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# WHO WOULD WIN – AND WHO WOULD LOSE – FROM INEQUALITY REDUCTION IN BRAZIL? AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY EXERCISE

## *Quem ganharia – e quem perderia – com a redução da desigualdade no Brasil? Um exercício de história alternativa*

## *¿Quién ganaría –y quién perdería– con una reducción de la desigualdad en Brasil? Un ejercicio de historia alternativa*

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes alternative scenarios for addressing income inequality in Brazil, investigating who would gain or lose under different redistribution models. Using counterfactual exercises, the research simulates the maintenance of current per capita household income while adjusting its distribution to mirror that of various countries. The analysis evaluates impacts on median income, poverty, and extreme poverty, while considering intersectional effects across social groups defined by gender and race. Additionally, the study discusses the limitations of synthetic measures such as the Gini index, which, while estimating the magnitude of inequality, reveal little about the specific structure of income distribution. The results demonstrate that counterfactual shifts in income distribution suggest that aligning Brazil with more equitable international standards would significantly reduce both poverty and extreme poverty.

**Keywords:** income inequality, redistribution, poverty, counterfactual exercises, intersectionality.

## *RESUMO*

O presente artigo analisou cenários alternativos para o enfrentamento da desigualdade de renda no Brasil, investigando quem ganharia ou perderia com diferentes formas de redistribuição. A partir de exercícios contrafactuais, foi simulada a manutenção da Renda Domiciliar Per Capita (RDPC) média atual do País, ajustando-se sua distribuição à observada em diversos países. Com isso, foram avaliados os impactos sobre a mediana da renda, a pobreza e a extrema pobreza, considerando também efeitos interseccionais sobre grupos sociais recortados por gênero e raça. Além disso, discutiram-se as limitações de medidas sintéticas como o índice de Gini, que, embora estimem a magnitude da desigualdade, pouco revelam sobre o perfil específico da distribuição de renda. Logo, foi possível identificar os impactos da redistribuição de renda no País, mostrando que a aproximação do Brasil a padrões internacionais mais equitativos pode promover avanços importantes no combate à pobreza e à pobreza extrema.

**Palavras-chave:** desigualdade de renda, redistribuição, exercício contrafactual, pobreza, interseccionalidade.

***RESUMEN***
El presente artículo analizó escenarios alternativos para enfrentar la desigualdad de ingresos en Brasil, investigando quién ganaría o perdería con diferentes formas de redistribución. A partir de ejercicios contrafactuales, se simuló el mantenimiento del Ingreso Familiar Per Cápita promedio actual del país, ajustando su distribución a la observada en distintos países. Con ello, se evaluaron los impactos sobre la mediana de ingresos, la pobreza y la pobreza extrema, considerando también efectos interseccionales sobre grupos sociales según género y raza. Además, se discutieron las limitaciones de medidas sintéticas como el índice de Gini, que si bien estiman la magnitud de la desigualdad, revelan poco sobre el perfil específico de la distribución del ingreso. Así, fue posible identificar los impactos de la redistribución de ingresos en el país, mostrando que acercar a Brasil a patrones internacionales más equitativos puede promover avances importantes en la lucha contra la pobreza y la pobreza extrema.
**Palabras clave:** desigualdad de ingresos, redistribución, ejercicios contrafactuales, pobreza, interseccionalidad.

## INTRODUCTION

In academic literature, alternate history is a subgenre of science or speculative fiction where narratives unfold in a world similar to our own but diverge at a critical event. These narratives explore the social and individual consequences of such a divergence, asking: what if history had taken a different course? For example, in Philip Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, the author imagines the United States in a world where the Axis powers won World War II and controlled the country. Social science and public policy evaluation employ a similar logic through "counterfactual exercises." By rigorously analyzing empirical evidence, these exercises simulate scenarios where most living and economic conditions of a country or social group remain constant while one fundamental variable is altered. This study applies this method to Brazil, simulating scenarios to better understand the country's economic inequality.

Who gains what, why, and what difference does it make? According to Lasswell (2018), a pioneer in the field these are the fundamental questions of public policy analysis. While discipline has evolved to include other approaches and themes, these questions remain essential for understanding the intricate relationships between the distribution of power, public policy, and social inequality.

From this perspective, asking such questions in the debate over income inequality and poverty seem trivial. If the goal is to reduce income concentration, the answer appears straightforward: the upper strata lose income share while the lower strata gain. However, as with most structural and complex phenomena, the issues are rarely so trivial, nor are the answers so obvious.

