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Young Unemployed People Rebel: A Political Economy Law or Assumption?

Lacey L. Weynand
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate the validity of the widely held assumption that high rates of youth unemployment will lead a state to experience internal armed conflict. I hypothesize that as youth unemployment rates increase, a state will have a larger number of internal armed conflicts occur annually. This can happen via three causal mechanisms: 1) opportunity cost calculations; 2) private frustrations, resentment, and feelings of stagnation turning into public grievances; 3) and emotional and psychological triggers leading to participation in violent insurgent activities. I find that while youth unemployment does have a statistically significant influence on the number of internal armed conflicts within a given state, other variables have a far greater effect. This research contributes to the growing body of literature arguing that the assumption above is empirically unsupported, and that more weight should be placed on other causal factors that have a far greater influence on the incidence of internal armed conflicts.

Keywords

Economics, Armed Conflict, Youth Bulge, Insurgents

Disciplines

Comparative Politics | Peace and Conflict Studies | Political Science

Comments

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Young Unemployed People Rebel: A Political Economy Law or Assumption?

Lacey Weynand

Pol 351 Political Economy of Armed Conflict

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Abstract:

In this paper, I investigate the validity of the widely held assumption that high rates of youth unemployment will lead a state to experience internal armed conflict. I hypothesize that as youth unemployment rates increase, a state will have a larger number of internal armed conflicts occur annually. This can happen via three causal mechanisms: 1) opportunity cost calculations; 2) private frustrations, resentment, and feelings of stagnation turning into public grievances; 3) and emotional and psychological triggers leading to participation in violent insurgent activities. I find that while youth unemployment does have a statistically significant influence on the number of internal armed conflicts within a given state, other variables have a far greater effect. This research contributes to the growing body of literature arguing that the assumption above is empirically unsupported, and that more weight should be placed on other causal factors that have a far greater influence on the incidence of internal armed conflicts.

Introduction

It has commonly been accepted by scholars within the discipline of political economy that as growing numbers of young people are unable to find gainful opportunities for employment, the likelihood that a state will experience a growing number of violent internal conflicts rises. The general postulate assumes that as rates of youth unemployment (and levels of under-employment) increase, social tensions escalate alongside these persons' private frustrations. Sentiments of restlessness and resentment arise from the realization that the standard milestones of adulthood are no longer unattainable: a spouse, a dowry, a house, stable employment, children, etc. Young people that are dissatisfied with their socio-economic standing become easier targets for insurgent groups to recruit, as they can promise better income-earning opportunities, thereby reducing the opportunity cost of engaging in violent and illicit activities.

Actors with violent goals can take advantage of these individual's grievances towards the government and the state and incentivize them to change society by force.

The general phenomenon described above has been documented by many political economists throughout recent history, with an increasing number of academics using case studies from individual countries such as Nigeria or Liberia (and even regions such as the Middle East) to justify their support for this assumption. In fact, some have come to believe that “without jobs, young people are prone to engage in violence, ‘they possess their own culture of violence,’ [and] they are a threat to society” (Idris 2016, 7). Yet, this presumption has never been empirically proven—there is no single study that has been able to concretely prove a strong automatic causal link between youth unemployment and civil war occurrences in a cross-national analysis. The belief that young unemployed people rebel is simply that, a belief. My goal for this paper is to contribute a foundational causal link between high rates of youth unemployment and occurrence of internal armed conflicts, to provide statistical support to the postulate that has already been accepted by most academics within this discipline. My research question should establish this relationship as it asks:

To what extent does youth unemployment status affect the number of annual internal armed conflict within a state?

I predict that states with higher levels of youth unemployment will experience a larger number of internal armed conflicts per year. I use a dependent variable that measures the number of internal armed conflicts in a given year in a regression model with a central explanatory variable that measures the rates of unemployed youth of the total labor force in a given country. My linear regression model shows that there is some statistical support for this claim, although its strength is relatively small compared to the influence that the other variables included in the

model have on the dependent variable. Each variable included in the model proved to be statistically significant, although the control variables had larger coefficients than did the central explanatory variable. This illustrates that while there is some support for the widespread acceptance of the assumption that young unemployed people cause internal armed conflicts, more research is needed to truly assess the strength of the causal link.

Moreover, more research is needed to ensure that the many non-governmental agencies, NGOs, and donor groups that funnel massive amounts of development aid into countries affected by conflict are actually positively influencing the situation, rather than wasting their resources. Countless programs are based on the belief that creating jobs and increasing employment rates reduces societal tension by lessening economic tensions. The general reasoning of these groups is that “employment schemes and economic growth can provide a ‘peace dividend,’ which will leave the population disinclined to return to conflict” (Walton 2010, 2). This issue is becoming all the more pressing, given that academics are suggesting that “around six hundred million jobs need to be created just to keep unemployment rates constant” as an anticipated “one billion youth [are] expected to enter the job market in the next decade” (Idris 2016, 2). These programs are implemented to influence the size of the labor market to absorb the burgeoning population of young people aging into the workforce. But if this assumption is unfounded and incorrect, and young unemployed people do not increase the number of internal armed conflicts in any statistically significant sense, the policy implications are innumerable. More research into this topic is required to ensure that the good intentions of these groups have the potential to make a positive difference.

