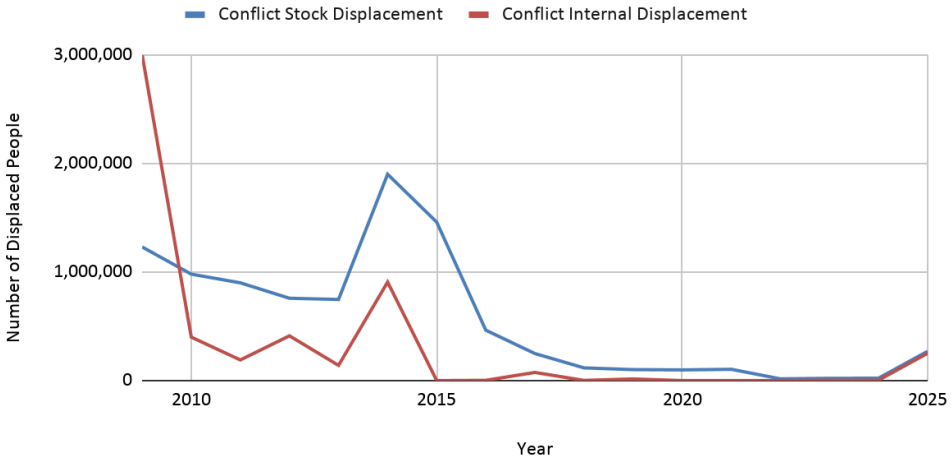


Figure 3: Comparison of annual conflict-induced internal displacement and conflict-induced stock displacement in Pakistan from 2009 to 2025

In Figure 3, we compare new conflict-induced displacement with the number of people living in displacement. Conflict-induced displacement reached its highest level in 2009, at approximately 3 million people, before falling sharply, while conflict stock displacement peaked later, in 2014, at around 1.9 million people. This suggests that although new displacement declined after 2009, many people remained displaced for several subsequent years before stock levels fell as well.

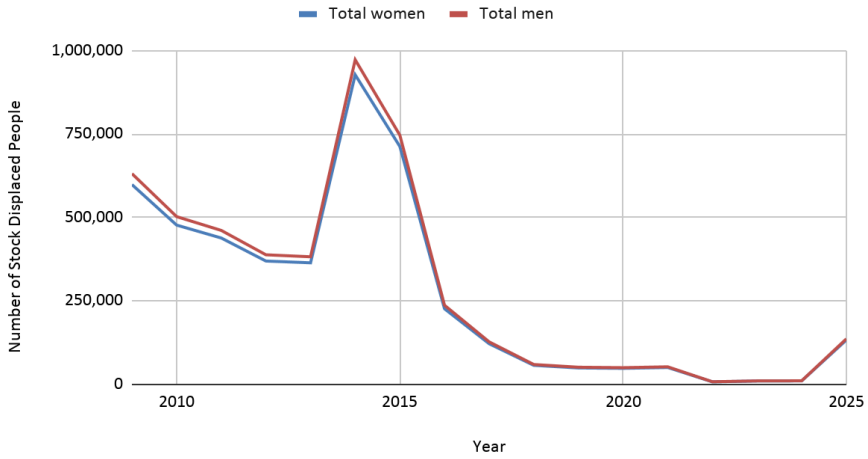


Figure 4: Graphical representation of the number of stock-displaced men and women in Pakistan from 2009 to 2025.

Figure 4 shows that the number of displaced men and women remained very similar throughout the study period. Men were consistently displaced in slightly higher numbers than women, but the gap was minimal. However, IDMC's demographic estimates represent the number of people still living in displacement at the end of each year, rather than the number newly displaced during that year. Thus, the peak in 2014 does not mean that more men and women were newly displaced in 2014 than in 2009, as the annual new-displacement data show that more people were displaced in 2009.

