

Trend of Absent Population in Nepal

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Abstract

An absentee is one who is not present in the nation during the date of enumeration for more than six months with the intention of returning. In demographic analysis, this human condition is meaningful for the nation, especially in Nepal. The main cause of absenteeism is the international migration of labor in Nepal. This study expresses the trend, magnitude, and characteristics of the absentee population, where data from national population and housing censuses of 2001, 2011, and 2021 provide the base for analysis. The comparative analyses of the absentee population were applied to evaluate changes in volume and composition. The findings show that the absentee population appears to have increased from 762,181 in the 2001 census to 2,190,592 in the 2021 census. The movement is dominated by males, whereas female participation is increasing over time. More than 90% of the absentee population appears fitted to the working-age group (15–59 years). This finding represents the selective migration in the form of strong international labor migration. A regularly raised absentee population shows the rising economic dependence on remittance. This situation has some significant implications for the structure of the population, with labor supply reflecting socio-economic development.

Keywords: absentee population, labor migration, age structure, remittance economy

Introduction

Like birth and death, population movement is another kind but one of the strongest components of demographic change. It influences not only the size and distribution of the population of the nation but also its socio-economic structure. International labor migration is distinct from other kinds of movements, which is particularly noticeable in developing countries like Nepal. In demographic measurement, the mobility is often captured through the concept of the *absent population*. People outside the country at the time of enumeration are absent (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012; National Statistics Office, 2024). The functioning concept of the absent population is a de facto kind; thereby, it differs from the general movement of the people. Therefore, a unique lens is essential to observe the scale and implications of emigration.

Internationally, the volume of global migrants has grown significantly over the last few decades, driven by economic globalization, demands of the labor market, and differences in development opportunities (UNDESAPD, 2020). Labor emigration bears a livelihood plan, particularly in developing countries. National economies become

effective from the remittances, which contribute mainly to household welfare, including poverty reduction (World Bank, 2024). However, the composition of the population left behind the place of origin raises an important demographic concern.

In South Asia, emigration has become extremely rooted in socio-economic systems. The economies of Nepal are the most migration-dependent. Historically, seasonal and short-term movements towards neighboring countries like India have been considered emigration from Nepal. Longterm shift to overseas contributed to a substantial increase in Nepalese living abroad.

Census-based absentee data are different from regular migration statistics. Censuses collect the record from the household level, which differs from the record-keeping of administrative records or surveys. Censuses include people, living abroad for a short or long time, who are still counted as members of their households. According to the national population censuses of Nepal of 2001, 2011, and 2021, the markedly increased data over time indicate a sustained and large-scale outflow of the working-age population from the nation, influencing the population structure (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2003, 2014). Integration of Nepal into international labor markets is the main cause of international migration, with a greater or more contribution of domestic employment opportunities.

The economically active population in the age group 15-59 years is dominant in the concentration of absenteeism in Nepal. This shows that selective depletion of the national force, which reflects the implication in labor availability, even in agriculture sector. Changing gender dynamics based on the recent absent population in census data of Nepal reflects that females are moving abroad in gradual increasing fashion. (National Statistics Office, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

A growing absent population poses pros and cons, like multilayered socio-economic effects. The living standard of Nepalese has increased due to remittances from overseas, and the household consumption pattern has changed in structure. A bird's-eye view of Nepal shows that Nepal exists among the top remittance-receiving countries (World Bank, 2024). On the negative side, increased workload distributed among the left behind members, shifted roles of the individuals in family members, and decreased care for the dependents pose challenges due to absenteeism. At the community level, development, productivity, and social cohesion are affected due to a high rate of absenteeism.

Noticing from the rebuttal angle of its importance, the absent population has received relatively limited attention in academic research. The demographic measurement and trend of the absent population is the new site captured in this study, which has previously been less viewed than the studies that focus on migration processes, remittance impacts, and labor markets. The evolution of the size and structure of the absent population is the reflection of longitudinal analysis. This study examines the demographic consequences of rooted emigration as a knowledge gap for a deeper understanding. Changes in the magnitude by gender of the absent population are the crux of this study. By utilizing census-based evidence, the study seeks to provide a

stronger picture of the scale and structure of international migration and its implications for the population dynamics of Nepal. A better understanding of the absentee helps to design policies needed for the opportunities and challenges associated with emigration.