Relevant Literature

There is a large body of research to draw from in order to establish my theoretical foundation, given how widespread the ‘unemployed-youth-to-insurgent-pipeline’ assumption is within the discipline of political economy. It is useful to first define the two most important terms of my research: youth and unemployment. The ‘youth’ age group, established by the UN Programme on Youth, defines ‘youth’ as any persons between the ages of 15 and 24. Within this age range, individuals are beginning to transition from childhood to adulthood, and moving from the home and into society. Some academics suggest that youth should be defined in literature “as both an age range and a social construct,” considering the cultural contexts around the age group itself (Idris 2016, 8). Unemployed youth are defined as those without work who are available and actively seeking a job, according to the definition established and utilized by both the International Labor Organization and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2003). According to the UN Programme on Youth, “young people between the ages of 15-24 represent approximately 18% of the global population, nearly 1.2 billion people” (UN Programme on Youth 2010, 10). Additionally, approximately 87% of youth live in developing countries, with 62% living in Asia and 17% living in Africa. Contextually for my research, “the global youth unemployment rate was 13 percent in 2014, with wide regional variations—the highest rates being in the Middle East and North Africa” (Idris 2016, 2; Abdelkarim 2018). As more people age into a labor market ill-equipped to absorb them, youth unemployment rates will unavoidably increase.

There are three main schools of thought that establish the theoretical relationship between youth unemployment and internal armed conflict, designed by three men: Gary Becker, Paul Collier, and Christopher Cramer. All three men argue “that unemployed young [people] have a

low opportunity cost for engaging in violence and joining armed groups,” each with their own variation and theoretical framework for why this is valid (Cramer 2015, 1). Becker’s framework is centered on economic considerations, with great importance placed on an individual’s opportunity cost calculation. Collier’s model also uses an opportunity cost calculation but allows for other socio-political considerations to factor into the decision, rather than relying on pure economics. On the other hand, Cramer’s model does not consider economic calculations to be the greatest motivating factor—he sees psychological and emotional variables as more influential on a young person’s decision to engage in armed violence.

Opportunity Costs and Economic Considerations

Becker’s theory of criminality specifically predicts that as potential options for gainful employment decreases, so do the opportunity costs of committing crimes, therefore making illegal markets an attractive choice for income-earning opportunities. He does not theorize that individuals engage in criminal behavior for the sake of committing crime, but instead claims “that participation in a legal or illegal act is best comprehended as an attempt to satisfy basic necessities” (Adekoya & Abdul-Razak 2018, 160). Becker thus views the decision to engage in crime and rebel activity as an economic calculation, with individuals weighing the opportunity costs of participation in both legal and illegal markets to decide which will be most profitable. According to this logic, as gainful opportunities for employment decrease and youth unemployment rises, the option of joining an insurgent group and engaging in violence becomes increasingly attractive for generating income. A young person’s decision to join an armed group “is feasible only when the potential gain from joining is so high and the expected costs so low that rebel recruits will favor joining over alternative income-earning opportunities” (Azeng & Thierry 2013, 3). This theoretical thinking is not entirely without circumstantial support, as there

is some evidence that a small population of young insurgents chose to engage in violence due to the “financial advantages of fighting” (Walton 2010, 3). However, this causal mechanism is still without concrete empirical support.

Becker’s theory of criminality and its application to insurgencies have been tested and empirically examined by other authors and international organizations, with the same assumption being concluded. One study actually found directly “that unemployment increases the opportunity to commit violence” in Nigeria, providing some circumstantial statistical support for the notion that unemployed youth are inherently something to be concerned about (Adekoya & Abdul-Razak 2018, 172). A US Agency for International Development report on youth and armed conflict in 2005 asserts that:

“young people often participate in violence because membership in extremist organizations provides immediate economic benefits, because violence itself offers opportunities for economic gain through direct payment or looting, or because conflict promises to open up longer term economic options, for example, through patronage if ‘their’ ethnic or religious group captures power” (4).

Adekoya & Abdul-Razak (2018) supported this report, writing that youth “participation is attached to the gain they would receive either by cash given to them by their recruiters or by financial gain realized after selling stolen goods and properties” (162). These studies indicate that for many young unemployed people, income-earning potential is the greatest motivating factor in the decision regarding whether or not to engage in internal armed conflicts.

Economic and Socio-Political Considerations

Collier structures his model around the notion that people choose to engage in violent actions due to their greed and grievance motivations. He argues that high rates of unemployment directly contribute to violent rebel activity; given “that unemployment [is] a source of grievance—providing a motive alongside greed,” young unemployed people have no other

option to address their greed/grievances besides engaging in violent armed conflict (Idris 2016, 6). The decision to join an insurgency is based on whether the rebels can assure individuals that their grievances will be heard and addressed. This decision is considered to be more of a socio-political calculation than an economic one since a person factors social considerations into the decision as well. Collier places great weight on unemployment as the main measure to predict the likelihood of armed conflict. He “[sees] unemployment as the likely route through which [economic] growth could affect violence” (Idris 2016, 6). Donor groups and NGOs have centered their humanitarian work around this notion, since they focus on improving unemployment rates for their possible ‘peace dividend’ effects.