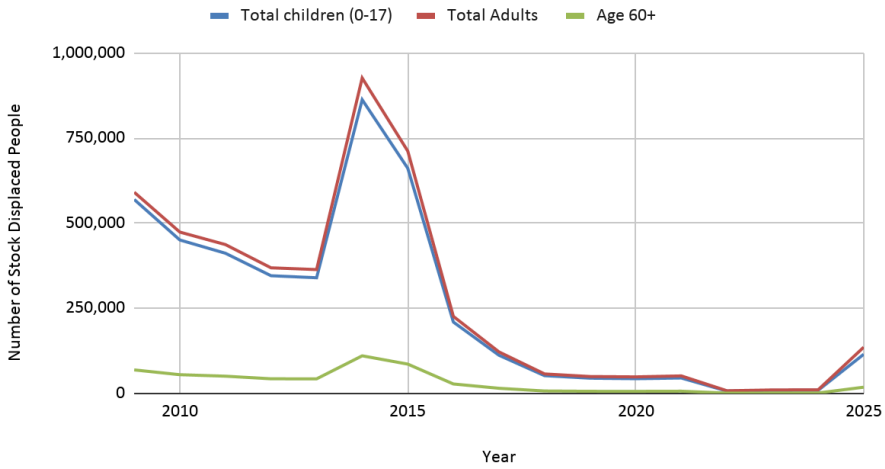


Figure 5: Graphical representation of stock of displaced individuals in Pakistan by broad age group from 2009 to 2025.

Adults and children both accounted for the largest share of the displaced; they are effectively equal. Both groups experienced a sharp increase in 2014, reaching approximately 920,000 adults and 870,000 children, before declining rapidly over the following years. In contrast, people aged 60 and above remained a much smaller proportion of the displaced population throughout the period. This shows that, on average, there were an equal number of children who were displaced as adults, which is representative of the family structure and fertility rate of Tribal areas in which this displacement was taking place; for example, FATA recorded a total fertility rate of 4.8 births per woman in FATA, the highest among the regions surveyed (National Institute of Population Studies [NIPS] & ICF, 2019). These figures show the demographic breakdown of stock displacement, based on data collected at the end of the year, and do not account for individuals who were displaced but returned within the same year.

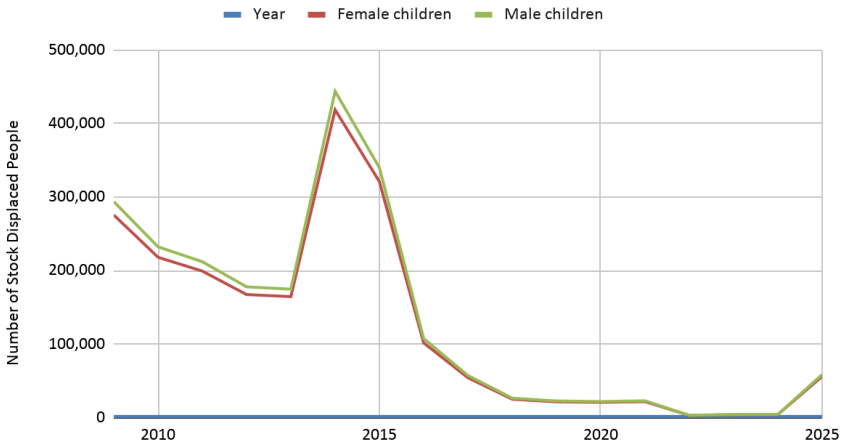


Figure 6: Comparison of the number of stock-displaced male and female children in Pakistan from 2009 to 2025.

Figure 6 shows that both male and female children experienced similar levels of displacement, with displacement not clearly linked to sex. This means that male and female children were primarily forced to leave their homes at similar rates, peaking in 2014. There are periods when the number of male children, while following the same trend as female children, has slightly higher stock displacement, around 5,000 more. These figures show the demographic breakdown of stock displacement at the end of the year and do not account for individuals who were displaced but returned within the same year.

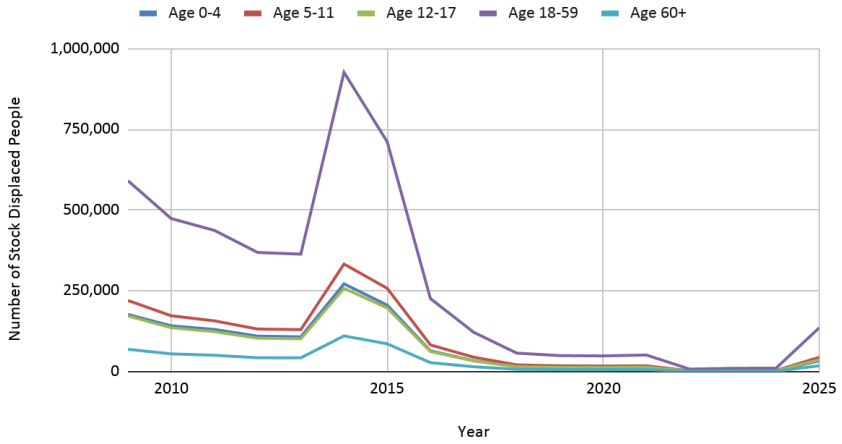


Figure 7: Graphical representation of stock displaced individuals in Pakistan by age group from 2009 to 2025.

