

Racial Inequities in Food Systems

An Analysis of the Mexican & Brazilian Cases



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Author

Aline D'Angelo Campos, MPP

Correspondence Contact

Sarah Zoubek, sarah.zoubek@duke.edu

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Alison Conrad, Duke World Food Policy Center

Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

The majority of the literature on the topic of racial inequities in food systems is produced in and focused on the United States. However, structural racism is a prevailing and often covert force that shapes differential access to resources and opportunities in many different societies around the world. When excluding US-focused resources from a literature search, we found that most results focused on other countries in the Americas (including Canada and Latin America), Australia, New Zealand, and, to a lesser extent, European countries.

The goal of this project was to analyze how racial inequities play out in food systems in Mexico and Brazil, as well as to identify gaps in the existing scholarship on the topic in these countries. The Latin American narrative of racial mixing creating post-racial societies (known as *mestizaje/mestiçagem*) is the backdrop for this analysis. Although large racial disparities show up in both countries' food systems, ideas of *mestizaje* heavily influence the scholarship produced on the topic and often obscure the racial aspect of social inequities.

In both countries, the strongest scholarship identified through this project focuses on food insecurity and nutritional status in isolated rural communities, where Indigenous and African identities have remained "untouched" by *mestizaje* narratives. Research is necessary to capture the large gaps outside of such contexts and identify race-specific mechanisms contributing to inequities in both countries' food systems. This can only be achieved through context-appropriate methods that effectively engage with Mexicans' and Brazilians' perceptions of racial identities.



In Mexico, racial disparities are evident in rural settings, but discussions about the racial aspect of inequities in urban settings are greatly lacking.

- **Foods associated with Indigenous culture have historically been seen as inferior.** Food has played an important part in Mexico's history of racial relations, and foods associated with Indigenous culture were looked down on for a long time. The 1940 Census, for example, collected data on people's habit of eating corn tortillas, seen as an indicator of backwardness. The Mexican government promoted switching to wheat and adopting European cuisines as key to modernizing the Mexican *mestizo*.
- **Indigenous communities have higher rates of food insecurity and face a dual burden of undernutrition and obesity, with particularly high sugar-sweetened beverage consumption.** Indigenous people are undergoing an intense process of nutrition transition in Mexico. While pockets of undernutrition remain among Indigenous communities, their obesity rates have also



been on the rise – and consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages is particularly high among them. These disparities are documented based only on household language as a marker of Indigenous identity, which poses great limitations to capturing racial disparities outside of Indigenous communities in rural areas.

- **Indigenous peasants face large inequities in land access, livelihoods, and labor in the Mexican countryside.** Because of NAFTA and recent neoliberal policies that put an end to Mexico's land reform, Indigenous peasants have largely lost access to land and income from food production. As a result, many have resorted to seasonal migration to work in export-oriented agriculture, where they face discrimination, lower wages, and extremely poor work conditions – often justified with overtly racist discourse.
- **Strategies targeting racial disparities are insufficient.** The Mexican government targets such disparities mainly with ameliorative strategies, including cash transfers, provision

of agricultural supplies, and nutritional supplementation. These efforts are insufficient to address food insecurity in many communities, do not provide them with a sustainable source of food and livelihood, and are often culturally inadequate.

- **In urban Mexico, the *mestizaje* narrative still obscures possible racial aspects of inequities in food access and dietary quality.** This is an important gap, given that *mestizo* society is highly stratified based on (often non-explicit) racial biases.
- **Current research on genetic predispositions to obesity pathologizes racial groups.** In addressing Mexico's obesity epidemic, the government has been emphasizing research on the genetic and epigenetic predisposition to obesity and diabetes among people of Indigenous heritage. While there is genomic evidence supporting this hypothesis, it also ends up playing into old notions of eugenics that pathologize a specific racial group in the public eye and distracts from the importance of social determinants of health disparities.



BRAZIL

In Brazil, race-specific discussions in the context of food systems are mostly focused on Indigenous and *quilombola* (traditional Black) communities in rural areas, and only tangentially discussed in other contexts.

- **Brazil's narratives of racial harmony are misleading, and European foods were considered superior.** Food has played a contradictory role in Brazil's history of racial relations. On one side, the thinkers behind Brazil's *mestiçagem* narrative steered away from scientific racism by arguing that lack of adequate nutrition, not racial inferiority, was at the root of Brazil's issues. On the other, they promoted certain European foods as superior (such as wheat over the native cassava), and painted a harmonious picture of African, Indigenous, and European cuisines coming together in the country that erased the power relations between these racial groups.
- **Since colonial times, land has been extremely concentrated in the hands of a white elite in Brazil.** Land distribution remains highly eschewed, with Black and *pardo* people representing 68.9% of the landless and 74.1% of smallholders, and only 12% of large landowners. Yet, the literature on food sovereignty and land access rarely makes race a central angle of analysis when discussing structural inequality in Brazil. The country's prominent Landless Workers Movement (MST), which has been at the forefront of the struggle for land redistribution, also barely touches on the racial aspect of land concentration, and does not make racial equity a central tenet of land reform.
- **Indigenous and *quilombola* communities face severe food insecurity and land loss.** In many cases, these communities have limited space for food production and rare opportunities to earn income, leading to concerning levels of food insecurity. They also face great threats of land grabbing by agribusiness landowners in many areas.
- **Overall, Black and *pardo* Brazilians are more likely to be food insecure and to have unhealthy diets, high BMIs, and diet-related non-communicable diseases.** The largest spikes in obesity rates in recent decades have been among the poor, who are disproportionately Black and *pardo* Brazilians.
- **Despite the racial disparities in public health statistics, the literature identified does not discuss race-specific social mechanisms leading to differential health outcomes.** There is a widespread overreliance on socioeconomic status to explain all social inequities, a tendency that is deeply entrenched in Brazil's *mestiçagem* narrative.