Academics have also supported Collier’s theoretical framework, agreeing that as individuals find themselves without employment, there is a greater likelihood that their private frustrations will turn into public grievances, eventually leading to recruitment into insurgent groups (Berman & Callen, et al. 2009). Cramer (2011) suggests that “trends in employment and unemployment are a major part of a larger social structure and set of relations” and the breakdown of these relations can have violent and destabilizing effects (11). Walton (2010) asserts that as youth are unable to find employment and achieve the standards of adulthood, “taking up arms against the state or the political elite in these contexts can provide a means by which they can integrate into society (albeit by force) or gain the sense of purpose and recognition denied by ordinary society” (3). McLean Hilker & Fraser (2009) also supports this perspective—that various social, economic, and political barriers have led to the exclusion of young people from society and contribute to their feelings of discrimination and marginalization. In these cases, insurgents are able to promise a reordering of society and a new form of governance, which will provide a place for the burgeoning youth population. Urdal (2006)

supports this causal pathway, by claiming that “demographic trends and pressures are creating tensions that lead to the outbreak of low-intensity conflicts such as protests or riots, or more organized political upheaval and internal armed conflict” (Azeng & Yogo 2013, 3). Violent rebel groups are able to take advantage of the pathway that leads toward youth’s private frustrations, resentment, and feelings of stagnation. They push these feelings to become public grievances and incentivize violent behaviors as a way of forcing societal change.

Psychological, Emotional, and Other Considerations

As a political economist, Cramer also sees high unemployment among young people as one of the main predictors of internal armed conflict within a state, but not for economic or socio-political reasons. Cramer’s model suggests a direct correlation between employment status and the potential for violent behavior, because of psychological and emotional motivations. He writes “that unemployment triggers participation in insurgencies, prompts people to join violent gangs, drives people to extremism, [and is] the primary reason behind domestic violence” (Cramer 2015, 1). The decision to engage in these violent behaviors comes from emotional and psychological considerations, rather than from any economic factors. However, Cramer is quick to note early on in his scholarship that researchers and actors such as donor groups should not focus on unemployment rates as the sole variable for measuring and predicting violence participation. He argues that “specific variables, such as unemployment, typically have rather complex implications for violent outcomes; and that labor market and economic policy, if they are to be part of an effort to reduce violence, cannot be reduced to policies designed simply to maximize the number of work opportunities available” (Cramer 2010, 2). He advocates for other approaches, such as ones centered around the labor market: “if the labor market cannot absorb a sudden surplus of young job-seekers, a large pool of unemployed youths will generate strong

frustration” (Azeng & Yogo 2013, 3). Youth unemployment rates should not be the only approach for promoting peace when other economic approaches could likely have a greater potential.

Labor market concerns are becoming more widespread in areas with bulging youth populations, due to these theoretical warnings that establish a causal link between unemployment and insurgent violence. As more people age into the workforce to find that there are little to no options for gainful employment, their decision-making processes become severely manipulated by rebel groups towards attractive criminal and insurgent behavior. One study done by Urdal (2012) finds that “when youth represent more than 35% of the adult population, which they do in many developing countries, the risk of armed conflict is 150% higher than in countries with an age structure similar to most developed countries” (7-8). In countries such as these, “where there is an abundance of easily lootable resources,” insurgent groups find that “the costs of organizing rebellion are lower,” especially “where there is a large youth population (which is relatively cheap to recruit)” (Walton 2010, 2). Most scholars assert that “it is not uncommon that people engage in violence are linked to poverty or areas with few opportunities and poor economic background” (Adekoya & Abdul-Razak 2018, 164). With over one billion young people expected to enter the labor market within the next decade, many researchers, and leaders of states with these economic conditions, fear for potential future violent instability (Idris 2016).

Blattman & Annan (2015) designed their own field experiment in Liberia to assess the capacity of gainful employment opportunities to reduce lawlessness and rebellion. They evaluated an agricultural program targeted towards ex-combatants in Liberia who were engaging in various illicit industry activities around the country. The authors find “large impacts on returns to legal work (and the opportunity cost of illegal work), but no statistically significant evidence

of impacts on the behaviors and attitudes associated connections to commanders, peer quality, non-material forms of violence, community participation, or attitudes to crime and violence” (Blattman & Annan 2015, 36). These results illustrate the influence that employment has on modifying the opportunity cost calculation of participating in insurgent activities. Moreover, their research indicates “that getting trained and becoming a successful farmer raised men’s community esteem and lowered men’s social marginalization” (Blattman & Annan 2015, 36). These findings are theoretically supported by the standard reasoning that men without gainful employment feel stigmatization and discrimination, making them turn to violent rebel groups in order to force society to accept and integrate them.