Figure 7 shows that adults aged 18–59 consistently made up the largest share of displaced people throughout the study period. All age groups followed a similar pattern, with a sharp increase in 2014, followed by a rapid decline after 2015. Children aged 0–17 were the second-largest affected group, while people aged 60 and above remained the smallest group every year. These figures show the demographic breakdown of Stock displacement at the end of the year and do not account for individuals who were displaced but returned within the same year.

DISCUSSION

The present study aims to understand the internal displacement due to conflict and violence in Pakistan over the years. Pakistan's 2009 and 2014 displacement crises demonstrate that conflict-induced displacement cannot be understood simply by the number of people initially forced from their homes. While new displacement declined rapidly after major military operations ended, large numbers of IDPs remained displaced because insecurity, destroyed housing, inadequate reconstruction and limited state assistance prevented return. Most displaced people remained outside formal camps and depended heavily on host communities, while women, children and older persons experienced particular vulnerabilities that displacement figures are unable to account for.

Conflict-induced displacement in 2009

Mass displacement was observed in 2009 as individuals were forced to evacuate their homes in Malakand Division and FATA as a result of intense fighting and hostilities, with ongoing operations concentrated in Swat, Buner, Dir and Waziristan (OCHA, 2010). The year-end stock was about 1.2 million, which suggests many people returned home during the same year or that some individuals were displaced more than once. Even after the cessation of hostilities and military operations, many locals found it very difficult to return home, where most villages had been destroyed. They were considered unsafe due to the explosives (OCHA, 2010).

Locals viewed military operations as at odds with their tribal customs and traditional authority structures. Hence, they refused to work within governmental structures as they considered them a threat to their autonomy (Khan, 2011). Living conditions were considered very poor, and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) appealed for $680 million to overcome the crisis (United Nations, 2009). By 2009, more than 2.5 million people had reportedly been displaced by conflict in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province. At the same time, humanitarian agencies faced a clear funding shortage in these camps, affecting the most vulnerable (Ghumman, 2009).

Due to this, about 250,000 IDPs were living in the 35 camps established in FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, accounting for roughly 15% of the total IDPs (OCHA, 2010). The vast majority stayed with host families or in around 4,500 schools that provided temporary shelter (OCHA, 2010). In July of

2009, the government claimed that the Malakand Division was fit for resettlement, yet by December 2009, around 370,000 civilians from the Malakand Division were still displaced, either living in the 10 remaining camps in NWFP or with host families (OCHA, 2010).

In 2009, the women's rights NGO the Aurat Foundation interviewed displaced women in camps who reported that, coming from conservative tribal backgrounds, they were used to a life lived by the 'Pukhtun code' where a woman's honour and privacy were closely guarded and protected by their families and communities at large. Living in crowded camps and cramped tents, they now faced a loss of privacy and honour and felt severely restricted and trapped in "stifling tents" (Minallah, 2009, p. 1). To escape these conditions, many families relying on traditional Pashtun hospitality (*Milmastiya*) sought shelter with local hosts. However, this had placed immense financial strain on host families, many of whom were themselves from low-income backgrounds. (Minallah, 2009, p. 2).

Conflict-induced displacement in 2014

According to the findings, the next wave of large-scale migration occurred in 2014, with a few small-scale operations preceding it. In 2014, around 900,000 new displacements increased the total stock to approximately 1.9 million, as many previously displaced people had still not returned. After 2015, both figures declined sharply, although the remaining stock was generally higher because some people continued to live in displacement even as relatively few new movements occurred. The difference between the lines therefore reflects the distinction between the annual flow of new displacement movements and the continuing population of displaced people.

This supports our findings, as data from the IDMC showed similar numbers of IDPs in 2014 who were displaced due to Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan. Pressure from militants, who warned people of the consequences of living in government-set-up camps, drove people away (Hashim, 2014). They opted instead to move to remote areas of Afghanistan and nearby districts (Hashim, 2014). Provinces such as Sindh and Balochistan did not allow any IDPs to move into their territories, citing fear of increased violence and renewed terror attacks, which put increasing pressure on existing infrastructure within districts adjacent to Waziristan (Dawn, 2014). Residents, who refused or were unable to leave their villages, described indiscriminate bombings with little distinction made by the Pakistani military between terrorist camps and civilian homes (The Express Tribune, 2014).