Introduction & Methods

Structural racism is a prevailing and often covert force that shapes differential access to resources and opportunities in many different societies. In food systems, structural racism may translate into inequities from production to consumption – thus encompassing disparities in land access, labor throughout the food production chain, and access to food in terms of quantity, quality (safety and nutrition), and cultural appropriateness (Holt-Giménez & Harper, 2016).

This project constituted a literature review. The research team chose the topic upon initial analysis of the literature on racial inequities in food systems outside the United States. The literature on food sovereignty in Latin America touched on important racial dynamics and therefore provided a starting point. The lead researcher thus chose to focus on Brazil and Mexico because of these two countries' prominence in the literature on food sovereignty found during the scoping phase of this project.

This project used the Web of Science database for the English search. This search was usually enough to find results in Spanish and Portuguese as well since most articles provide abstracts in English. However, Google Scholar was occasionally used for complementary searches. To determine which search results were relevant to this project, the lead researcher analyzed abstracts based on three criteria:

1. the resource is about socially relevant food policy issues;
2. the resource shows a connection to racial issues (either explicitly established or easily inferred);
3. the resource is about Mexico or Brazil.

See Appendix for details on search engines and search terms.

International Literature Context

The majority of literature on the topic of racial inequities in food systems is produced in and focused on the United States. This project's initial scoping search attempted to purposefully exclude US-related results, but most of the identified literature that explicitly connected food issues and racial disparities was US-focused. The most common non-US-related search results were studies from countries that have also historically grappled with large internal racial diversity and inequity: other countries in the Americas (including Canada and Latin America), Australia, New Zealand, and, to a lesser extent, European countries. South Africa was a noteworthy absence, given the racialized history of the apartheid regime.

Conceptually speaking, most search results fell along two lines when discussing racial issues related to food production and access:

Food sovereignty

In 1993, a global coalition of peasant¹ movements named Vía Campesina introduced the concept of food sovereignty as people's "right to produce their own food in their own territory" (Desmarais, 2003). This concept has since expanded, as different groups started using it in different contexts. However, at its core, food sovereignty remains about power relations and social control of the food system, with a special focus on land and agriculture (Patel, 2009). Although food sovereignty is not an inherently racial concept, in many countries land ownership and control of food production fall along racial lines, making food sovereignty discussions highly racialized. This is especially true in Latin America, which took the lead in the food sovereignty movement (Perrey, 2013).

¹ Term generally used to refer to smallholder farmers, landless farmers, and working people in rural areas (Human Rights Council, 2012).

Global inequality

There is a broad discussion about how European colonialism in the 19-20th century led to underdevelopment in most of Africa and parts of Asia – which, as a result, now struggle with weakened food systems, food shortages, and undernutrition (Ghebremeskel, 1989). Europeans mostly left their colonies in the second half of the 20th century, so these countries do not

currently face large internal racial inequities – which is in part why discussions about food systems in these countries are not often conceptualized in terms of race, but rather in terms of colonialism and inequality between countries in the Global North and Global South. However, some authors point to the fact that European colonialism was justified and implemented along racial lines, and therefore global inequality is a racial issue (Slocum, 2011)



Indigenous communities have higher rates of food insecurity and face a dual burden of undernutrition and obesity, with particularly high sugar-sweetened beverage consumption. Photo: Mexico. iStock

Definitions

The concepts of race and ethnicity are not used uniformly across different contexts. In Latin America more specifically, these concepts contain important nuances that set their understanding apart from that of people in other countries where racial identities are present – such as the United States.

Race

Race emerged as a form of social identity in the Americas during colonial times, where societies were stratified based on people's origin and physical characteristics. In this context, Europeans adhered to the concept of race to rationalize the domination of Indigenous people and the enslavement of Africans (Smedley, 1998). The concept has since expanded geographically and evolved – and while any scientific basis has been dismissed, it remains an important social construct with real impact on the lives of racialized groups. The term “race” presents nuances in different contexts and is sometimes used interchangeably with “ethnicity,” but at its core, race remains primarily connected to physical appearance (Schaefer, 2008). In the literature analyzed for this project, the term “race” is more commonly employed in countries where European settler colonialism introduced white vs. non-white hierarchical social structures.

Ethnicity

The term “ethnicity” refers primarily to cultural differences, not appearance. However, it is often used interchangeably with “race” (Schaefer, 2008). The literature analyzed for this project suggests that the term “ethnicity” is most commonly used in Mexico to refer to the contrast between Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities. In Brazil, in turn, the term “race” seems to be the most prevalent when referring to the contrast between white and non-white identities. In practical terms, this difference in terminology does not seem to reflect a significant difference in social constructs, since both countries come from a background of European-imposed hierarchy based on physical appearance and heritage (Smedley, 1998).

Mestizaje/mestiçagem

In Latin America, national identity-building processes drew heavily from the idea of racial mixing (Spanish: *mestizaje*; Portuguese: *mestiçagem*). *Mestizaje* is the early 20th-century political thinking on race in Latin America that posited that racial mixing had led to homogeneously mixed-race populations and harmonious racial relations (Hooker, 2017). *Mestizaje* claimed a transcendence of racial differences and de-racialized the majority of the population under the *mestizo/mestiço* category (Wade, 2018). This political thought became highly influential in Latin America and was actively promoted by the state in many countries.

The *mestizaje* ideology was highly influential during Latin American countries' nation-building for two reasons. First, it claimed a sense of homogeneity and unity within the nation. This discourse drew from scientific racism and eugenic thinking – albeit in an unorthodox way – by posing homogeneity as a means to strengthen and consolidate the population's genetic composition. Additionally, *mestizaje* was emphasized as a key difference between Latin America and the US, where racial segregation was the prevailing policy. This distinction was important because, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Latin America faced imperialist threats from the United States, and asserting its superiority in terms of racial relations and *mestizo* unity served an anti-imperialist discourse (Hooker, 2017).