For instance, the same Gini index, for example, can represent very different distributive profiles. Second, strictly speaking, any redistribution that transfers income (or share of income) from one individual (or a group of individuals) to any other located anywhere below them in the income distribution would be reducing inequality. Thus, transferring income from a billionaire to someone earning more than 50,000 reais per month could be a way to reduce concentration, just

as transferring income from a basic education teacher to a recyclable material collector would. But are these the most desirable changes in terms of social justice and equity?

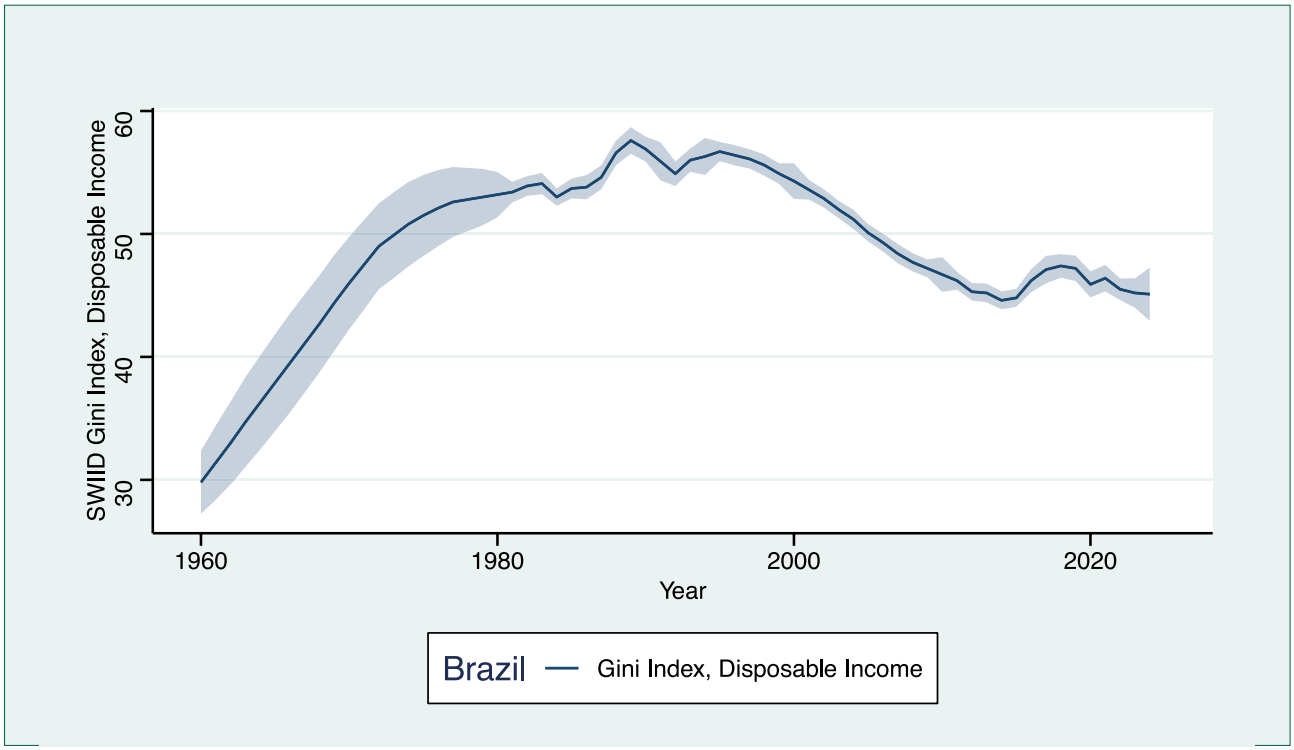
In other words, more specifically, who would gain how much—and who would lose how much—with different types of redistribution? How would they impact poverty and different groups in society? How can we assess whether a redistribution proposal is feasible in the Brazilian context? These are some of the issues addressed in this technical note, based on a set of counterfactual exercises: assuming the same current average Per Capita Household Income (RDPC) in Brazil, but adjusting its distribution among income deciles to match that of different countries, what would happen to the median income? And to poverty and extreme poverty? How would the income of different gender, race, and child groups be affected? Who would lose how much income in each case? In other words, who stands to gain—or lose—the most from tackling inequality?

