

## Institutional racism at the university and consequences in the lives of Black students: a mixed study

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**Abstract** *This article aimed to analyze how institutional racism at a Brazilian public university affects the lives of Black students. This mixed study was developed by applying an online self-administered questionnaire to university students who self-declared as Blacks. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, bivariate analysis using chi-square, and multinomial logistic regression. Qualitative data analysis was performed using IRAMUTEQ. Sixty-eight (54.4%) of the 125 respondents claimed to have suffered racism at least once within the university. We noticed that racist situations experienced by Black people within the university environment call into question the student's self-confidence and motivation, directly affecting their mental health and performance in the course. The importance of receptive groups for strengthening students' belonging was highlighted.*

**Key words** *Racism, University education, Black population, Students*

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## Introduction

Brazil is the American country that received the most enslaved Africans<sup>1</sup>. The 2013 National Household Sample Survey (PNAD) conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) showed that the Black population (made up of Blacks and browns) is the largest in the country, with 53.6% Black compared to 45.5% who self-declared white. On the other hand, in the same period, only 16.4% of university students were Black<sup>1,2</sup>.

The Brazilian Black population suffers the consequences of racism, remaining in the most impoverished social classes and with the most substandard conditions in the social pyramid. Unworthy living conditions persist over the years, highlighting silent and undeclared racism<sup>3,4</sup>. The marginalization of this population is related to each individual's life narrative, i.e., the historical conditions of social inclusion and housing conditions, income, health, geographical location, and positive or negative self-concept, which determine access to goods and services<sup>5</sup>.

Considering the education system, specifically Higher Education, the lack of access of Black students to this level of education, a reflection of the current structural racism in society triggered intense debates that culminated in the enactment of the "Quotas Law" in 2012. This law applies to Higher Education in Brazilian federal institutions and results from the constant Black movement mobilization, with the work of the Afro-Brazilian Studies Centers (NEAB), professors, and civil society<sup>6</sup>. This law intended to equalize the student body, which was visibly white, elitist, and came from private education, by allowing candidates without access to Higher Education. The proposed measures were formulated so that diversity could contribute to the University's development. Ordinance N° GR695/07 established the reservation of slots in undergraduate courses for self-declared Black and brown people so that they are subjected to an investigation by the institution to verify the veracity of the information provided<sup>7</sup>.

As people transition and adapt to university, the transformations in people's lives can result in physical and psychological health symptoms<sup>8</sup>. These symptoms can be even more intense for the Black population living in continuous mental distress due to the substandard living conditions caused by racism from enslavement and marginalization<sup>5</sup>. The support of peers, professors, and the different sectors of the institution is decisive

in the adaptive process. However, students may withdraw emotionally if they are not adequately received<sup>8</sup>.

The university plays a vital role in the learning and the overall psychosocial development of its students. It cannot look solely at academic results or the training of specialized professionals but its community as a whole<sup>11</sup>. Thus, this study aimed to analyze how institutional racism at a public federal university can affect the lives of Black students.

## Methods

This mixed quantitative/qualitative, descriptive, analytical, and exploratory study was conducted with undergraduate students at a Brazilian public university in the inland region of the state of São Paulo who self-declared Black (Black or brown), were over 18, and had access to the internet.

The group of authors of this article consists of seven people, five of whom self-declare Black. Two were undergraduate students who entered Higher Education under affirmative action, and one is studying for a master's degree, also with a slot reservation for postgraduate studies.

We adopted a purposive sample based on the number of responses to the form. We selected this method because data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic peak. At the time, impressions of the impact of the pandemic and remote education at the university where data were collected were of the increased inequalities faced by Black students and other vulnerable groups, such as Indigenous students, regarding access to the internet, computers, and other necessary tools.

The outcomes of this study were having suffered or witnessed racism committed against other people at the university. As a measure against the possible re-victimization of the people who answered the questionnaire, the research team provided the telephone numbers of two of the researchers so that the students, if they wished, could get in touch and thus be referred to the university's health care service or a project for receiving Black people, which emerged during the pandemic. Two respondents sought out this service.