At the time, the FATA Secretariat, along with the FATA Rehabilitation & Reconstruction Unit (RRU), attempted a series of localised policies to address the needs of IDPs from Operation Zarb-e-Azb (Ijaz, 2015). These included providing IDPs with Rs. 25,000 in cash assistance and Rs. 10,000 for transportation expenses, as well as 6 months of food rations and a non-food kit for each household (Ijaz, 2015). The FATA Rehabilitation Unit conducted the "Housing Damages Survey" and the "FATA Housing programme", aimed at rebuilding damaged homes; however, these were limited to South Waziristan and Khyber Agencies (Javaid, 2016). These programs were largely unsuccessful, as the surveying was

conducted ineffectively and was dismissed by the provincial government (Dawar, 2017). Furthermore, the financial compensation was set at fixed amounts, with local people complaining that the compensation was insufficient to rebuild their livelihoods (Dawar, 2017). This, in turn, kept the number of stock displacements high for years to come, due to the government's limited capacity to provide proper living conditions for those seeking to return to North Waziristan.

Conditions within the camps were also very poor, forcing the vast majority of people to stay in "host communities" (Hashim, 2014). Here, they had to share rooms, with many reports of up to 40 individuals in a single room (Rasool & Anwar, 2019). There was also inadequate protection from the harsh winter climate (Rasool & Anwar, 2019). By March of 2015, the first IDPs were meant to return to North Waziristan, yet progress was slow, and by May only approximately 230 families had returned to their local areas (Bureau Report, 2015). According to the Pakistani military, in December 2015, roughly 40% of households had moved back to North Waziristan, with around 100,000 families returning (Dawn.com, 2015). Even today, this situation remains unresolved; in 2020, reports revealed that 12,000 families were still unable to return to their local areas (Mehsud, 2020).

Demographic patterns of conflict-induced displacement

The numbers of displaced men and women indicate that displacement generally affected entire households and communities rather than only one sex. However, these numbers do not mean that men and women experienced displacement in the same way. UN reports have shown that displaced pregnant women were at increased health risk, having little access to prenatal care, assisted delivery or emergency obstetric services (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2009). Reporting by the New Humanitarian in 2010 showed that elderly women, especially widows, struggled to cope as IDPs. Many had little or no exposure to the outside world, having previously performed only domestic responsibilities at home, such as caring for livestock or tending their crops. Many had never been registered in the National Database and lacked ID cards; they also faced hurdles in accessing rations and other aid distributed by the government or NGOs (The New Humanitarian, 2010).

Large numbers of youth were also displaced, which shows that a high proportion of children reflects Pakistan's young population and suggests that displacement affected families as a whole. The numbers do not capture the specific hardships faced by children. Reporting from IDP camps and interviews with those set up in host homes and paediatricians showed that IDP children were particularly vulnerable and susceptible to illnesses, especially in the winter months due to lack of access to water and heating (The New Humanitarian, 2009). According to findings by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2010), the displacement crisis severely affected child welfare, leading to overcrowded living conditions, disruption of formal education, and increased rates of domestic abuse, child labour, and forced marriages. For displaced girls, there was a shortage of access to female healthcare professionals and other essential medical treatment. Furthermore, because displaced child populations were scattered across camps and host homes, humanitarian agencies struggled to gain access to them, which hindered their ability to provide necessary protections (IDMC, 2010)

The displacement severely affected children by keeping them out of school and depriving them of recreational facilities (Swati, 2009). IDP families reported looking after orphaned or unaccompanied children, making these children particularly vulnerable. While host families had been welcoming, their own low-income backgrounds meant they were unable to provide medical, educational, and recreational facilities that these children required. This was ultimately the responsibility of the government, which had failed to provide essential support (Swati, 2009). Even after the children had returned home, they were unable to return to their normal lives and routines, and the effects of the conflict and displacement continued. According to UN reports, many returning students discovered that the conflict had ruined or damaged roughly 550 schools, 147 of which were specifically for girls (United Nations, 2009).

Older populations appear in much smaller numbers partly because they make up a smaller share of the national population. Their lower numerical representation should not be taken to mean they were less vulnerable, as older displaced people have reported facing greater difficulty in travelling, accessing healthcare, and living independently (Swati, 2009).