## POVERTY, INEQUALITY, AND REDISTRIBUTION IN 21ST-CENTURY BRAZIL

In 2001, Barros et al. published an influential work that proposed—and demonstrated—a set of theses regarding Brazilian poverty and inequality. Their argument was threefold: first, that Brazil's high poverty rate was due to the highly unequal distribution of resources rather than a lack of them; second, that income inequality was remarkable for both its magnitude and its persistence, despite intense social, demographic, economic, and political transformations during the second half of the last century; and third, that relying solely on economic growth was an inefficient strategy for poverty reduction. In a context of high concentration at the top, the upper percentiles appropriate a disproportionate share of growth, requiring extremely high growth rates to achieve even modest poverty reduction. Consequently, redistribution is a far more efficient strategy for tackling poverty.

Throughout the past few decades, shifts in Brazilian poverty (especially extreme poverty) and inequality have justified this research, which discusses who wins and who loses when considering different redistribution models. The article explores how these models influence poverty rate across different groups in society and how to evaluate the viability of a redistribution proposal. For the first time, at least since the 1960s, Per Capita Household Income (PCHI) inequality, as measured by household surveys conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE)—Census, PNAD, and PNADc—experienced a relatively long and intense period of reduction, as shown in Figure 1.

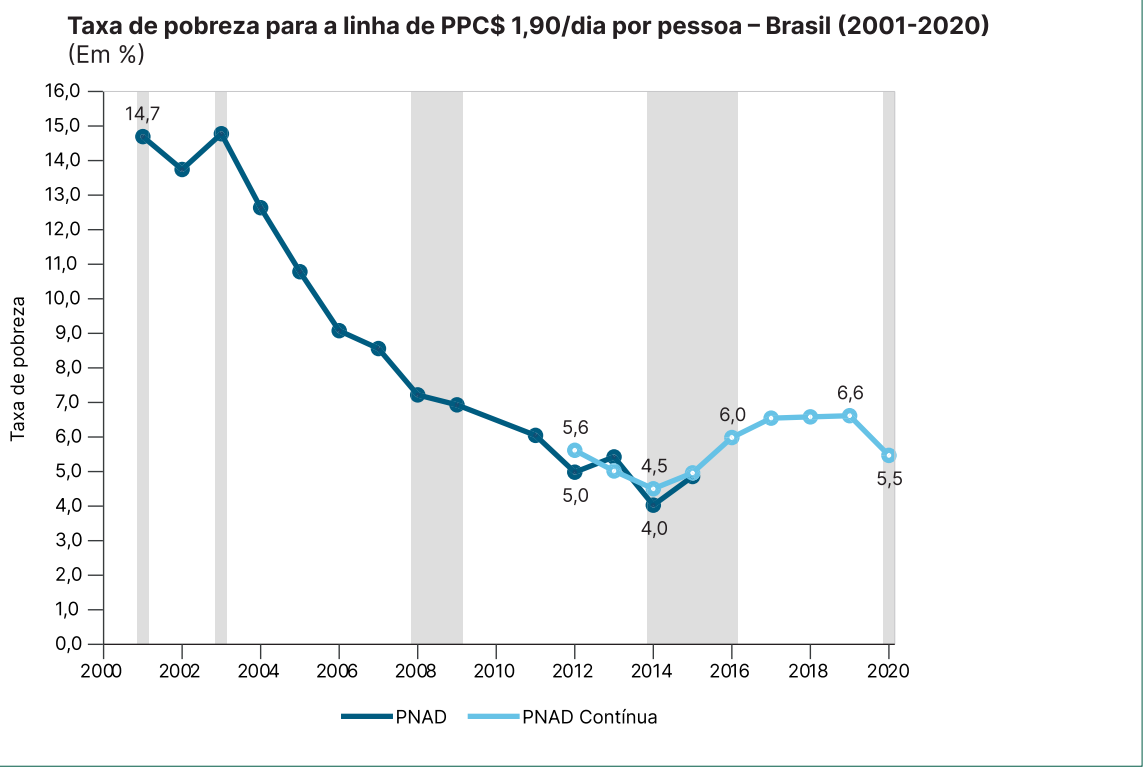
**Figure 1** – Inequality reduction in Brazil (1960–2020)




Note: Solid lines indicate mean estimates; shaded regions indicate the associated 95% uncertainty intervals. Standardized World Income Inequality Database v9.91 (Solt 2020).

During the same period, monetary poverty fell sharply, regardless of the absolute poverty line applied (Figure 2). As both figures indicate from the reduction of poverty and inequality occurred simultaneously.