Mestizaje presented progressive aspects in a time when scientific racism – which claimed that racial mixing would lead to biological inferiority – was the dominant thought on race and racial relations. However, *mestizaje* presented a romanticized narrative of race relations in Latin America, obscuring the racism that Black and Indigenous people still faced. Racial mixing has not led to the disappearance of racial hierarchies in Latin America (Hooker, 2017). In *mestizo* societies,

most people are not categorically white or Black or Indigenous, but they are lighter or darker than others around them, and this still has social implications. In this context, “white” is a relative and flexible identity, influenced by both phenotype and social practices – but the notion of a higher position in the social hierarchy based on race is still very present (Saldaña-Tejeda, 2018a). There is a high degree of stratification within the *mestizo* majority (Saldaña-Tejeda, 2018b).

Ham's Redemption, in Portuguese: A Redenção de Cam, an oil painting made by the Spanish painter Modesto Brocos in 1895.

Spaniard and Indian Produce a Mestizo, attributed to Juan Rodríguez Juárez, c. 1715, oil on canvas (Breamore House, Hampshire, UK)



Findings: Mexico

KEY TAKEAWAYS: The racial aspect of social inequities is evident in rural Mexico, where many Indigenous languages are preserved and facilitate the identification of individuals and communities as Indigenous. Historical processes have also made “peasant” and “Indigenous” two highly correlated identities, so when neoliberal policies started disproportionately hurting this group in the 1990s, the resulting inequities became increasingly recognized as not only socioeconomic but also racial. On the other hand, in urban Mexico the mestizaje narrative still obscures possible racial aspects of inequities in food access and dietary quality.

Race in Mexico

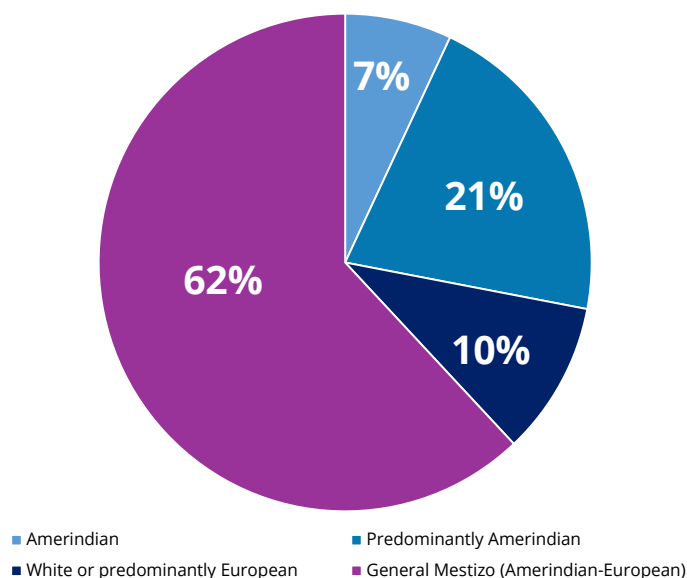
Racial composition

The Mexican government does not collect official data on racial identity, so the statistics available use different racial categories to assess Mexico’s racial composition. The CIA World Factbook (CIA, n.d.) uses categories (shown in Figure 1) that present a gradation in the Amerindian²-European spectrum: from most Indigenous (“Amerindian”) to most white (“white or predominantly European”).

In a different approach, the National Institute for Education Evaluation (INEE in the Spanish acronym) collects data on Indigenous populations per state, defining as “Indigenous” those who live in a household where at least the head speaks an Indigenous language. According to this metric, the states with the largest portion of Indigenous people are located in Southern Mexico: Yucatán (58%), Oaxaca (47%), Quintana Roo (39%), and Chiapas (28%). In turn, Central and Northern Mexican states have the smallest portion of Indigenous people, ranging between 7% and 0.29% (INEE, n.d.).

² Term referring to Indigenous people of the Americas.

Figure 1. Mexico’s national racial composition



Source: CIA – The World Factbook

Racial narratives

The Mexican *mestizo* is primarily conceived of as a mix of Indigenous and European – and the distinction between Indigenous and *mestizo* people is part of the foundation of the Mexican nation (Wade, 2018). The marriage of Hernán Cortés, Mexico’s first Spanish colonizer, and his Indigenous translator who helped him conquer the Aztec empire, La Malinche, is romanticized in Mexico’s national narrative as the birth of the nation (Saldaña-Tejeda, 2018a). Thus, Mexicans’ Indigenous-ness is celebrated as a heritage – in a discourse known as *indigenismo* – but then also disavowed and seen as backward in contemporary Indigenous people, who need to modernize and assimilate to *mestizo* society (Saldaña-Tejeda, 2018b).

The most prominent thinker behind the political thought on Latin American *mestizaje* was the Mexican José Vasconcelos. In the 1920s, he developed the concept of the “cosmic race”, or a fifth race that had emerged in Latin America – and especially in Mexico – as a mix of Europeans, Amerindians, Africans, and Asians (Hooker, 2017). In practice, despite some cultural influence from other races, Mexico’s *mestizaje* resulted in a

process of assimilation into a majority culture that was dominated by white references (from Europe and the United States) equated with “modernity.” Contemporary Indigenous people and culture became synonymous with backwardness (Jung, 2014).

Despite the clear racial hierarchy that remains in Mexican society, the idea of Mexico as a “cosmic race” society is widespread and has been highly influential in the country’s narratives around race. In the 1930s, the government stopped collecting data on racial identification, arguing that it made no sense in a country where all were mixed (Jung,

2014). Discussions about race and racism are rare in Mexico and usually limited to explicitly Indigenous communities and newly recognized Afro-*mestizos*. However, rather than creating a truly raceless society, the lack of discussion about race leads most people to experience racism as commonplace and not perceive the depth or seriousness of its effects in society. Most Mexican *mestizos*, despite not being white by conventional standards, do not commonly recognize their own racialization and end up participating and reproducing racism in society (Moreno Figueroa, 2010).