Data were collected from October 2020 to February 2021 using a self-administered electronic questionnaire prepared for this research, which addressed sociodemographic variables and data on entry and the current situation at the

university. The open-ended questions are listed below:

1. Have you ever had any discussion or content on racial issues in your course? If so, which subject? What was the debate like?
2. If you have experienced a racist situation at university, how do you think it has affected your university performance?
3. If you have experienced a racist situation at university, how do you think it has affected your life at university?
4. What mechanisms for combating racism do you identify at the university?
5. What do you suggest for the university regarding combating racism and valuing diversity?

Quantitative data was stored and double-checked in a structured Excel spreadsheet. The statistical program used was Stata, version 12.0, and a descriptive analysis was conducted to characterize the sample. Chi-square and linear trend tests were performed, and odds ratios (OR) and respective 95% confidence intervals (95%CI) were calculated using multinomial logistic regression models. A significance level of 5% was adopted for the association tests. A textual corpus was compiled by combining the answers submitted, followed by processing and analysis using the software Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires (IRAMUTEQ) to analyze the qualitative data.

The answers to the open-ended questions were organized in such a way as to make up the textual corpus, which was prepared and revised to eliminate typing errors and standardize acronyms and expressions (preserving the same meanings). The analysis used Classical Textual Statistics and Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC). The occurrences of each class in the CHD were considered based on statistically significant values ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar) approved this study under CAAE: 32725820400005504 and Opinion n° 4192494.

## Results

In total, 125 Black students responded to the survey. Table 1 shows the profile of the responses. Most said they were Black (57.6%), cis female (72.4%), and heterosexual (48.0%). A total of 63.1% were admitted through affirmative action. We observed no predominance regarding

the knowledge areas (biological/health sciences, humanities, and exact sciences) in which they were enrolled. Just over half (54.4%) had failed a course. Sixty-eight participants (54.4%) said they had suffered racism at least once, and 74 (59.2%) had witnessed racism at university. Regarding those who committed racism, students were identified as the majority, both for those who suffered racism (44.8%) and those who witnessed racism (83.8%), followed by professors (28.8% and 56.8%, respectively).

Table 2 shows the bivariate analysis results between the outcome and sociodemographic variables. Brown students (57.9%) and those who entered university through affirmative action (53.6%) reported having suffered more racism. Black students experienced more racism at the university (68.3%) and failed at least one subject (63.5%).

Table 3 shows the results of the multiple logistic regression. Brown students suffered 1.2 times more racism at university than Black students. On the other hand, Black students witnessed 1.07 times more racism committed at the university towards other people.

Concerning the research data qualitative analysis, the general corpus comprised five texts (corresponding to the answers to the five open-ended questions in the questionnaire), separated into 251 text segments (st), with 210sts (83.67%) being used. A total of 8,906 occurrences (words, forms, or vocabulary) emerged, of which 1,715 were distinct words, and 1,023 had a single occurrence. The content analyzed was categorized into 4 classes: Class 1 with 37st (17.62%), Class 2 with 81st (38.57%), Class 3 with 33st (15.71%), and Class 4 with 59st (28.09%).

These four classes are divided into two branches (A and B) of the total corpus under analysis. Sub-corpus A, "Racial issues at the university", is made up of Classes 1 ("Places of protection against racism at the university") and 2 ("Discussions on racial issues at the university"). Sub-corpus B, "Racism at the university", contains the discourses corresponding to Classes 3 ("Consequences of racist situations at the university") and 4 ("Possible strategies for combating racism at the university") (Figure 1).

To better visualize the classes, an organizational chart was drawn up from which the evocations with similar vocabulary and different vocabulary from the other classes emerge. Below is a description and example of each class that emerged from the Descending Hierarchical Classification (Figure 2).

**Table 1.** Profile of Black university students and institutional racism, Brazil, 2021 (n = 125).

Variables	Proportion (n)
Ethnicity/skin color	
Black	57.6% (72)
Brown	42.4% (53)
Income	
Less than 1 minimum wage	10.5% (13)
1-2 minimum wages	37.9% (47)
3-4 minimum wages	36.3% (45)
More than 4 minimum wages	15.3% (19)
Gender	
Cis female	72.4% (89)
Cis male	26.0% (32)
Non-binary	1.6% (2)
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	48% (60)
Bisexual	24.8% (31)
Gay	7.2% (9)
Prefer not to answer	5.6% (7)
Other (+)	5.6% (7)
Lesbian	4% (5)
Pansexual	3.2% (4)
Queer	0.8% (1)
Intersexual	0.8% (1)
Entry through affirmative actions?	
Yes	63.1% (77)
No	36.9% (45)
Graduation course knowledge area	
Humanities	33.1% (41)
Health/biological sciences	33.8% (42)
Exact sciences	33.1% (41)