**Figure 2** – Poverty Rate per Person in Brazil (2001–2020)

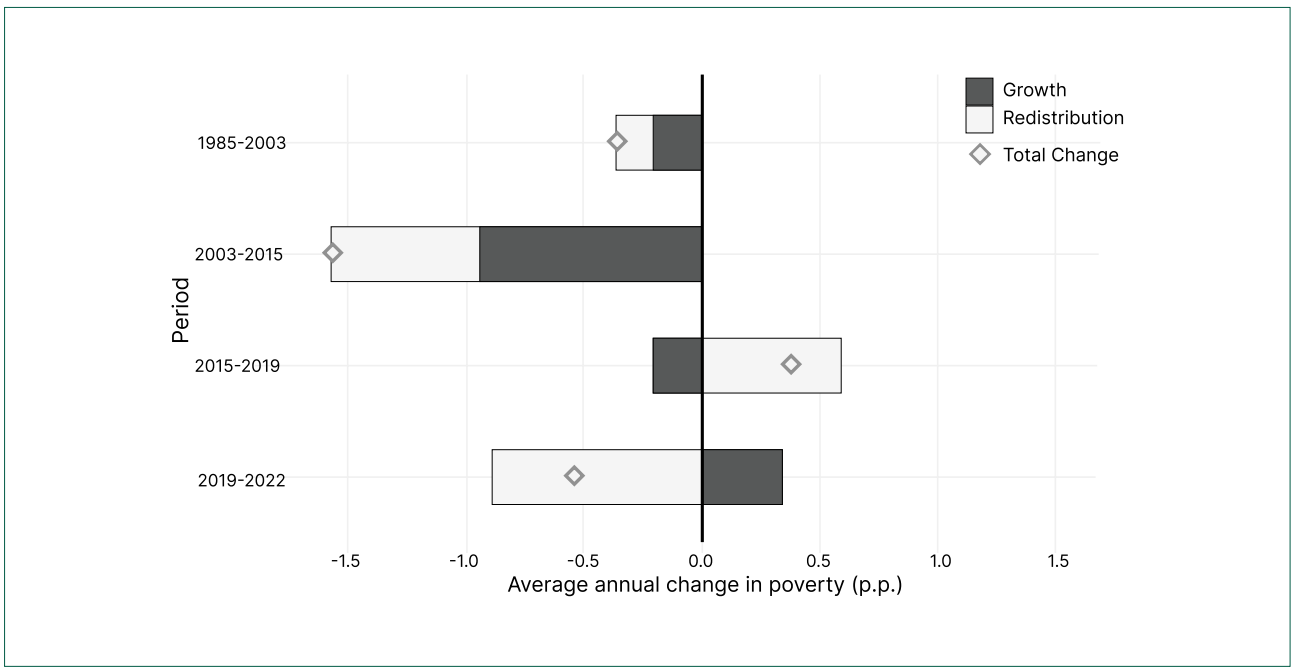



Note: Adapted from Souza (2022). Elaborated using annual microdata from PNAD (2001–2015) and Continuous PNAD (PNADc) (2012–2020).
Obs:
1. Until 2003, PNAD data excluded rural households in the North region of Brazil, except the state of Tocantins.
2. Income figures deflated to December 2020 by the National Consumer Price Index (INPC), without the application of regional deflators. The PPP poverty line of USD 1.90 per person per day is equivalent to BRL 157.00 per person per month.
3. Shaded areas indicate years with technical recession.

Indeed, a recent analysis by Souza (2025) shows that during the longest and most intense period of poverty reduction (from 2003 to 2015), about one-third of this decline was due to income redistribution, while the remainder was attributable to general income growth (Figure 3). It is important to qualify the argument that growth and redistribution are alternative strategies. In a strictly mechanical sense, they are indeed alternatives. However, when considering the political economy of decision-making and implementation of public policies in societies marked by intense inequalities of power, voice, and representation, the feasibility of these processes is often intertwined. Brazil's "economic miracle" demonstrated that economic growth does not necessarily lead to redistribution and may even be associated with greater income concentration. Nevertheless, promoting redistribution is much more politically feasible during periods of growth, creating a positive-sum situation in which everyone gains and the poorest gain more. Distributing gains progressively is more viable than imposing

losses that create a zero-sum or negative-sum game, making cooperation much more difficult. This is especially true when these costs fall on sectors with significant resources and power.