Oppositional Literature

While there has been widespread acceptance of the assumption that unemployed youth increase the number of armed conflicts within a state, it is necessary to also review literature that has not found this to be valid. Many academics who oppose the presumption do so since “there is barely any reliable evidence on youth unemployment in any developing country,” especially states that experience high rates of conflict, making any conclusions inherently weak and circumstantial (Cramer 2011, 1). In other cases, data are simply missing, and the variable used actually measures other factors relating to the fundamental question, not necessarily youth participation in armed conflicts. Some researchers have outright dismissed the assumption based on their models; Berman & Callen et al. have “emphatically [rejected] a positive correlation between unemployment and attacks against government and allied forces,” illustrating that with their model, “there is no significant relationship between unemployment and the rate of insurgent attacks that kill civilians” (Berman & Callen et al. 2009, 1). Notwithstanding the above data constraints, other scholars have drawn their own theoretical conclusions on why unemployment

is not the greatest motivating factor to engage in insurgent activities. For some young people, economic considerations may not even matter in comparison to other reasons; it is possible that “while fighting is risky, sometimes being a civilian is riskier, and so many men join armed groups for the security they provide” (Blattman & Annan 2015, 2). Academics sometimes also compare research on gangs and similar organizations to “suggest that the key motivator might not be wages but demand drivers such as status, ideology, outrage, or a desire for justice” (Blattman & Annan 2015, 2).

While Cramer is one of the more cited scholars on this topic theoretically, he has been cited consistently for his own oppositional stance, asserting that “there are no grounds empirically for the commonly made claims that there is a strong, automatic causal connection from unemployment, under-employment, or low productivity employment to violence and war” (Cramer 2011, 2). He explicitly states that evidence to support the relationship between youth unemployment and participation in insurgencies “is largely circumstantial and the claims often made on deductive, abstract grounds” (Cramer 2011, 17). He writes that even as

“employment from a number of conflicts suggests that employment issues, including unemployment, can be significant features of the processes leading to violent conflict as well as of its dynamics once under way...that unemployment is generally not the most significant causal feature or even facilitating (recruitment) factor.” (18).

Moreover, Cramer suggests that “unemployment may be linked to violence without group organization...; unemployment may be linked to a wish to be part of a group, whether violent or not; and it may be linked to deriving meaning from belonging to a group with a high salience of violence” (Cramer 2011, 6). There is no reason to draw an immediate causal assumption, that any unemployed youth is participating in violence activities because of their unemployment status. He asserts that there is some evidence— “though contested and not enough evidence— that terrorism (and support for terrorism) is not correlated with poverty and unemployment,

despite very widespread claims and assumptions to the contrary” (Cramer 2010, 6). For Cramer, the whole presumption is based on a flawed logical framework and any policies aimed towards mitigating conflict should factor in other considerations as well.

These arguments are mirrored by Walton’s research on the topic; she notes, that in many instances, “the motivating factor behind violence was not unemployment *per se*, but rather grievances at an unjust and corrupt patrimonial system that increasingly shut out young people” (Walton 2010, 2). She believes that while unemployment may play a role in the decision to join an insurgency, a person’s unemployment status is the result of other far greater economic inequalities. She adapts Collier’s framework to show that “frustration at lack of livelihood opportunities can play a part in motivating youth violence,” but adds that “social and political grievances are usually more central” (Walton 2010, 2). Instead of using unemployment as the main causal variable to predict the likelihood that young individuals will participate in violent armed conflict, Walton suggests factors such as “availability of weapons, levels of drug use, indoctrination, recruitment by force, ideology, leadership factors, organization dynamics, and trigger events” (Walton 2010, 3). Her position here is best explained by the notion that unemployment is a necessary, but insufficient motivating variable in the occurrence of armed conflict. For Walton, there are other causal mechanisms that have a stronger impact on the potential for armed conflict within young unemployed cohorts.

Walton (2010) further notes that in developing countries, unemployment is not even an option—people “need to engage in some kind of productive activity in order to survive” (2). This contributes a foundation to the growing number of academics arguing that under-employment may be just as indicative of internal armed conflict as regular unemployment. McLean Hilker & Fraser (2009) insist on including under-employment with unemployment in scholarly work,

writing that “menial jobs with little prospect of advancement may also be a cause of youth frustration, embarrassment, and social separation...[This] can cause conflict or lead to youth involvement” in insurgencies or organized criminal activity (4). This notion is also supported by Abdelkarim (2017), who writes that “the marginalization that can be a potential source of conflict is found not in open unemployment, but in low productivity and poorly recognized work in informal settings” (13). Additionally, the issue that “young people are over-represented in the informal economy,” exacerbates whatever social tensions may already be brewing outside of economic conditions (Idris 2016, 10). If young individuals are working in an unofficial capacity, making low wages, and have no potential to advance, it would be perfectly reasonable to anticipate their recruitment into an insurgency. Cramer addresses this point directly, as he believes that “underemployment may be as significant as unemployment, as may be irregular employment. The type of employment opportunities available may be significant rather than simply whether or not such opportunities are available” (Cramer 2011, 6). Assuming that youth participation in violent behaviors could be addressed by simply modifying the labor market is far too reductionist for the academics that hold this position.