it continues

**Table 1.** Profile of Black university students and institutional racism, Brazil, 2021 (n = 125).

Variables	Proportion (n)
Have you failed any class?	
Yes	54.4% (68)
No	45.6% (57)
Have you ever suffered racism at the university?	
Never	45.6% (57)
Once	16.0% (20)
2-3 times	18.4% (23)
4 times or more	20.0% (25)
Who perpetrated it?	
Student	44.8% (56)
Professor	28.8% (36)
Outsourced staff	8.8% (11)
Administrative technician	5.6% (7)
Other people	4.0% (5)
Have you ever witnessed racism at the university?	
Never	12.0% (9.7)
Once	23.4% (29)
2-3 times	26.6% (33)
4 times or more	
Who perpetrated it?	83.8% (62)
Student	56.8% (42)
Professor	14.9% (11)
Outsourced staff	17.6% (13)
Administrative technician	9.5% (7)
Other people	

Source: Authors.

**Table 2.** Racism suffered and/or witnessed by Black university students. Brazil, 2021 (n = 125).

	Suffered racism	Witnessed racism
Ethnicity/skin color	<b>p = 0.001</b>	<b>p = 0.003</b>
Black	42.1%	68.3%
Brown	57.9%	31.1%
Entry through affirmative actions?	<b>p = 0.044</b>	p = 0.820
Yes	53.6%	62.0%
No	46.4%	38.0%
Graduation course knowledge area	p = 0.172	p = 0.136
Humanities	32.1%	40.8%
Health/biological sciences	26.8%	24.5%
Exact sciences	41.1%	34.7%
Have you failed any class?	p = 0.469	<b>p = 0.018</b>
Yes	50.8%	63.5%
No	42.1%	36.5%

Chi-square test. In bold, statistically significant p-values.

Source: Authors.

**Table 3.** Multiple logistic regression for racism suffered and/or witnessed by Black university students. Brazil, 2021 (n = 125).

	Suffered racism OR (CI <sub>95%</sub> )	Witnessed racism OR (CI <sub>95%</sub> )
Ethnicity/skin color	<b>p = 0.002</b>	<b>p = 0.007</b>
Black	1	1.07 (0.29 – 1.84)
Brown	1.2 (0.43 – 1.98)	1
Entry through affirmative actions?	p = 0.053	p = 0.557
Yes	0.79 (-0.01 – 1.58)	0.24 (-1.05 – 0.57)
No	1	1
Graduation course knowledge area	p = 0.211	p = 0.136
Humanities	0.33	40.8%
Health/biological sciences	1	24.5%
Exact sciences	0.66	34.7%
Have you failed any class?	p = 0.211	<b>p = 0.024</b>
Yes	0.51 (-0.18 – 0.85)	0.97 (0.13 – 1.81)
No	1	1

Multinomial logistic regression. In bold, statistically significant p-values.

Source: Authors.

### Class 1 – Places of protection against racism at the university

It comprises 17.62% (37 st) of the total corpus analyzed and is made up of words and radicals in the range between  $x^2 = 4.72$  (theme) and  $x^2 = 59.51$  (collective). This class is made up of words such as “group” ( $x^2 = 33.29$ ); “SAADE” (Secretariat for Affirmative Action, Diversity, and Equity) ( $x^2 = 28.88$ ); “movement” ( $x^2 = 19.07$ ); “Black people” ( $x^2 = 14.45$ ); “conversation circles” ( $x^2 = 10.09$ ).

The analysis performed revealed spaces within the university that protect Black people from racism. Few spaces are institutional and correspond to study groups and communities that aim to fight against classist, racist, misogynist, and prejudiced issues in general, as can be seen from the text fragments:

*The presence of communities and leagues that address the issue and are somehow a means of helping and distributing information* (P32).

*The ‘Coletivo Quilombo dos 50’ and the ‘Bateria Comando Federal’ propose conversation circles and social projects whenever possible* (P48).