**Figure 3** – Economic Growth and Income Distribution in Brazil (2003–2022)

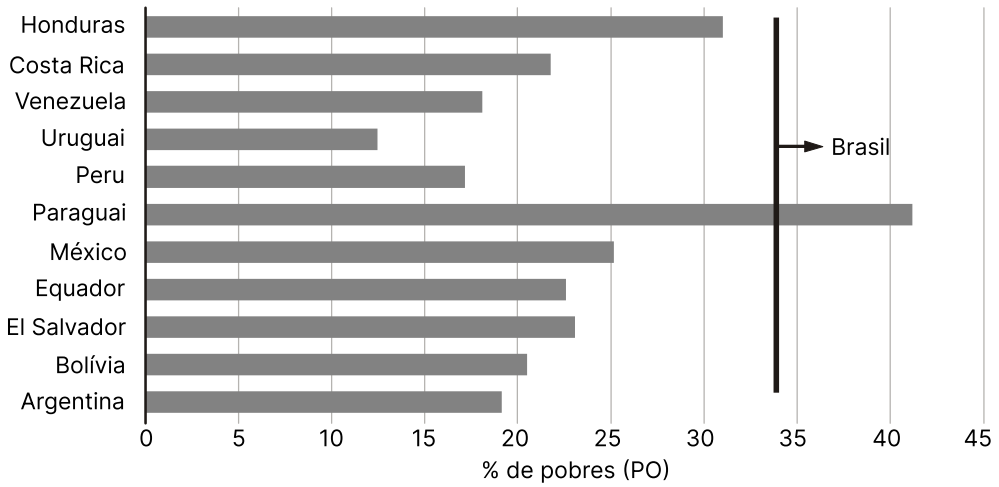



This figure is Datt-Ravallion decomposition of the variation in the $3.65/day poverty rate by period – Brazil, 1985-2003, 2023-2015, 2015-2019, and 2019-2022. Growth measures the variation in poverty associated with changes in the mean income; "Redistribution" is the shift in poverty due to changes in inequality while keeping the mean constant. See Datt and Ravllion (1992). Residual eliminated by the Shapley method.
Note: Souza (2025). Elaborated with calculations using microdata from PNAD and Continuous PNAD.

The crisis that led to the impeachment of President Dilma Rouseff and her replacement by an anti-redistribution coalition interrupted this experiment. Many authors have addressed the factors that enabled this combination of growth and redistribution and the consequent reduction in poverty, as well as the reversal of this dynamic from 2016 to 2022. Thus, the objective of this article is more specific: to update and expand a counterfactual exercise conducted by Barros et al. (2001).

To demonstrate that Brazil could immediately and significantly reduce its high levels of monetary poverty, Barros et al. (2001) simulated a scenario where the country's mean income remained constant while its distribution was adjusted to match that of selected countries. This isolated the effect of redistributing existing income on poverty reduction. Figure 4 summarizes these results.

**Figure 4** – Mean Income and Income Inequality




Note: Barros et al. (2001). Elaborated with data from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

As Figure 4 demonstrates, at the turn of the century, reducing inequality to levels close to those observed in the analyzed countries (all Latin American) would have allowed, even in the absence of economic growth, a reduction of more than 20 percentage points in the incidence of poverty in Brazil if Uruguay were taken as a reference, or 9 percentage points if the reference were Mexico, which is closer to Brazil in terms of population and territory.

To what extent do these impacts remain valid? Beyond poverty, which social groups and income strata would be most affected by changes in Brazil's distributive profile? More directly and immediately, who gains and who loses from income inequality? This study explores these questions through a counterfactual simulation in which the mean PCHI in Brazil for 2023 is maintained while its distribution is altered to match a selection of countries: Uruguay, Mexico, Spain, the United States, and Finland. These countries were selected to represent different income levels, distribution patterns, social protection systems, and geographic regions, as well as for the availability of high-quality data.

More specifically, the study conducts a counterfactual experiment that quantifies the redistributive effects of applying the income distribution of the five mentioned countries to the Brazilian socioeconomic context. We use a parametric model calibrated to replicate the distributive characteristics of these countries based on their Gini coefficient and cumulative income deciles. Subsequently, a counterfactual scenario is constructed that maintains the Brazilian mean income but distributes it according to the calibrated parametric model, adjusting individuals' incomes to conform to the new distribution. Finally, we measure the redistributive impacts across income strata, gender, race, and poverty rates.