The role of young unemployed women specifically in internal armed conflict is highly debated and absent from much statistical literature. It is well-known that women do participate in violence, in their own ways and with their own motivating factors that may or may not align generally with men’s. McLean Hilker & Fraser (2009) suggest that “women may get involved in violence because they see it as a means to challenge gender norms” rather than an immediate effect of unemployment. For such a significant group to be engaged in armed conflict, the lack of evidence on their motivations is astounding; for some (possibly sexist) reason, there “tends to be an assumption that youth in the context of unemployment and violence refers only to young

males, not females” (Idris 2016, 2). Moreover, in many cultures, there is no ‘youth’ category for women; they simply move from childhood to adulthood (McLean Hilker & Fraser 2009). One reason for the lack of empirical study is the limitation of the data itself: “gender-disaggregated data on youth unemployment in developing countries are limited, despite female youth unemployment rates often exceeding those of males” (Idris 2016, 3). Studies approximate that “women make up 10-40% of armed forces and insurgent groups worldwide and, beyond combatant roles, young women take on a variety of non-military support roles” (McLean Hilker & Fraser 2009, 3). For such a large part of any state’s population and labor force to be absent from literature calls into question the validity that only unemployed men cause armed conflict due to their unemployment status. If a sizable proportion of women are unsatisfied, unemployed, and ignored, there is the potential for a serious societal upheaval.

Explanation of Causal Mechanisms:

I identify opportunity cost calculations as the first causal mechanism since various political economic theorists have thoroughly explored it. This causal mechanism relates purely to economic motivations and theorizes that individuals join insurgencies and rebellions to advance their personal economic interests. As the number of gainful employment opportunities decrease, young unemployed individuals will be attracted to insurgencies in order to generate income and survive (Walton 2010). In areas with high rates of poverty and a large cohort of young people, rebel groups can more easily recruit individuals into their ranks by promising wealth from their illicit activities. Moreover, the larger the group of young people aging into the workforce, the less likely that the labor market will be able to absorb them and the cheaper it will be for insurgents to recruit them, therefore inevitably leading to higher rates of internal armed conflicts (Cramer 2011).

My second causal mechanism concerns the process by which private frustrations and resentment turn into public grievances, leading to the decision to engage in violent behaviors (Idris 2016). Young unemployed people become frustrated with their personal political and economic statuses and feel as though society has not adequately integrated them as they transition into adulthood (Berman & Callen et al. 2009). Similar to the labor market argument, these individuals leave childhood only to find that they do not have a place in their world, or come to believe that their government has intentionally arranged to exclude and discriminate against them. This leads to people seeing armed violence against the state as the only pathway to change their livelihood and force recognition from their governments. Rebel groups take advantage of these motivations and frustrations to manipulate any opportunity calculations by promising a changed social order and new places for youth to find gainful political and economic opportunities (USAID 2005).

My last causal mechanism is the feeling of stagnation among unemployed youth, as they transition from childhood to adulthood, and from the home to society (Walton 2010). This process requires gainful employment in order for individuals to attain the standard metrics that signify their movement from childhood to adulthood: marriage, ability to afford a dowry, children, a stable home, etc. (Idris 2016). Persons aging into a society that is unable to absorb and integrate them find that these material metrics of adulthood are farther away than past generations, or perhaps even unattainable. Most literature on this topic has also identified this to be one of the major causal mechanisms, with researchers arguing that “the structural exclusion and lack of opportunities faced by young people effectively block or prolong their transition to adulthood and can lead to frustration, disillusionment and, in some cases, their engagement in violence” (McLean Hilker & Fraser 2009, 4). This mechanism combines both the political and

economic motivations, without relying on the concept of opportunity costs. For many people in developing areas without employment, the costs are not considered because there is no other choice.

Given the potential strength of these causal mechanisms, I hypothesize that:

Countries with higher levels of youth unemployment will experience a larger annual number of internal armed conflicts than will countries with lower levels of youth unemployment.

I hypothesize a positive relationship between my central explanatory variable and my dependent variable. Moreover, I predict that my first two control variables, ethnic fractionalization, and total population, will both have a positive effect on the dependent variable while my third control variable, real GDP, will have a negative effect on the number of internal armed conflicts.