*I see some student movements, but I don’t know much about the university* (P56).

*The Afro-Brazilian Studies Center Community and committees that would provide respect and protection for these people* (P19).

### Class 2 – Lack of discussions on racial issues at the university

It comprises 38.57% (81st) of the total corpus analyzed and is made up of words and radicals in the range between  $x^2 = 4.35$  (race) and  $x^2 = 27.33$  (discussion). This class is made up of words such as “discipline” ( $x^2 = 30.78$ ); “class” ( $x^2 = 24.36$ ); “never” ( $x^2 = 15.75$ ); “conversation circle” ( $x^2 = 14.54$ ); “professor” ( $x^2 = 12.47$ ).

The analysis shows that discussions on racial issues rarely occur at the university. It is at specific moments in subjects or the classroom when they do. Some retaliation situations occur depending on where the issue is raised, which generates discomfort for the students who made the point, as can be identified from the text fragments:

*The discussions end up being very shallow and with specific situations, such as obstetric violence against Black women, for example. There is a lack of references before bringing them up in the classroom or at events aimed at Black academics* (P13).

*I’ve already taken an elective course on the subject of race. Apart from that, I don’t remember much if I did* (P79).

*During a class discussion, a classmate asked me, ‘Do you know why you’re poor? Because your race worked 300 years for mine’* (P06).

*There was no theme in the subject, but I raised the issue of Black women’s loneliness. I received strange looks and ironic comments from the class in various subjects* (P04).

### Class 3 – Consequences of racist situations at the university

It comprises 15.71% (33st) of the total corpus analyzed and is made up of words and radicals in the range between  $x^2 = 5.08$  (“feel”) and  $x^2 = 21.87$  (“grade”). This class is made up of words

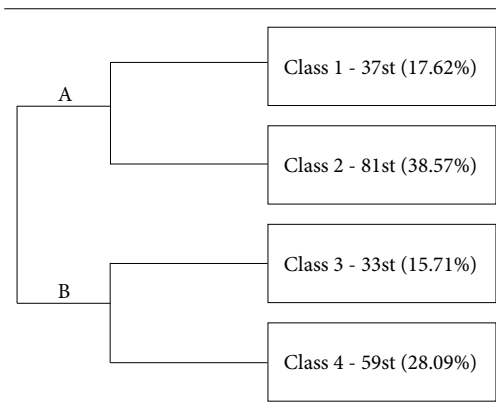
such as “pass” ( $x^2 = 18.43$ ); “doubt” ( $x^2 = 16.32$ ); “get” ( $x^2 = 15.98$ ); “subject” ( $x^2 = 9.32$ ); “suffer” ( $x^2 = 6.21$ ).

The data show that the racist situations experienced by Black people within the university environment can cause even irreversible harm. They call into question the student’s self-confidence and motivation, directly affecting their mental health and, consequently, their performance on the course, as can be identified from the following text fragments:

*I’ve been looked down on a lot. They even doubted my grades or how I passed a difficult subject without failing. This, in the tone of speech, as if I were the failing profile (P43).*

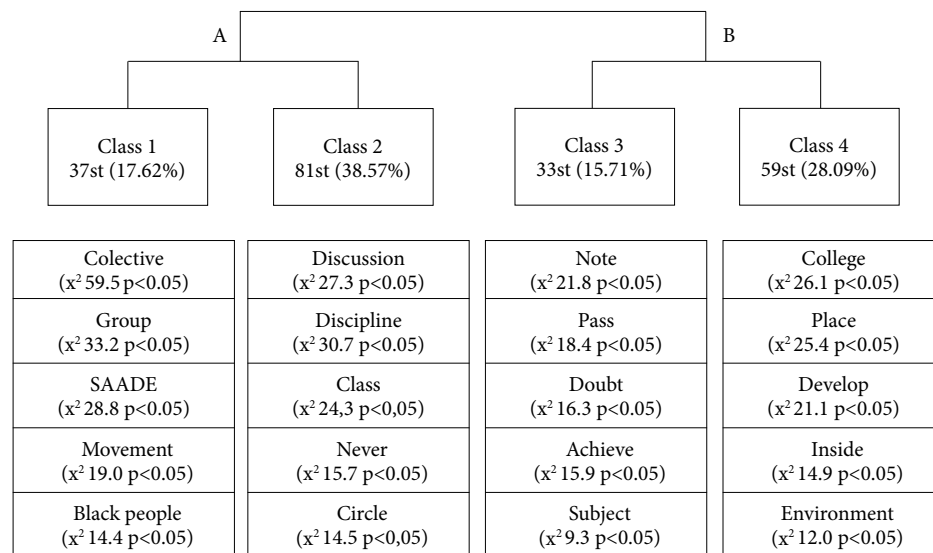
*It certainly inhibited my development. Yes, between a Black student and a white student, professors choose white students a thousand times to help them or even to give them a mark to pass the subject. We, Black people, are never recognized, even if we are good at something (P102).*