Research Gap and Objectives

Previous studies do not provide a complete demographic picture of the absent population without a single aspect like remittance, gender roles, or regional patterns. There are a few studies that examine trends over time, age and sex structure, and regional differences using multiple census data together. Socio-economic effects of the absent population on household-level activities are studied in limited amount. This study tries to address these gaps by analyzing data from the 2001, 2011, and 2021 national censuses of Nepal. The aim of this study is to provide a detailed and multidimensional understanding of the absent population of Nepal. Progressive trends, structural and regional differences, and socio-economic implications on the development of absenteeism are the key objectives of this study.

Scope of the Study

This study specifically focuses on the age and sex composition, regional distribution, and time-based changes in absenteeism. The study covers both internationally migrated and those noted in the national census as absentee populations. It provides the insights selectivity for economic issues, feminization of migration, and evolution of demographic trends. This study stresses the analysis on the provincial level and patterns of absent population, not in district or community level variation, and personal experience or household decision. The findings of this study inform the policy discussion on the management of the labor force, remittance, and socio-economic and demographic implications of the absent population in Nepal.

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design. Secondary data were obtained from the Population and Housing Censuses of Nepal conducted in 2001, 2011, and 2021 (National Statistics Office, 2024). Census data are nationally representative on household composition, migration status, age, and sex. These components are essential for analyzing patterns of absence over time. A descriptive and comparative approach was employed in the analysis. Relevant variables such as age, sex, and duration of absence were taken out and analyzed. Age groups used in the study were grouped into three broad age groups: 0–14 years, 15–59 years, and 60+ years. Sexual category disaggregated analysis was conducted to examine gender differences among the absentee population. Trend analysis and percentage distribution are the techniques used in data analysis. Changes over time are analyzed through comparative tables. Census data, even being more reliable and nationally representative it could not provide qualitative insights for the motivation required for migration experiences. It enables evidence-based insights for demographic and policy planning.

Analysis and Findings

Examination of changes in the absentee population, including frequency, percentages, and trend analysis across population censuses 2001, 2011, and 2021, is the crux of this section.

Concept and Measurement

The 2021 census found that 15.3 percent of the population had been absent from home at the time of enumeration, living abroad or elsewhere in Nepal away from their places of enumeration. Among them, 7.5 percent were living abroad – almost the same as in 2011 (7.3%). However, the number absent from home had significantly increased from 1,921,429 in 2011 to 2,190,592 in 2021, while that was 762,181 in 2001. In the Nepalese census, the absentee population refers to a person who has been living abroad for more than six months before the census date, is not present in the household, and may return in future (National Statistics Office, 2024) (National Statistics Office, 2024).

Table 1

Trend of Absent Population in 2001–2021

Census Year	Total Population	Absent total	Absent percent of total population	Absent male	Male percent of absent total	Absent female	Female percent of absent total
2001	23151423	762,181	3.29	679489	89.2	82712	10.9
2011	26494504	1,921,494	7.25	1684029	87.6	237400	12.4
2021	29164578	2,190,592	7.51	1799675	82.2	390917	17.8

Note.(Baral, 2021; National Statistics Office, 2024).

Table 1 shows that the number of absent individuals increased substantially between 2001 and 2021. The proportion of the absentee population increased from 3.29 percent to 7.51 percent in two decades, where the rate of increase appeared relatively slower after 2011.

Gender Composition

Male dominance remains a defining feature of absentee populations, largely reflecting labor migration patterns to destinations such as the Gulf countries, Malaysia, and India (Karki, 2020). However, female participation has increased over time due to changing gender roles and expanded opportunities (Aryal, 2021).

Table 2

Sex-wise Absent Population in 2001–2021

Census Year	Total	Male	Male (%)	Female	Female (%)
2001	762,181	679,489	89.2	82,712	10.8

Census Year	Total	Male	Male (%)	Female	Female (%)
2011	1,921,494	1,684,029	87.6	237,400	12.4
2021	2,190,592	1,799,675	82.2	390,917	17.8

Note. (Baral, 2021; National Statistics Office, 2024).

Table 2 shows the absentee population is predominantly male across all census periods. However, the share of female absentees has gradually increased, while the proportion of males has declined.

Age Structure

The age structure of the absentee population in Nepal across the 2001, 2011, and 2021 censuses reveals a highly selective migration pattern, overwhelmingly concentrated in the working-age group, with minimal participation of children and a gradually increasing share of the elderly population.