Research Design and Data:

All of the variables I use can be found in The Quality of Government Institute's QoG Standard Dataset for 2022. This dataset was created by combining several datasets covering eighteen topics from health to economic and social policies (Teorell et. al, 2022). The dataset that I employ is a cross-national time-series dataset, and therefore well-suited to the model I run. The dataset includes observations for the time period 1946 to 2021, "and the unit of analysis is country-year" (Teorell et. al 2022). I have chosen to run a linear regression model with three control variables to investigate the relationship between the number of internal armed conflicts and youth employment rates. The linear regression model is used to determine the relationship between the dependent and the independent variables, while also showing the direction of the relationships. For every coefficient unit in the independent and control variables, there will be a

subsequent unit increase/decrease in the dependent variable. The model analyzes data between 1991 and 2019, due to the time constraints on my independent variable. Given my hypothesis, I predict that the higher the level of youth unemployment in a given state, the greater the number of internal armed conflicts the state will experience.

Key Dependent Variable:

My dependent variable is the `ucdp_type3` variable, which measures “the number of internal armed conflicts per country in a given year” between the years 1946 to 2020. This variable is originally part of the UCDP/PRIO dataset (Teorell et. al 2022). There are 1321 cases included in this variable, from thirty-six states. The variable is now coded as a range from 0-5, with zero representing no internal armed conflicts in a given year and five as the maximum number of internal armed conflicts that a country experiences within a given year (Pettersson 2020). I recoded the variable to allow for a zero number of conflicts (meaning no internal armed conflicts were recorded in a given year), rather than allowing the model to read the data as simply ‘missing’ as it was in the original dataset. This modifies how the model interprets and runs the data, to better answer my research question since I am seeking to understand the extent to which youth employment status influences a state’s potential for conflict.

Central Explanatory/Independent Variable:

My central explanatory variable is the `wdi_unempyilo` variable, which measures the levels of youth employment in each state (World Bank 2021). This variable, which originally came from a dataset created by the World Bank, uses the age group between 15-24, given that it has become the standard of ‘youth’ for political scientists and economists. The data covers the rates of youth unemployment between the years 1991 to 2019, and 178 states. There is potential

for the variable to be relatively weak, given that a significant majority of young unemployed people live in developing countries that do not regularly keep records of this data. Additionally, this variable has the greatest constraint on time as it only covers 28 years' worth of youth unemployment data. This variable was coded numerically to correspond to the rates of unemployment per episode with a total of 5076 observations. The total range of the unemployment rates are .37 to 65.44 percent.

Control Variables:

The first control variable is *fe_etfra*, which represents “the probability that two randomly selected people from a given country will belong to different such [ethnic] groups” (Teorell et. al 2022, 301). High rates of ethnic fractionalization have been identified in the general literature as contributing to an increased number of internal armed conflicts, thus requiring the need to control for its influence (Wegenast & Basedau 2013). The variable originally came from a dataset created by James D. Fearon (2003), who “[identified] 822 ethnic and ‘ethnoreligious’ groups in 160 countries” between the years 1946 to 2021 (Teorell et. al 2022, 301). Fearon operationalizes the data as a percent range between 0 (perfectly homogenous) and 1 (highly fragmented).

I generated two new variables for the other two control variables by taking the natural log of each, in order to decrease the numerical discrepancies between any given state and suppress abnormal skews. Taking the natural log of the following variables allowed me to achieve more consistent variance across the data since it forces the variables into a smaller distribution. The variables are still able to retain their original significance within the model's output while still forcing a more linear result. The first natural logged variable is total population, generated from

the World Bank’s wdi_pop, which measures the total population of all residents regardless of legal status and citizenship (World Bank 2021). The datapoint covers 192 countries from the year 1960 to 2020. I chose total population as my second control variable since a majority of literature asserts that a state with a higher total population will experience a greater number of internal armed conflicts (Brückner 2010). The second natural logged variable and third control variable is pwt_rgdg, which measures the GDP at constant 2017 national prices in U.S. dollars. This variable originally came from a dataset created by Feenstra, Inklaar, & Timmer (2015). I chose this as my third control variable, since it has been commonly accepted with the literature that a ‘wealthier’ state or a state with higher GDP will experience a smaller number of internal armed conflicts compared to ‘poorer’ states or states with a smaller GDP (Vestby et al. 2021). The datapoint covers 171 countries between the years 1950 to 2019.

Analysis of Data and Discussion:

Table 1: Youth Unemployment and Internal Armed Conflict 1991-2019

Youth Unemployment	0.003**
	(.001)
Ethnic Fractionalization	0.187***
	(.048)
Total Population (natural log)	0.279***
	(0.012)
Real GDP (natural log)	-0.103***
	(0.010)
Constant	-3.238***
	(0.137)
Observations	4227
R-squared	0.147

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; Standard errors in parentheses.

The linear regression model indicates that while youth unemployment has a positive and statistically significant influence on the number of internal armed conflicts that a given state will experience, it only has a small impact. The positive direction of the coefficient supports the belief that higher levels of youth unemployment contribute to armed violence, yet the size of the coefficient reveals the relatively weak impact of the independent variable compared to the control variables. In more technical terms, the model indicates that for every one percent increase in the youth unemployment rate, a state will experience a 0.003 unit increase in the number of internal armed conflicts. These results support my hypothesis, which was modeled after the widely held assumption. However, the small size of the coefficient also provides support for the arguments of other academics that unemployment may not be the biggest motivating factor for a state to experience violent internal armed conflict. While the youth unemployment variable is my central explanatory variable, it reported the smallest coefficient among my independent variables. This illustrates that while high rates of youth unemployment can lead to a state experiencing a greater number of internal armed conflicts, it is not the most influential variable.