Indigenous women in Mexico processing corn using a traditional mortar and pestle. Source: Istock.com

Race in Mexican Food Systems

Racialized narratives around food and diet

Diet played an important part in Mexican *mestizaje* and assimilation into society. Since the late 19th century, the Mexican government saw the diet of the poor, who were mostly Indigenous, as inferior, and promoted Spanish and French cuisines as more nutritious. Wheat, which is not native to Mexico and was associated with European colonizers, was especially promoted as superior to corn, which had always had a very prominent place in Indigenous Mexican cultures. In “The Cosmic Race”, José Vasconcelos corroborated the idea that switching from corn tortillas to wheat bread was key to the modernization of the Mexican *mestizo* (Aguilar-Rodriguez, 2020). The 1940 Census collected data on the habit of eating corn tortillas, which was seen as an indicator of backwardness (King, 2020). Additionally, pushing wheat on the rural poor was a strategy for economic modernization, because they either had to buy bread or spend money on more land, mills,

and ovens – all of which were unnecessary with corn, which had higher yields and did not need to be turned into flour or baked (Aguilar-Rodriguez, 2020).

Disparities in land access and rural livelihoods

The contrast between *mestizo* and Indigenous people in Mexico is highly associated with the contrast between urban and rural. Urban areas are the center of *mestizo* society, while rural areas remain largely Indigenous in population (Wade, 2018). During the 1910-1920 Mexican Revolution especially, Indigenous Mexicans under the leadership of Emiliano Zapata were “reimagined as *campesinos*” (peasants) and started subscribing to this class-based identity (Jung, 2014). Nowadays, the correlation between “peasant” and “Indigenous” is high, and the two identities largely blend into each other in the eyes of Mexican society (Novo, 2004). Therefore, the large inequities in land access, rural livelihoods, and rural labor that peasants currently face in the Mexican countryside constitute not only a socioeconomic inequity but also an important racial inequity.



Indigenous nopal (*opuntia ficus-indica*) farm in Milpa Alta. Source: Istock.com

Following the Mexican Revolution, the Mexican government carried out land reform in several waves, establishing state-owned communal properties (*ejidos*) that peasants could collectively farm. By the 1940s, *ejidos* represented 47.4% of Mexico's cropland (Henderson, 2018). This communal land system represented an inclusion of mostly Indigenous peasants into the Mexican social contract and sustained the legitimacy of the Mexican government throughout most of the 20th century (Jung, 2014). However, the *ejido* social order still reproduced Mexican racial hierarchies in many ways. "Whiter" mestizos had more access to *ejido* lands and a vote in *ejido* assemblies, while Indigenous people and "more Indigenous" mestizos were often only granted the status of *avecindados* – meaning that they could not have their own plot of land within the *ejido* – and thus had to farm other people's plots – and did not have a vote in the *ejido* assembly (Rivera-Núñez et al., 2020).

The wave of neoliberal policies implemented in Mexico in the 1990s ended its land reform. Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution made the privatization of *ejidos* possible and halted further land distribution and most funding for peasant agriculture (Novo, 2004). The establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) also deeply impacted peasants' ability to make a living from the land, since they could not compete with the price of subsidized agribusiness commodities from the US (Eakin et al., 2014) – especially corn, which is a key staple for the Indigenous *milpa* system of production³ (Putnam et al., 2014; Rodríguez et al., 2020). Meanwhile, government funding was largely redirected to commercial corn producers in Northern Mexico, the whitest region of the country (Eakin et al., 2014).

Since the 1990s, unable to make a living from their food production alone, many Indigenous peasants and smallholders have seasonally migrated to Northern Mexico to work as day laborers on the harvest of cash crops. In fact, in Northern states dominated by export-oriented agriculture, terms such as "day laborer" (*jornalero*) and "migrant" are used as coded language to refer to Indigenous people. It is interesting to note that among these day laborers there are also *mestizos* who don't speak Indigenous languages, but they tend to be read as non-white (or more on the Indigenous

than on the *mestizo* side) for performing "degrading" labor (Novo, 2004). Thus, the fluidity of race reading in Mexico's *mestizo* society allows for non-racial factors, such as occupation, to influence to what degree a person is racialized.

In the export-oriented agriculture sector, Indigenous peasants face discrimination, lower wages, and extremely poor work conditions, which are often justified with overtly racist discourse – e.g. that they are short and therefore better equipped to work the land, or that they are used to rough living conditions and therefore rough, employer-provided lodgings only replicate their traditional way of life (Novo, 2004). Despite this situation, most peasants do not show interest in unionizing and fighting for better work conditions, mainly because they have no desire to remain as wage laborers. They see this work as a way to subsidize the small plots of land that many of them own in the South, and ultimately desire to live off their land again – a desire that is deeply connected to Indigenous culture (Henderson, 2018).

Food insecurity

Indigenous people face higher food insecurity rates in Mexico. Through a representative survey, Mundo-Rosas et al. (2013) find that among households whose head speaks an Indigenous language, only 16.1% are food secure, and among the rest, 42.2% experience moderate or severe levels of food insecurity. By comparison, among non-Indigenous language speakers, 31.2% are food secure, and 27.1% experience moderate or severe food insecurity. Cuevas-Nasu et al. (2019) find a similar prevalence among Indigenous people when looking specifically at households with children under 5 years old.