Table 3

Absent Population Percentage by Broad Age Group in 2001-2021

Census Year	Total	0–14 (%)	15–59 (%)	60+ (%)
2001	762,181	4.5	91.6	3.9
2011	1,921,494	4.4	91.5	4.1
2021	2,190,592	4.3	90.5	5.2

Note. (National Statistics Office, 2024).

The age distribution of the absentee population is heavily concentrated in the working-age group (15–59 years), which consistently accounts for more than 90% across all census years. The proportion of children (0–14 years) remains low, while the share of the elderly (60+) shows a gradual increase over time.

Spatial Distribution

Provincial data show the absent population is higher in Sudurpashchim province, followed by Gandaki. This result reflects the trend of migration as cultures are motivated by limited local employment opportunities. Among the seven provinces, Madhesh shows a relatively lower level of absenteeism (National Statistics Office, 2024).

Table 4

Spatial Distribution of Absent Population by Province, Nepal

Province	Absent Population (%)		Trend description
	2011	2021	
Sudurpashchim	9.8	11.5	Highest, increasing
Karnali	8.5	10.2	High, increasing
Gandaki	9.2	10.8	High, increasing
Lumbini	7.5	9.3	Moderate, increasing
Bagmati	5.8	7.1	Moderate
Koshi	6.3	7.8	Moderate
Madhesh	3.5	4.2	Lowest, slightly increasing

Note. (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014; National Statistics Office, 2024).

Table 4 shows the significant disparities in the regional distribution of the absentee population. The distribution of the absentee population varies significantly across provinces. On the highest ($\geq 10\%$) to lowest ($< 5\%$) trend description, Sudurpashchim and Madhesh are in extreme positions respectively, while Karnali and Gandaki are in high (5 - 9.9%), and Lumbini, Bagmati, and Koshi are in moderate positions of increment.

Analytical Insight on Age

Table 3 shows that more than 90% absentee are concentrated in the working age group (15-59). This overwhelming concentration of absenteeism indicates labor migration is age selective for their economic concern (Kafle & Mahat, 2026). The individuals living away from their households in working age clearly states the income generation is driven by population mobility. This labor migration is a significant demographic phenomenon to fulfil the economic need. This absenteeism suggests the broader implications for household structure. These changed dependency ratios further affect the regional development of the nation. Policies at labor management compel to understand age composition for social welfare, which helps in sustainable economic planning.

Stability of Child Absenteeism

The proportion of the population under fifteen years remains low, suggesting that migration is not family based rather individual (Jaquet et al., 2019). Less than five percent of absenteeism in the 0-14 years age group says that most of the families remain in their place of origin. Migrants of working age leaving their dependents at the place of origin creates a different discussion of the social comfort of inhabitants. This prioritization of economic opportunities without disrupting families' care is a strategic challenge of population management. The discussion must be created in Nepal based on

intra-household dynamics into demographic and social dimensions for the development policies. The education of children and the caregiving of dependents are going to be challenging, particularly in the rural sector of Nepal.

Gradual Increase in Elderly Absentees

The slight increase in elderly absentees indicates that the internal migration of older people is possible, and the evolution of the family support system to incorporate individuals and family navigating life challenges, including emotional, practical, and social resources available in the family unit (Ghimire, 2025). The increasing nature of elderly absentees in Nepal from 3.9 percent in 2001 to 5.2 percent in 2001 suggest the shift in the family support system. Migration towards industrialized areas is seriously accelerating the population hollowing issue (Guo et al., 2022). Emphasizing the need for policies that address intergenerational support is the crux of the discussion based on elderly absenteeism.

Causes of Increasing Absentee Population

Urbanization and industrialization are the main structural causes of the absentee population of Nepal. The purposeful reasons for the absenteeism include engagement in services, professions, education, and others. Foreign employment opportunities with attractive remuneration, limited domestic job opportunities, and cross-border mobility contribute to the rising number of absentees (Aryal, 2021; Baral, 2021; Kafle & Mahat, 2026). Interest of the common Nepalese individual moving abroad is shadowed by the responsibilities of household management.

Impacts

Absenteeism carries the various questions in place of origin as well as place of destination. Positive and negative outcomes associated with absenteeism are the two sides of the same coin. Labor migration leads to a labor shortage in place of origin in one side and remittance helps to increase household income and living standard in other side. Similarly, family separation is a crucial demerit of absenteeism, which also contributes to demographic imbalances (Adhikari et al., 2026; Ghimire, 2025; Karki, 2020).