This result has obvious policy implications for donor groups and NGOs wishing to decrease the levels of violence a state experiences through programs that increase the rates of unemployment for young people. These entities spend considerable amounts of money every year with the justification that this is the best way to ensure that insurgent groups cannot manipulate opportunity costs to make violent rebellion a more attractive choice. These groups attempt to influence the labor market in order to absorb the growing number of individuals aging into the workforce in areas with high levels of poverty, thus making it more difficult for young people to be recruited. However, if youth unemployment is not the greatest motivating factor for the number of internal armed conflicts a state experiences, this aid should be redistributed to other

programs that have a greater peace-making effect. While the opportunities cost framework is the most persuasive and widely held, my identification of two other causal mechanisms provide other avenues through which to address the relationship between youth unemployment and violent conflict.

Ethnic fractionalization reported outputs that were predicted by my hypothesis and widely accepted assumptions within the discipline. Specifically, the positive direction of the coefficient was expected, as well as the presence of statistical significance. While the coefficient is not necessarily a large value, it does indicate greater influence than youth unemployment. The model reported that for every unit increase in the ethnic fractionalization of a given state's population, the number of internal armed conflicts the state will experience increases by 0.187 units. The results both supports and is supported by the general thinking that ethnic fractionalization and tensions have the potential to increase violent behavior and conflict. The level of statistical significance and larger coefficient suggests that ethnic fractionalization has a greater influence on the number of internal armed conflicts than youth unemployment.

Interestingly, the natural log of the total population had the largest coefficient and impact on the number of internal armed conflict that a state experiences. The model indicated a positive direction for population's influence on the dependent variable and reported that for every unit increase in the total population of a given state, the number of internal armed conflicts can be expected to rise by 0.279 units. This control variable also reported statistical significance and resulted in outputs that were expected from my hypothesis and widely accepted assumptions from literature. The larger coefficient and statistical significance indicate that total population has a greater effect on the number of internal armed conflicts a state experiences than youth unemployment rates.

The natural log the real GDP was the only variable with a negatively signed coefficient, as expected from my hypothesis and commonly accepted literature. The model reported that for every unit increase in a state's real GDP, a decrease of 0.103 units in the number of internal armed conflicts that a state will experience can be expected. This variable also reported high statistical significance similar to the other control variables. The larger coefficient and statistical significance indicate that real GDP has a greater effect on the number of internal armed conflicts a state experiences than youth unemployment rates, but not as great an influence as do the other control variables.

Limitations:

Future analyses should seek to remedy the two greatest challenges that this paper may not have overcome: an absence of large-scale cross-national data on youth unemployment, and the possibility that unemployment is not the only correct measure but should instead encompass underemployment. These limitations should inform any future research on the need to be more mindful of the models and data, since a simplified opportunity cost framework comparing employment options excludes key contexts that influence a youth's decision to join an insurgent group. The assumption that young unemployed people cause greater levels of armed conflict is somewhat reductionist, as it denies the possibility that a young person's only motivating influence is their income, without any weight placed on other socio-political factors.

The first limitation, the absence of data, is a limitation confronted by most research on this topic. My model was constrained to the only 28 years that youth unemployment data has been collected, limiting any possible historic trends that can be found. Many scholars note at the end of their papers that "there is still far too little good large-scale statistical data available to assess this [relationship] at the large-N comparative level" (Cramer 2015, 4). Moreover, it is

even harder to find “accurate, up-to-date, comprehensive, gender and age-disaggregated data on youth in developing countries” (Idris 2016, 2). There is little reliable data in states experiencing high rates of youth unemployment and consistent occurrence of internal armed conflicts, making it extremely difficult to understand the relationship between employment status and participation in insurgencies. Most countries that have donor programs funding employment schemes are the same ones without reliable data, further complicating the situation. These reduce the statistical robustness of most models that attempt to capture the relationship between youth unemployment and political violence. Political scientists and economists will continue to accept and promote the assumed relationship between youth unemployment and violence, even if it is at best, statistically weak, and at worst, inaccurate.

Additionally, only using unemployment as the main measure rather than including underemployment limits the strength of the model and any possible statistical significance. However, this limitation is also constrained by the first, given that most developing countries and states experiencing internal armed conflict do not keep a record of individuals who are underemployed. The dataset I used for this paper did not contain a variable measure for underemployment as well, mirroring other literature unable to find an accurate and operationalizable measure. It is the absence of gainful employment that contributes to feelings of frustration, embarrassment, and stagnation, and eventually to violent behaviors.