Reforming Pakistan's Legal Framework for Internally Displaced Persons: Lessons from the UN Guidelines, Colombia and Honduras

The starting point for the legal protection of IDPs in Pakistan is the *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973*. The Constitution does not refer to or define IDPs as a distinct category; its fundamental rights provisions apply equally to all citizens, including those who have been internally displaced. These protections include the rights to life and liberty (art. 9), the inviolability of the dignity of man (art. 14), freedom of movement and residence (art. 15), protection of property rights (arts. 23–24), and equality before the law and equal protection of the law (art. 25; *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan*, 1973).

Despite these guarantees of fundamental rights to all citizens, the experience of conflict-induced IDPs shows that these protections have not always been available to them. Following the large-scale displacement from the FATA region in 2015, IDPs were subjected to restrictions on their movement and access to urban areas. Local authorities in Peshawar imposed restrictions preventing IDPs from entering or moving freely within the city during the Islamic month of Muharram on security grounds. (Shah, 2015) Critics argued that these measures effectively deprived displaced citizens of the constitutional guarantee of freedom of movement under Article 15 and treated them as though they enjoyed fewer rights than other Pakistani citizens, despite their status as citizens of Pakistan (ReliefWeb, 2014). Hence, while constitutional protections do exist on paper, even for IDPs, there is a gap between theory and practice.

In Pakistan, various government agencies share responsibility for managing displaced people. At the national level, under the National Disaster Management Act 2010, the National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA) is responsible for preparedness, relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction following natural and human-induced disasters (National Disaster Management Act, 2010). At the provincial level, Provincial Disaster Management Authorities (PDMAs) coordinate day-to-day relief efforts on the ground.

In 2025, the NDMA introduced the *National Policy Guidelines on Vulnerable Groups in Disasters* (2025) (National Disaster Management Authority [NDMA], 2026) (hereafter, *the Guidelines*). These identify a range of vulnerable populations requiring protection, including women, particularly those who are pregnant or breastfeeding, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, transgender and gender-diverse individuals, economically disadvantaged and socially marginalised communities, homeless and landless populations, ethnic and religious minorities, migrants and internally displaced persons, and those residing in remote rural areas or informal urban settlements. The guidelines adopt an intersectional approach, acknowledging that overlapping characteristics such as gender, age, disability, poverty and minority status can compound vulnerability. They promote a rights-based and inclusive approach to disaster risk management to ensure that no vulnerable group is excluded from disaster preparedness, response and recovery efforts (NDMA, 2026).

While the guidelines are a significant step towards recognising IDPs as a vulnerable population requiring humanitarian assistance, they mainly address climate disaster risk reduction rather than provide a policy addressing conflict-induced displacement. Conflict-induced IDPs require a comprehensive national legal framework that guarantees their rights and protections, including those set out in the *United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* (United Nations, 1998) (hereafter, the Guiding Principles). These include protection against arbitrary and prolonged displacement, access to humanitarian assistance, protection from discrimination, the preservation of family unity, access to food, water, healthcare and education, protection of housing, land and property rights, restitution or compensation where restitution is not possible, participation in decisions affecting displaced persons, local integration or resettlement elsewhere (*Guiding Principles*, United Nations, 1998).

As a starting point, the Pakistani government could make its protections and legal regime towards IDPs more robust by adopting the Guiding Principles. Under international humanitarian law, these are a set of non-binding standards intended to guide governments and international humanitarian agencies in assisting IDPs. However, according to Martin (1999, p. 10), the Guiding Principles carry universal authority because they restate already-binding human rights and customary international law. Therefore, any group interacting with IDPs, from state governments and international charities to insurgent groups, must respect and follow these principles.

Owning a territory means a government is responsible for the safety and well-being of its citizens. This duty does not disappear during a crisis, meaning national authorities cannot ignore people just because they are displaced. Therefore, displaced individuals have a legal right to seek assistance from their government without facing punishment (Martin 1999, p. 12). According to the United Nations (1998), Principle 8 of the Guiding Principles states that displacement must never be executed in a way that endangers human life, personal freedom, safety, or human dignity. Additionally, Principle 9 mandates that global states have a strict responsibility to prevent the forced relocation of vulnerable groups, such as rural farmers, minorities, and indigenous populations, who rely heavily on their ancestral lands for

survival. To follow Principles 8 and 9, the Pakistani government needs to do more than just hand out basic supplies; it must create real laws to protect vulnerable people. Since Principle 9 protects people who rely on their farms, the government should protect the land rights of rural families so they can safely return home and resume farming.