## METHODOLOGY

Data for Brazil were extracted from the 2023 Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNADc), using observations from the first interview wave only (i.e., the household's initial interview in the survey's rotating panel design). Specifically, we used the per capita household income (PCHI) variable, which includes habitual income from all jobs and effective income from other sources, excluding income from pensioners, domestic employees, or their relatives within the household (Variable code VD5008 in the PNADc database). For the other countries, the most recent available aggregate data were obtained from the World Bank Poverty and Inequality Platform (PIP), including Gini coefficients and the cumulative share of total income by population deciles. The data for Spain and Finland refer to 2021, while for Mexico, the United States, and Uruguay refer to 2022. The compatibility between data sources is justified by the similar methodological nature, as both are based on statistically representative household surveys.

### Theoretical Structure of the Model

The counterfactual exercise is theoretically grounded in modeling income distribution using a log-normal function, recognized in econometrics for its ability to approximate empirical income distributions, especially in the central portion. Formally, the log-normal density is expressed as:

$$f(x;\mu,\sigma) = \frac{1}{x\sigma\sqrt{2\pi}}\, e^{-\frac{(lnx-\mu)^2}{2\sigma^2}} \qquad (1)$$

where the parameters and determine the shape of the distribution. From this function, the Gini coefficient can be derived using the following formula:

$$G = 2\Phi\left(\frac{\sigma}{\sqrt{2}}\right) - 1 \qquad (2)$$

where $\Phi$ represents the cumulative distribution function of a standard normal.

Parameterization and Optimization Strategy

To parameterize the model to fit the target Gini and Lorenz curves, a two-step optimization procedure was performed for each country:

1. First, an initial estimate of  was calculated using the equation above, applying the Gini coefficient of each selected country.
2. Next, using the Brazilian mean income ($\bar{x}$) and the initial , the parameter  was calculated using the following relationship:

$$\mu = ln(\underline{r}) - \frac{\sigma^2}{2} \qquad (3)$$

A set of 382,937 theoretical incomes (matching the PNADc sample size) was then generated following a log-normal distribution with the calculated μ and $\sigma$ parameters. The Gini coefficient and the cumulative income share for each decile of this theoretical set were computed, applying the original PNADc sample weights, ordered by income. The sum of squared errors between the theoretical decile shares and those of each country, as well as the theoretical and country Gini coefficients, was calculated. An optimization algorithm was implemented to find the value of  μ that minimizes the sum of squared errors. From the resulting  μ, $\sigma$ was calculated, thus obtaining the final theoretical distribution. The final parameters that best approximate each country's distributive profile while maintaining the Brazilian mean income, are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** – Gini Coefficients and Optimized Parameters (μ and $\sigma$)

| COUNTRY | GINI | μ | σ |
|---|---|---|---|
| Finland | 27.7 | 7.3948 | 0.5022 |
| Mexico | 43.5 | 7.1872 | 0.8169 |
| Spain | 33.9 | 7.3291 | 0.6193 |
| United States | 41.3 | 7.2295 | 0.7634 |
| Uruguay | 40.6 | 7.2340 | 0.7574 |

Note: Prepared by the authors based on PNADc (IBGE, 2023) and the World Bank PIP (2025).

### Counterfactual Generation via Quantile Mapping

Quantile mapping was employed to translate the parameterized model into a counterfactual distribution. This technique preserves the relative rank of original observations while adjusting their values to match the target distribution. The process followed two steps:

1. Ordering the PNADc sample observations by PCHI and calculating cumulative weights for each observation, obtaining their empirical quantile in the original distribution. A protection was applied to the top quantile (q = 1), set at 1 - 10-7, to prevent the adjusted income from reaching infinity.
2. Applying the quantile function of the calibrated log-normal distribution to each empirical quantile, defined as:

$$renda\ ajustada\ (q) = e^{(\mu+\sigma\cdot\Phi^{-1}(q))} \qquad (4)$$

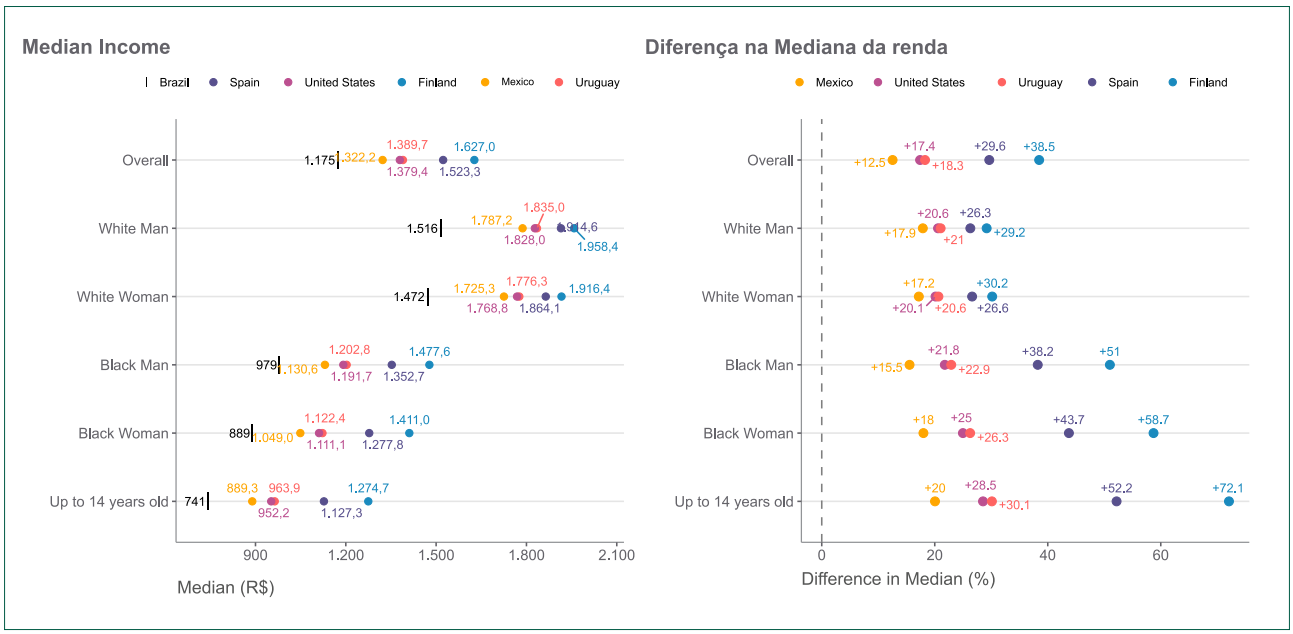
After calculating the adjusted income, the difference between its mean and the mean of the empirical income was computed, resulting in a final scaling factor that was applied to the adjusted income to ensure that mean income was held constant in the new distribution.

## RESULTS

### Impact on Median PCHI

A preliminary exploration of the results provides an intuition about the level of income concentration at the top of the distribution in Brazil and the severity of horizontal inequalities persist in PCHI distribution. Figure 5 shows what the median PCHI (the value at the distribution's midpoint) for the total population and selected groups would be if Brazil mantained the same mean PCHI but adopted the distributive profiles of the reference countries. It also indicates how much the median PCHI of each group in the Brazilian population would increase, according to each country in the counterfactual exercise.

**Figure 5** – Median Income and Difference in Median Income by Gender and Race




Note: Prepared by the authors based on PNADc (IBGE, 2023) and the World Bank PIP (2025).

Figure 5 clearly demonstrate three points: first, the extreme concentration of Brazilian income, even when compared to other Latin American countries; second, that this distribution is not random—Black people, women, and children disproportionately occupy the lower strata; and finally, that it is materially possible to substantially improve the living conditions of the majority of the population, particularly vulnerable groups. Regardless of the reference country applying its distribution to Brazil's mean PCHI would significantly increase the national median income, with gains ranging from 12.5% to 38.5% (referencing Mexico or Finland, respectively).