Disparities in health outcomes

Indigenous communities currently face a dual burden of undernutrition and obesity. Especially in more isolated communities, the nutritional quality of the foods available for purchase is very low (Pura et al., 2017). As result, several studies find increasing obesity rates among Indigenous people (Pura et al., 2017; Pérez-Izquierdo et al., 2020), while others find remaining pockets of nutritional deficiencies among them (Cuevas-Nasu et al., 2019; Barquera et al., 2003; Batis et al., 2020; De la Cruz-Góngora et al., 2018; Flores et

3 A system of polyculture of corn, beans, and squash.

al., 2009; Mundo-Rosas et al., 2013). Many studies also find high consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages among Indigenous people (Pura et al., 2017; Posadas et al., 2007; García-Chávez et al., 2017).

Main responses to disparities

Food sovereignty and Indigenous autonomy movements

Mexico's food sovereignty movements, which emerged in response to the neoliberal wave of the 1990s, have an important racial identity. These movements brought about a reemergence of race as an important factor in the discussion of inequities in Mexico. This reemergence can be explained both by the fact that neoliberal policies had disproportional negative impacts on Indigenous peasants and by the historical

moment of the 1990s – when the end of the Cold War undermined Marxist thought and the reliance on class/socioeconomic status as the explanation for all social inequities (Jung, 2014).

Movements such as “No Country Without Corn” (“*Sin Maíz No Hay País*”) mark the reemergence of race as an important dimension of social inequity. Corn has a very important place in Mexican Indigenous cultures, and small corn producers were impacted the hardest by the competition with subsidized American corn under NAFTA (Rogers, 2012; McAfee, 2008). Other movements went beyond food sovereignty and evolved into full struggles for Indigenous autonomy, such as the Zapatista National Liberation Army – who commonly use the motto “without food there is no resistance” (Rodríguez et al., 2020). These *neozapatistas* currently control several areas in Southern Mexico, where they seek not independence from the Mexican state but governance over their territories to be able to live according to Indigenous cultural practices (Núñez et al., 2017; Sulvaran Lopez et al., 2017).



Social programs

The Mexican government's main social programs targeting peasants are *Oportunidades*, a cash transfer program, and *Procampo*, which provides small assistance to families farming in remaining *ejidos* (Putnam et al., 2014). Most farming assistance to peasants and smallholders is insufficient, covering some agricultural supplies but not including any type of training or credit (Galicia Gallardo et al., 2021). Mostly-Indigenous rural communities that benefit from these programs remain highly food insecure, and have no way to sustain their livelihoods that is economically, culturally, or environmentally sustainable (Putnam et al., 2014). Many programs targeting nutritional deficiencies in Indigenous communities are also technically inadequate – for instance, providing vitamin supplements to children deficient in calories, not vitamins – and culturally inappropriate, promoting ultra-processed foods, and looking down on traditional Indigenous cuisine (Hersch-Martínez & Pisanty-Alatorre, 2016).

Emphasis on Indigenous people's genetic predisposition to obesity and diabetes

Obesity and diabetes have become large problems in Mexico, which currently has the largest rate of overweight and second-largest rate of obesity in the world (OECD, 2017). In addressing this epidemic, the Mexican government has been placing emphasis on research that points to a genetic and epigenetic predisposition to obesity and diabetes among people of Indigenous heritage. While there is genomic evidence supporting this hypothesis, some authors draw attention to the questionable interpretations and uses of this evidence in Mexico: it ends up playing into old notions of eugenics that pathologize a specific racial group in the public eye, enhancing the perception of Indigenous people as primitive and unfit for modern diets (Saldaña-Tejeda, 2018a; Baedke & Nieves Delgado, 2019). It also does not seem to inform health policy or healthcare in any particularly important way, and in many cases seems to distract from the importance of social determinants of health disparities (Saldaña-Tejeda, 2018b).

Main literature trends and gaps

The literature found through this project's search terms extensively covered rural inequities and established the racial aspect of such inequities well. This is due to the growing racial identity of Mexico's food sovereignty movements, as well as to researchers' ability to more easily capture Indigenous identities in rural areas for linguistic reasons. Following the approach adopted by public institutions (INEE, n.d.), studies on food security, public health, and nutrition in Mexico usually control for Indigenous identity using a language marker – i.e. whether at least one specific member of the household speaks an Indigenous language (Mundo-Rosas et al., 2013; Batis et al., 2020; De la Cruz-Góngora et al., 2018; Flores et al., 2009; García-Chávez et al., 2017; Mundo-Rosas et al., 2013; Quezada-Sánchez et al., 2020). With this criterion, studies can capture health outcomes for Indigenous people living in mostly rural areas, where native languages have been preserved (Batis et al., 2020; Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2009). On the other hand, this criterion does not significantly capture disparities in the health outcomes of racialized people in urban, more *mestizo* settings. Discussion about the possibility of racial disparities outside of explicitly Indigenous communities was absent from the articles analyzed in this project, which instead relied on socioeconomic variables to capture inequities in such settings.

Findings: Brazil

KEY TAKEAWAYS: From land ownership to diet-related chronic diseases, racial disparities are well documented in Brazilian statistics, but are poorly analyzed in the literature. This tendency has to do both with Brazil's "racial democracy" narrative, which downplays the effects of racism in a largely mixed-race society, and with Marxist-inspired tendencies to reduce all disparities to class/socioeconomic status.