*Once, I even doubted whether I was on the right course, and it gave me an extreme anxiety crisis. Even though I was doing well, I had the feeling of continuing to reaffirm myself to those who had hurt me (P10).*



**Figure 1.** Dendrogram of the analysis of the textual corpus of open-ended answers.

Source: Authors.



**Figure 2.** Organizational chart with the most prevalent classes and words.

Source: Authors.

*It made me doubt myself, my ability, and even whether I was fit to perform the activities or continue in this field (P02).*

#### **Class 4 – Strategies to combat racism in the university environment**

It comprises 28.09% (59st) of the total corpus analyzed and is made up of words and radicals in the range between  $x^2 = 4.15$  (“University”) and  $x^2 = 26.19$  (“College”). This class is made up of words such as “place” ( $x^2 = 25.46$ ); “develop” ( $x^2 = 21.15$ ); “inside” ( $x^2 = 14.97$ ); “environment” ( $x^2 = 12.03$ ); “opportunity” ( $x^2 = 7.49$ ).

Analyzing the fragments of texts that made up this class, we can identify some strategies listed by the participants in the research to combat racism in the University environment. These strategies include (1) developing events; (2) the availability of institutional bodies where complaints can be received, ensuring that cases are resolved; (3) the provision of more professionals able to address the mental health of students; and (4) faculty training to handle prejudiced situations, such as racism:

*Organizing a week to discuss the issue. Ombudsmen’s offices for the whole college, not just the academic centers. More Psychology slots for students (P89).*

*Creating a racial council that can receive complaints about situations within the University but also outside of it when they happen between people at the University since this affects relationships and academic performance (p. 124).*

*Take student complaints seriously. Offer more courses on ethnic-racial identity in humanities. Train lecturers to be more empathetic to people’s life experiences (P21).*

*Greater integration between the University and Black students, so that more events can be held during the freshman year and on other dates throughout the year and Black students feel more welcome to prevent possible discriminatory/vexatious situations (P69).*

#### **Discussion**

This survey showed the profile of institutional racism experienced by Black students at a Brazilian public university. Data were collected at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the total number of respondents corresponded to 4.37% of the university’s self-declared Black undergraduate students. In the pandemic con-

text, one of the groups of students most affected by the lack of structure to keep up with academic activities in a remote format was Black students. Although we do not have the dropout profile during the pandemic, we can see that the COVID-19 pandemic has entrenched pre-existing inequalities, making the Black population even more vulnerable<sup>9</sup>.

We adopted the sociological concept of race, on which racism is perpetuated in society, since “it is a systematic form of race-based discrimination and manifests itself through conscious or unconscious practices that culminate in disadvantages or privileges, depending on the racial group to which one belongs”<sup>10</sup>. The university is not immune to social relationships marked by racism in the Brazilian social structure. On the contrary, as we can see in this research, most Black university students have suffered or witnessed racism within the university, caused mainly by their peers or staff.

The fact that brown students accounted for the majority of people who suffered racism at the university may be because it is still a mostly-white environment. However, the ethnicity/skin color profile within universities has changed over the last ten years. Thus, racial differences are accentuated when a brown person enters the university; in other words, these people discover themselves as “Black people” at the university<sup>11</sup>. Colorism is understood as skin color-based discrimination, i.e., it will dictate the treatment someone will receive from society and, thus, increase the likelihood of these individuals’ exclusion or marginalization<sup>12</sup>.