Concluding Thoughts:

Given the widespread acceptance of the assumption that high rates of youth unemployment lead to a greater likelihood that a state experiences internal armed conflict, I set out to ask: To what extent does youth unemployment status affect the number of internal armed conflicts within a state? I hypothesize that countries with higher levels of youth unemployment

will see a larger annual number of internal armed conflicts than will countries with lower levels of youth unemployment. This relationship exists via a three main causal mechanisms: 1) the opportunity cost calculation, which makes insurgent activities appear more attractive since they have the potential to offer greater income-earning options; 2) a young individual's private frustration, resentment and feelings of stagnation turning into public grievances, leading to the decision to take up arms to establish a new governance and social order; 3) the standard metrics for adulthood becoming unattainable because of worsening economic conditions for people entering adulthood, leading to violent behavior in order to obtain them. In order to assess my hypothesis, I run a linear regression model using a variable measuring the number of internal armed conflicts in a state as my dependent variable and rates of youth unemployment as my central explanatory variable. I recoded my dependent variable to include instances where a state experienced no conflicts in a given year, rather than allowing the model to interpret the data as 'missing'. In addition to these two variables, I used three other control variables: ethnic fractionalization, real GDP, and total population. I took the natural log of the latter two variables in order to ensure that there would be more normal distribution and reduce the discrepancies between any given states.

My results support my hypothesis: youth unemployment does have a positive effect on the number of internal armed conflicts within a state, and any unit increase in the rate of youth unemployment should be reflected in an increase the number of violent internal conflicts. My central explanatory variable was statistically significant, although with a small coefficient relative to the other outputs. My other variables fulfilled their predictions, that 1) higher ethnic fractionalization leads to a greater number of internal armed conflicts; 2) greater total population leads to a greater number of internal armed conflicts; and 3) countries with higher levels of real

GDP will see to a lower number of internal armed conflicts. All three of these variables reported statistical significance, and coefficients larger than what was reported for my central explanatory variable. These results provide some empirical support for the wide-spread presumption that high rates of youth unemployment lead to more violent armed conflicts. However, the coefficient of the central explanatory variable was much smaller than those of the other three variables, indicating that these factors have far more influence on the number of internal armed conflicts than youth unemployment rates. The relative weakness of the youth unemployment variable compared to the other variables indicates that aid dedicated to reducing a state's potential for internal armed conflict could be better spent elsewhere, rather than simply trying to increase the rate of formal youth unemployment.

My research supports much of the literature on this subject, which notes that while there may be some validity to the belief that youth unemployment potentially leads to higher rates of violent conflict, there is not enough empirical support to either confirm or deny it. My model reporting large disparities in the coefficients indicates that other factors may have a more influential effect on a state experiencing armed conflict. This illustrates that while youth unemployment may be a necessary factor in the degradation of society leading towards violent armed conflicts, it is not sufficient for this to occur. This advances the notion that youth unemployment may have some contributing factor to the decision to engage in violent behavior, but there are stronger contextual factors. The causal frameworks for why young people may choose to engage in violent behavior and join insurgency groups have been thoroughly theoretically examined, yet without robust empirical support.

Political economists are divided on the acceptance of this presumption, given the intractable gap between theory and evidence. Researchers and academics should be wary of any

literature that tout a strong, automatic empirical link between youth unemployment and internal armed conflict, especially given the absence of data on the topic within developing countries and states experiencing high rates of conflict. Future research should examine models that are able to work around this limitation, and possibly smaller in scale in order to truly assess the strength of the major theoretical frameworks. It would also be worthwhile for future research to question how insurgent groups recruit and what methods they use, as another pathway for assessing the theoretical frameworks. Insurgent tactics are an important contributor to the opportunity cost calculations of unemployed individuals, and their motivations can provide useful insight to the role that youth unemployment has on internal armed conflict. Additionally, future research should also look directly at the programs being implemented to increase the labor market and rates of formal employment to test whether they have an effect on a state's experience with internal armed conflict. The wide-spread presumption that young unemployed people cause violence has real world implications, with countless dollars being spent by NGOs and donor groups with good intentions. If this assumption is empirically unfounded, regardless of how persuasive the theoretical frameworks are, the aid money would be redirected to programs that can actually promote peace while helping the most vulnerable.

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. reg ucdp_type3 wdi_unempyilo fe_etfra lnrgdp lnpop
```

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs	=	4,227
Model	373.26182	4	93.3154549	F(4, 4222)	=	182.30
Residual	2161.17963	4,222	.511885274	Prob > F	=	0.0000
				R-squared	=	0.1473
				Adj R-squared	=	0.1465
Total	2534.44145	4,226	.599725851	Root MSE	=	.71546

ucdp_type3	Coefficient	Std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf. interval]	
wdi_unempyilo	.0025939	.0009697	2.68	0.007	.0006929	.004495
fe_etfra	.1869556	.0482042	3.88	0.000	.09245	.2814613
lnrgdp	-.1028787	.0100639	-10.22	0.000	-.1226092	-.0831483
lnpop	.2792896	.0124783	22.38	0.000	.2548256	.3037535
_cons	-3.237679	.1368249	-23.66	0.000	-3.505928	-2.96943