Race in Brazil

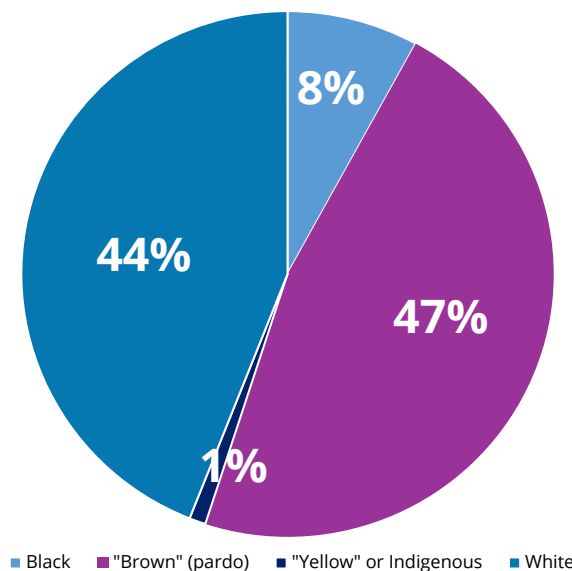
Racial composition

The Brazilian government collects data on racial identification using five categories: white, Black, "brown" (*pardo*), "yellow" (*amarelos*, meaning Asian), and Indigenous. Racial composition varies greatly by region. The North and Northeast regions have the largest shares of non-whites: 79.3% and 75.6%, respectively (including *pardo* and black people). The South and Southeast, in turn, have the largest share of whites: 76.8% and 52.2%, respectively (Silveira, 2017).

Racial narratives

The Brazilian *mestiço* is primarily conceived as an African-European mix (Wade, 2018) – with a more commonly used term nowadays being *pardo*. Brazil's racial narrative is also based on *mestiçagem*, which has the key feature of a large presence of people of African descent. The main thinker behind Brazil's *mestiçagem* was Gilberto Freyre, who challenged the prominent scientific racism of his time and celebrated racial mixing in Brazil, painting the picture of a harmonious post-racial society. His work was highly influential and helped to shape the idea of Brazil as a "racial democracy," which the government actively promoted between the 1930s and 1980s, especially during two periods of dictatorship (Andrews, 1997). Although the idea that racism does not exist in Brazil has been

Figure 2. Brazil's national racial composition



Source: IBGE, 2016

heavily challenged in academic circles since then, its influence still runs deep in Brazilian society (Soares et al., 2020).

"White" is an unstable identity in Brazil. Whites and *metiços/pardos* are subject to "degrees of whiteness" based on a "pigmentocracy" and other physical characteristics associated with blackness. Heritage does not dictate one's racial identity in Brazil, and someone with African heritage would not be considered Black without visible Black features (de Santana Pinho, 2009). The majority of people who identify as white in Brazil have some significant degree of African and/or Indigenous heritage (Wade, 2018), and often stress such heritage as a way to affirm their Brazilian-ness. But heritage does impact one's whiteness if a person has visible features that make them "less white" in the eyes of society – although this is also a subjective assessment and can vary based on different regional racial contexts. Additionally, social class can influence how one's whiteness is perceived to a certain extent (de Santana Pinho, 2009).

Race in Brazilian food systems

Racialized narratives around food and diet

Historically, the importance of food in the discussion of Brazilian *mestiçagem* is well-documented. Gilberto Freyre discussed Brazilian dietary patterns extensively in some of his most prominent work, such as *Casa Grande e Senzala* (“The Masters and the Slaves” in the official English translation). He rejected claims of biological inferiority of *mestiços*, and instead presented nutrition as a way to improve the health and economic performance of the Brazilian masses (Vasconcelos & Silva, 2001). Josué de Castro, another proponent of *mestiçagem*, famously referred to this phenomenon as an “issue of hunger, not race” (Vasconcelos & Batista Filho, 2011).

Despite some progressiveness in the way these thinkers rejected scientific racism, Freyre’s discourse framing nutrition as a way to “improve”

the Brazilian *mestiço* certainly flirted with eugenics. His dietary recommendations were also permeated by pseudo-scientific notions of the nutritional superiority of certain foods associated with European culture – such as wheat, as opposed to the native cassava (Vasconcelos & Silva, 2001). His celebration of the mixture of European, African, and Indigenous cuisines in Brazil painted a romanticized picture of harmonious racial relations, much like the rest of his work (da Silva, 2014). These are important considerations, given the influence that Freyre’s thought still has on how Brazilians perceive racial relations.

Disparities in land access

In contemporary Brazil, an important aspect for the analysis of racial disparities in the food system is land ownership – as the emphasis on food sovereignty in this project’s initial search had indicated. Since colonial times, land has been extremely concentrated in the hands of a white elite (Paulino, 2014). While a portion of poor European immigrants – who replaced Africans at coffee plantations after the end of slavery –



Quilombola woman cooking in her home. Brazil. Source istock.

eventually gained some access to land ownership, Black Brazilians remained the most marginalized group in rural areas (“Branços têm mais terras do que negros, aponta Censo Agropecuário,” 2019). Therefore, lack of access to land ownership has historically constituted a key structural barrier for greater racial equality (Souza, 2017; Hoddy & Ensor, 2018). Nowadays, around 54% of all food producers (including peasants and farmers) are non-white, but the distribution of land is highly eschewed: non-whites represent 68.9% of the landless and 74.1% of smallholders, but only 12% of large landowners (“Branços têm mais terras do que negros, aponta Censo Agropecuário,” 2019).

Another important dimension of racial inequities in the Brazilian countryside is the land grabbing that Indigenous and *quilombola* communities have been increasingly subjected to. *Quilombos* are historical Black rural communities first established by Africans who had escaped slavery, many of which still exist. Despite the Brazilian constitution enshrining the right to the demarcation of ancestral lands, the government does not recognize many Indigenous and *quilombola* communities’ territories (Sullivan, 2020). Because of this lack of recognition, as export-oriented agribusiness pushes Brazil’s agricultural frontier, it increasingly encroaches on these communities’ lands, jeopardizing their way of life and traditional food systems (Santarelli et al., 2019; Franceschini, 2016).