At the same time, to address the privacy and women and children's safety issues highlighted by the Aurat Foundation, the government must ensure that camps have private family sections and well-lit walkways so women from conservative tribal backgrounds can move around safely, without fear of feeling trapped in "stifling tents." To fix the lack of healthcare, the government must provide mobile medical vans with female doctors and midwives so that pregnant women and girls can access medical assistance without hindrance and without feeling embarrassed.

To curtail human trafficking networks, local police and government officials must set up security stations inside the camps to track and register all marriages and births. Finally, because many families opt to stay with local hosts, the government must send direct financial aid and food to these poor host families. This will ease their financial burdens and ensure that displaced people have a safe place to stay for as long as they need. As a blueprint, the Pakistani government could look at the Colombian and Honduran laws for IDPs based largely on the Guiding Principles.

Colombia was the first country to enact comprehensive legislation specifically addressing internal displacement through Law 387 of 1997, which recognised IDPs as a distinct legal category and established the State's responsibility to protect and assist them. Implementation has been initially weak (Gamboa & Ober, 2026). However, the Constitutional Court's landmark 2004 decision reinforced the State's obligations in this area, leading to further developments in the law (Constitutional Court of Colombia, 2004; Gamboa & Ober, 2026). In 2011, the Victims and Land Restitution Law (Law 1448 of 2011) was passed, establishing institutional mechanisms for humanitarian assistance, compensation, rehabilitation, and land restitution to provide reparations and support the return of stolen or abandoned land to its millions of displaced citizens. The creation of a Single Registry of Victims, which has identified more than nine million conflict victims, has further enabled the effective delivery of these protections (Gamboa & Ober, 2026).

Furthermore, in March 2023, Honduras passed the historic Law for the Prevention, Assistance and Protection of Internally Displaced Persons dedicated to safeguarding IDPs forced to flee their homes due to violence (Honduras, 2023). The law provides for preventive measures such as early warning systems, humanitarian relief, and the provision of housing, land, property, and education, as well as long-term socio-economic solutions, including employment opportunities and legal assistance. The law also establishes a dedicated fund with an initial minimum budget of USD $6 million for emergency humanitarian aid and other support programs. Furthermore, it introduces a data-collection mechanism through which the National Statistical Office can collaborate with state ministries to build an

administrative Register of IDPs, which would, in turn, enable the recording of IDP demographics in official national statistics. This would ensure that evidence-based policies and resource allocation can be made to address particular needs of IDPs (Honduras, 2023).

Pakistan, like Colombia and Honduras, could similarly benefit from adopting dedicated legislation that clearly defines the legal status and rights of internally displaced persons and assigns responsibilities across relevant state institutions. It should similarly create a national registration system for IDPs linked to its National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) and its provincial authorities. This matters as the vast majority of conflict-driven IDPs hail from tribal areas, living in informal settlements, which lack governmental oversight. This would help prevent displaced families from being excluded from cash assistance, schools and healthcare merely because they have moved to another district. Recording of data and statistics similar to the findings from the Honduran model could benefit federal and provincial authorities, humanitarian organisations, schools, healthcare providers and local governments in Pakistan.

CONCLUSION

This study examined long-term patterns of conflict-induced internal displacement in Pakistan between 2009 and 2025, focusing on the scale, demographic breakdown, and persistence of displacement, and analysing the effectiveness of the Pakistani Government's response. The findings show displacement due to periodic military operations occurring in response to actions by terrorist organisations within specific districts. Following years of consistent activity until 2014, when large-scale operations coincided with massive peaks in the number of displaced people, the number of newly displaced individuals fell until 2025. Significant numbers of individuals remain displaced even after new displacement subsides, demonstrating the lasting effects of military operations in districts; this indicates that serious obstacles prevent individuals from returning to their homes in their local areas.

The demographic analysis further shows that numerical patterns alone do not adequately capture the experience of displacement, where evidence from humanitarian organisations displays the impact of displacement amongst vulnerable groups such as women and children. Furthermore, this study identifies numerous gaps in Pakistan's legal framework for managing IDPs and recommends that Pakistan develop legislation informed by the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and by comparative approaches from Colombia and Honduras.

Future research could build upon these findings by combining district-level displacement data with the timing and geographic location of specific military operations and activity by terror groups. Research can also focus on comparing the IDMC dataset with data reporting from local districts and provincial governments, helping identify discrepancies in data reporting. This specifically can be applied in the case of Balochistan, where IDMC data gathering remains low.

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