Discussion

Considerable absentee population observed over the two decades indicates an increasing trend in Nepal. This trend directly impacts the living tactics of inhabitants in their place of origin. This pattern reflects structural economic constraints within the country, as well as the attraction of employment opportunities abroad (Aryal, 2021; Karki, 2020).

Age and Sex Selectivity

Nepal has a high sex ratio at birth, with about 112 boys for every 100 girls, as in the 2001 census, while it was 104 in 2001, 106 in 2011. This is mainly due to a strong preference for sons, rooted in patriarchal and patrilineal values in society. The current level is higher than in many Asian countries. It is higher than in India (108) and similar to China (112). It is closer to the normal level in Japan (105) and Bangladesh (105) (National Statistics Office, 2024).

The dominance of the working-age population among absentees confirms the economically selective nature of migration. Similar patterns have been reported by Jaquet et al. (2019) and Kafle and Mahat (2026), who found that migration in Nepal is primarily concentrated among economically active individuals. The increasing participation of women also suggests a gradual shift in traditional gender roles, consistent with findings by Aryal (2021) and Baral (2021).

Regional Disparities and Spatial Patterns

The higher levels of absenteeism in provinces such as Sudurpashchim, Karnali, and Gandaki reflect long-standing migration practices and limited economic opportunities, as also noted by Karki (2020). In contrast, the relatively lower absenteeism in Madhesh Province indicates the availability of local livelihood options.

Drivers of Absentee Population

Employment opportunities as an economic aspect, income disparity in different sectors and positions, and inadequate domestic motivations are driving forces of the absentee population that support the earlier findings (Aryal, 2021; Kafle & Mahat, 2026). The role of education-related migration suggests that Nepal should improve its behavioral and standard education system, inviting brains from foreign countries, which has led to an emerging discussion on the educational dimension of human capital mobility.

Socio-Economic Implications

Absent population and its trend generate multidimensional impacts, particularly on the socio-economic sector. Absentee sends their earnings as remittances to support household welfare. Besides this significant contribution of absenteeism, some challenges in labor, family, and rural settlements include a shortage of workforce, separation of active family members, and dependent inhabitants in rural settlements, respectively. The absentee population gains the opportunities to improve the skills and knowledge that support him/her to improve their personality. Improved personality may not return to the place of origin, having less chance to apply the newly gained knowledge. These findings are consistent with studies by Ghimire (2025) and Adhikari et al. (2026), which highlight both the benefits and social costs of migration based on absenteeism.

Global and Regional Comparisons

Globally, mainly two sectors, like developed and developing, show the trend of migration from developing to developed sectors because of the available opportunities of employment, whether it would be self-driven or driven by others. Economic disparity is broader in developing countries like Nepal and results in absenteeism (Karki, 2020; World Bank, 2024). The vision towards regional sectors, particularly within the SAARC region, Nepal shares similarities with Bangladesh and Pakistan, where the economic dimension shows labor migration is predominant, and the sex dimension shows male-dominated with increasing female participation (IOM, 2021; UNDESAPD, 2020).

Policy Implications

Policies based on absentee population can address a variety of sectors for ultimate population management. To alter the flow of the migration stream, an increase in opportunities for domestic employment is essential. Progressive steps on the removal of regional developmental disparities might motivate inhabitants to stay on place of origin. Households in the place of destination require support for easy living. Ultimately, safe and equitable migration practices help migrants to feel good governance.

Conclusion

The absentee population in Nepal has increased progressively over the past two decades, largely driven by international labor migration. The livelihoods of many households have become increasingly dependent on the economic benefits of migration, resulting in a continuous rise in the absolute number of the absentee population.

This article finds the dominance of the economically active age group of 15-59 years, among them, males are more than 80 percent, which is mentioned from 89.2% in 2001 to 82.2% in 2021. This share of the population proportion of females shows the changing role of women beyond their traditional household responsibilities. The absentee population is pushed through socioeconomic forces, leaving remarkable implications on development. Poverty reduction of national interest is somewhat supported by remittances from the absentee population. Firstly, employment opportunities and secondly, safe, equitable, and gender-sensitive employment opportunities can only face the challenges like labor shortage and family separation. The problem of left-behind children and old-aged dependents can be solved by examining the long-term impacts of absenteeism through sustainable development planning in Nepal.

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