Food insecurity

Studies in urban areas point to race as a strong predictor of food insecurity (Panigassi et al., 2008; Santos et al., 2018). In general, being in the “non-white” group⁴ – and more specifically, in the Black or *pardo* racial group – is associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing food insecurity (Insegurança Alimentar e Covid-19 No Brasil, 2021; Guerra et al., 2013), even when controlling for income (Gubert & Benício, 2010). With Brazil’s economic crisis in recent years, households headed by Black women are the ones most subject to increased food insecurity (Santarelli et al., 2019). However, none of the studies found during this project discuss these findings in depth. In rural areas, many Indigenous and *quilombola*

communities face serious, well-documented food insecurity as a result of the Brazilian state’s lack of guarantee of their right to their territories (Silva et al., 2008; Franceschini, 2016). With very limited space to grow their own food and opportunities to earn income, several Indigenous communities suffer from severe food insecurity (Franceschini, 2016; Welch et al., 2021). Some, like the Guarani and Kaiowá tribes, are also surrounded by agribusiness properties, and there is strong evidence suggesting that their water is contaminated with toxic agrochemicals (Franceschini, 2016). Similarly, most *quilombola* community members have no source of income and practice subsistence agriculture, which is often not enough to ensure their food security (D. O. e Silva et al., 2008).

Diet-related health disparities

Brazil has been going through a process of nutrition transition that became more intense in the last couple of decades, in large part as a result of government efforts to combat poverty. While obesity used to be an issue mainly among Brazilians with higher socioeconomic status, the largest spikes in obesity rates in recent decades have been among the poor, who are disproportionately Black and *pardo* Brazilians (Richardson & Nunes, 2015). There is a large body of public health evidence that controls for race and finds significant disparities between racial groups. Black and *pardo* Brazilians are more likely to have unhealthy diets (Lacerda et al., 2007; de Azevedo Barros et al., 2016; Ana Pallottini et al., 2017; Mello et al., 2020), have higher BMI (Juvanhol et al., 2016), and have diet-related non-communicable diseases (Piccini & Victora, 1994). Many of these studies find differences among racial groups even when controlling for socioeconomic status.

In turn, Indigenous people suffer from higher levels of malnutrition in different ways depending on the region. In the North, where they rely more on subsistence agriculture, they have higher rates of undernutrition, with stunting and anemia still being common among Indigenous children. In the South/Southeast, where Indigenous people have larger access to retail markets to purchase food, obesity is more prevalent, especially among women (Welch et al., 2021).

4 Many studies control for race using a binary variable, in which people are either “white” or “non-white.”



Quilombola farm in Quilombola Community of Presidente Kennedy, Espírito Santo, Southeast of Brazil. Source Istock.

Main responses to disparities

The Landless Workers Movement

Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST in the Portuguese acronym) is one of the most prominent peasant movements in the world and addresses issues of land distribution that, as mentioned above, are a key foundation of structural inequality in Brazilian society. The MST started in the 1980s in Southern Brazil among mostly white landless peasants, but has since expanded to most areas of the country and the vast majority of its current base is composed of non-white Brazilians (Lerrer, 2014). There are some tensions between the MST's political and technical leadership, who are mostly from the original group of founders or educated middle-class backgrounds – and therefore disproportionately white –, and the landless peasants in the MST's settlements. The movements' technical leadership often



Brazil's Landless Workers Movement flag. Source: <https://www.mstbrazil.org>

dismisses peasants' traditional knowledge. Additionally, while peasants are mainly seeking land as a form of securing food and livelihood, the movement's political leadership often seems more preoccupied with romanticized ideas about land and community (van den Berg et al., 2018).

Apart from establishing land settlements and pressuring the Brazilian government for land reform, the MST runs educational projects and schools and promotes broad debates about agroecology, food sovereignty, and the political and social forces shaping the food system (Meek & Tarlau, 2016). However, its discourse barely touches on race and does not make it a central tenet for land reform (Souza, 2017). This may be partially explained by the MST's Marxist orientation, which tends to reduce disparities to class-based only (Straubhaar, 2017). However, the movement has shown much greater flexibility to discuss other identity-based disparities – namely gender and sexuality – than it has to discuss race (Souza, 2017).

Poverty reduction and social policies

Brazil has greatly decreased hunger and food insecurity through poverty alleviation efforts over the last couple of decades. The main initiative in this regard was President Lula da Silva's "Zero Hunger" strategy, which combined conditional cash transfer programs, a large school meal program, and some schemes for public procurement of food produced by smallholder farmers. Although important, this approach was mostly ameliorative and failed to eliminate structural inequalities (Richardson & Nunes, 2015).

Main literature trends and gaps

The contemporary literature on food systems in Brazil touches on race mostly in a tangential way. A meta-analysis shows that studies that include racial markers are a minority among those investigating the relationship between social determinants and dietary patterns in Brazil (Canuto et al., 2019). Among the studies that do include racial markers, many find significant disparities between racial groups that socioeconomic variables do not account for, but very few of them engage in any discussion about these disparities – and none investigate race-specific social mechanisms behind them. Only one of the studies identified in this project engages in discussion about racial disparities in health outcomes, admittedly inspired by US scholarship (Lacerda et al., 2007).

Similarly, the literature on food sovereignty and land access abundantly discusses structural inequality, but rarely makes race a central angle of analysis. Although the vast majority of landless workers are Black and *pardo* Brazilians, such studies only seem concerned with their identity as members of a peasant working class. The association with race is only central when it comes to Indigenous and *quilombola* communities (Pahnke et al., 2015). This seems to be the case because the very existence of these communities is based on their racial identities, and their higher level of seclusion from Brazilian society insulates them from the de-racialization of *mestiçagem* narratives.

Conclusion

Mexico's discussion of racial inequity in the food system is more advanced than Brazil's in some areas – especially when it comes to the notion of food sovereignty and struggles for land ownership. However, there are large gaps in both countries' approaches to this topic, as *mestizaje* narratives play an important role in obscuring racial aspects of social inequities related to food. Race is rarely discussed in the food-related literature outside the context of isolated rural communities where Indigenous and African identities have remained “untouched” by *mestizaje*.