Universities have adopted an anti-racist discourse, blaming structural racism as a hypocritical way of addressing racial problems within their walls. So, there is a need to call oneself non-racist, but there is no exercise of being anti-racist or even fighting it daily in its structure<sup>13</sup>. With such a stance, one may observe restrained statements when referring to dark-skinned people in academic circles, which does not apply to people with less pronounced Negroid phenotypical traits, showing veiled and systemic racism.

The Black adult population with 12 years of schooling or more went from 3.3% to 12% from 1995 to 2015. However, the level reached by Blacks in 2015 was the same as that reached by whites in 1995<sup>2</sup>. Universities are a micro-representation of society, with the same stereotypes and low expectations for Black people. Barnett et al.<sup>14</sup> report that Black students at institutions with a white majority feel “pressured” to blend into

the dominant cultural reality to gain acceptance. We have a tendency similar to that described by Frantz Fanon: “What does a man want? What does the Black man want? [...] The Black man wants to be white”, quoted by Bernardino Costa<sup>15</sup>, in this discussion, specifically in the university context.

University campuses have approximately 12% to 50% of university students with one or more mental disorders, which derive from experiences outside the university and are associated with racial micro-abuse when transitioning from adolescence to adulthood<sup>14</sup>. As a result, these students generally have worse health and higher depression rates<sup>14</sup>.

To minimize these problems, communities have organized themselves in university environments to manage, train, and politically organize Black and quota students, monitor the implementation of affirmative action policies, and support students’ university careers. The name “communities” was inspired by the Black feminist groups of the 1970s and 1980s, which preached horizontality in decision-making and a lack of hierarchy in their organization. They set themselves as groups for discussion and political and intellectual action around a libertarian and emancipatory ideology<sup>16</sup>.

With the influx of Black students into Brazilian universities, most of whom have been admitted through the quota policy at federal institutions since 2012, the communities have become a support for these students. This movement has strengthened and enabled the consolidation of the Afro-Brazilian Studies Center (NEAB) within universities, escalating policies that have resulted in a more significant presence of research and researchers in the field of race relationships and, in a more horizontal way and through the systematic use of social networks on the internet, these groups refuse to call themselves militants, as in parties and unions, and prefer to call themselves activists<sup>16</sup>.

Intersectional practices and discourses are more visible in representation and university experiences, especially regarding the articulation between race, gender, and generation, as seen in contemporary studies on youth in the suburbs and universities. There is a need to underscore Black intellectuals, whether in their conduct

when they face situations of sexism or homophobia in university practices or in the incorporation of members with fluid sexuality, who do not necessarily see themselves from a binary gender identity<sup>17-19</sup>.

The data show that the issue of race is not institutionalized in a cross-sectional and continuous way during training. The approach to the subject is conditioned to specific individual initiatives by professors. In this research, students do not see effective receptive forms by the institution, which leads to a wider student-institution gap. However, when there is a need for this acceptance, search is directed towards the support of peers and groups due to the identification of people who make them up with the narrative. This behavior highlights the need to look at these communities as an essential part of the construction and continuity of the trajectory of Black and brown students in occupying spaces within the new reality given to them by right to access Higher Education.

Some of this study’s limitations include the following: We did not obtain a substantially more significant number of responses to the questionnaire, which affected the inference power; data were collected through an online questionnaire, which may have caused a selection bias; and this type of research can re-victimize racism victims, even though we attempted to ensure that the benefits outweighed the harms.

## Conclusions

Besides studies on inequalities and public policies targeting access to and permanence at the university, this study showed that institutional racism against Black and brown people enrolled at the public university in question results in a continuous attempt to distance themselves from and oppose the institution.

The findings of this study contribute to an anti-racist construction in Brazilian public universities to improve the living and health conditions of Black and brown people who attend and enter the university environment. They also contribute to guiding political debates in which Black social movements engage to increase the ascension of the Black population to Brazilian Higher Education.



## Collaborations

N Guerra: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, fundraising, investigation, methods, drafting – original version and review. N Stofel: conceptualization, formal analysis, project management, monitoring, validation, drafting, and review. F Borges: methods, monitoring, validation, drafting, and review. W Luna and N Salim: formal analysis, validation, visualization, drafting review, and editing. B Sá: data curation, formal analysis, validation, visualization, drafting review, and editing. J Monteiro: formal analysis, validation, visualization, drafting, review, and editing.

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