The main recommendation resulting from this project is to better establish the need for race-specific research on topics related to food systems. This entails identifying priority areas in which socioeconomic variables do not account for all inequities identified. Some public health studies in Brazil, for example, already point to the fact that socioeconomic status does not explain all health disparities – but do not go as far as exploring race-specific social mechanisms behind such disparities.

Establishing a dialogue with American scholarship on the topic may be useful, but this dialogue should also be approached cautiously and in a way that does not present the US's framework for the study of racial disparities as universal or superior. Although the US' understanding of race has much in common with Latin America's, it also tends to be more clear-cut, with people categorically identifying as white, Black, or Indigenous.⁵ This understanding does not perfectly translate in the Brazilian and Mexican contexts, where racial identities can be very fluid. Therefore, listening to stakeholders on the ground who are engaging with race-specific discussions on issues related to food is key to better establish research needs. The difficulty of collecting objective data on racial identity in Mexico and Brazil may be a major barrier to addressing the literature gap identified in this project (Lacerda

et al., 2007), so exploring ways to capture racial disparities that are context-appropriate is necessary.

5 This is not to say that there aren't grey areas and nuances to racial identities in the US, but merely to acknowledge that Latin America's notion of race was historically constructed based on less clear-cut categories – which results in important differences in the way most people construct their racial identities.

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Appendix

Table 1. Initial Scoping Search

Web of Science	
Search Terms	Method: analyzing all results
racism AND food (title) NOT "United States" NOT US NOT U.S. NOT American NOT COVID-19	Results: 44 Relevant results: 15
racism AND food AND globally	Results: 3 Relevant results: 2
global food insecurity AND race	Results: 0
global food insecurity AND racism	Results: 2 Relevant results: 1
"food systems" AND racism NOT "United States" NOT US NOT U.S. NOT American	Results: 10 Relevant results: 2
"structural inequality" AND food NOT "United States" NOT US NOT U.S. NOT American	Results: 2 Relevant results: 2
"structural inequality" AND "food systems" NOT "United States" NOT US NOT U.S. NOT American	Results: 0
"structural inequality" AND "food systems" NOT "United States" NOT US NOT U.S. NOT American	Results: 0
colonialism AND "food systems" NOT "United States" NOT US NOT U.S. NOT American	Results: 18 Relevant results: 13
Google Scholar	
Search Terms	Method
racism AND food -"United States" -U.S. -US	Because the platform is not a database and searches metadata, it provides a very large number of search results, the vast majority of which are not relevant. Because of this, there was no intention of looking through all search results or a pre-determined number of pages of search results. Results were examined until they became successively not relevant to the project, at which point the search was dropped.
racism AND food AND globally	
"global food insecurity" AND race	
"food systems" AND racism OR race -"United States" -U.S. -US	
"structural inequality" AND food OR "food systems" -"United States" -U.S. -US	
"structural inequality" AND "food systems" -"United States" -U.S. -US	
colonialism AND food OR "food systems" -"United States" -U.S. -US	
"food sovereignty" -"United States" -US	The aim of this second search was to gather enough information to (1) confirm that a focus on food sovereignty made sense for this project; and (2) determine which Latin American countries to focus on besides Brazil. Search results were not exhausted.
"food sovereignty" AND race -"United States" -US	
Mexico AND "peasant movements" AND race	
Guatemala AND race AND peasants	
Guatemala AND peasants	
Guatemala AND campesinos	
Guatemala AND peasants AND "food sovereignty"	

Table 2. Focused Search: Mexico and Brazil

Note: some results overlap across search terms and platforms.

Web of Science	
Search Terms	Method: analyzing all results
Mexico AND peasants AND race	Total results: 7 Relevant results: 3
Mexico AND "peasant movements" AND race	Mexico AND "peasant movements" AND race
Mexico (title) AND peasants (title) AND Indigenous (title)	Total results: 9 Relevant results: 5
Mexico AND peasants AND ethnicity	Total results: 7 Relevant results: 3
Mexico AND "food sovereignty"	Total results: 52 Relevant results: 12
Mexico AND obesity AND race NOT "United States" NOT US	Total results: 21 Relevant results: 5
Mexico AND food AND Indigenous (Refining 195 results, excluded fields: plant science, environmental science, ecology, green sustainable science technology, pharmacology pharmacy, biodiversity conservation, forestry, biology, environmental studies, geography, agronomy, chemistry medicinal, agricultural economics policy, entomology, chemistry applied, endocrinology metabolism, integrative complementary medicine, evolutionary biology, mycology, toxicology, water resources, archeology, biochemistry applied microbiology, cell biology, dentistry oral surgery medicine, engineering chemical, engineering civil, engineering environmental, geography physical, geoscience multidisciplinary, information science library science, literature romance, marine freshwater biology, meteorology atmospheric sciences, microbiology, ornithology, soil science, sports sciences, veterinary sciences, zoology)	Total results: 91 Relevant results: 20
Mexico AND food AND race NOT "United States" NOT US	Total results: 31 Relevant results: 3
Brazil AND food AND race	Total results: 46 Relevant results: 14
Brazil AND peasants AND race	Total results: 2 Relevant results: 2
Brazil AND "peasant movements" AND race	Total results: 0
Brazil AND peasants AND ethnicity	Total results: 0
Brazil AND "food sovereignty"	Total results: 68 Relevant results: 7
Brazil AND "food justice"	Total results: 1 Relevant results: 1
Brazil AND "food sovereignty" AND race	Total results: 1 Relevant results: 1
Brazil AND landless AND race	Total results: 4 Relevant results: 3
Brazil AND agrarian reform AND race	Total results: 2 Relevant results: 2

Google Search	
Search Terms	Method
Brasil alimentação raça	Because the platform is not a database and searches metadata, it provides a very large number of search results, the vast majority of which are not relevant. There was no intention of looking through all search results, which were only examined until they became successively not relevant to the project.
Whiteness Mexico	
Whiteness Brazil	