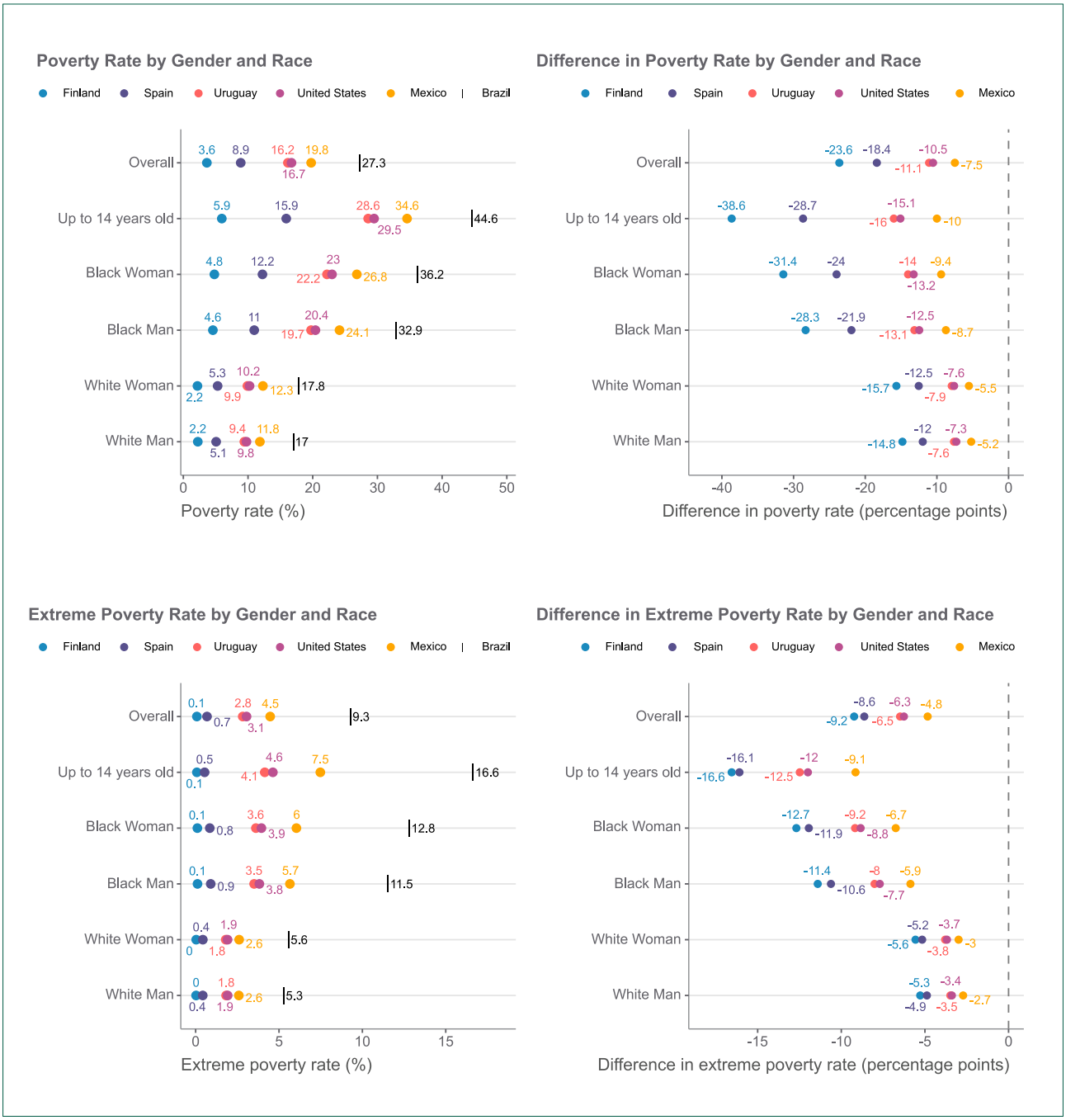
However, these effects are not homogeneous. From an intersectional perspective, White men would benefit much less from inequality reduction than Black women. While the median PCHI of White men would increase by 18% to 30%, the increase for Black women would range from 18% up to 59%. It is also noteworthy that the group that would benefit most directly would be children and adolescents, whose median PCHI could grow by 20% to 72%.

## Impact on Poverty and Extreme Poverty

As expected, the poor and extremely poor would benefit most from redistribution, regardless of the country adopted as the counterfactual model (Figure 6). But what would be the magnitude of the reduction in poverty and extreme poverty achievable through redistribution? Currently, Brazil's poverty rate stands at 27.3%. Under counterfactual models, this would decrease by at least 7.5 percentage points (Mexico) and up to 23.6 percentage points (Finland). This means that Brazil could reduce the

total number of poor by at least 27% or up to 87%, solely through redistribution that aligns with international profiles.

## Figure 6 – Poverty and Extreme Poverty by Gender and Race and Difference in Rates




Note: Prepared by the authors based on PNADc (IBGE, 2023) and the World Bank PIP (2025).

The results for extreme poverty are even more striking. Reductions in inequality based on the selected country's distributive profiles would allow extreme poverty to be reduced by more than half, when the country of reference is Mexico, or even eradicated, when the reference is Finland.

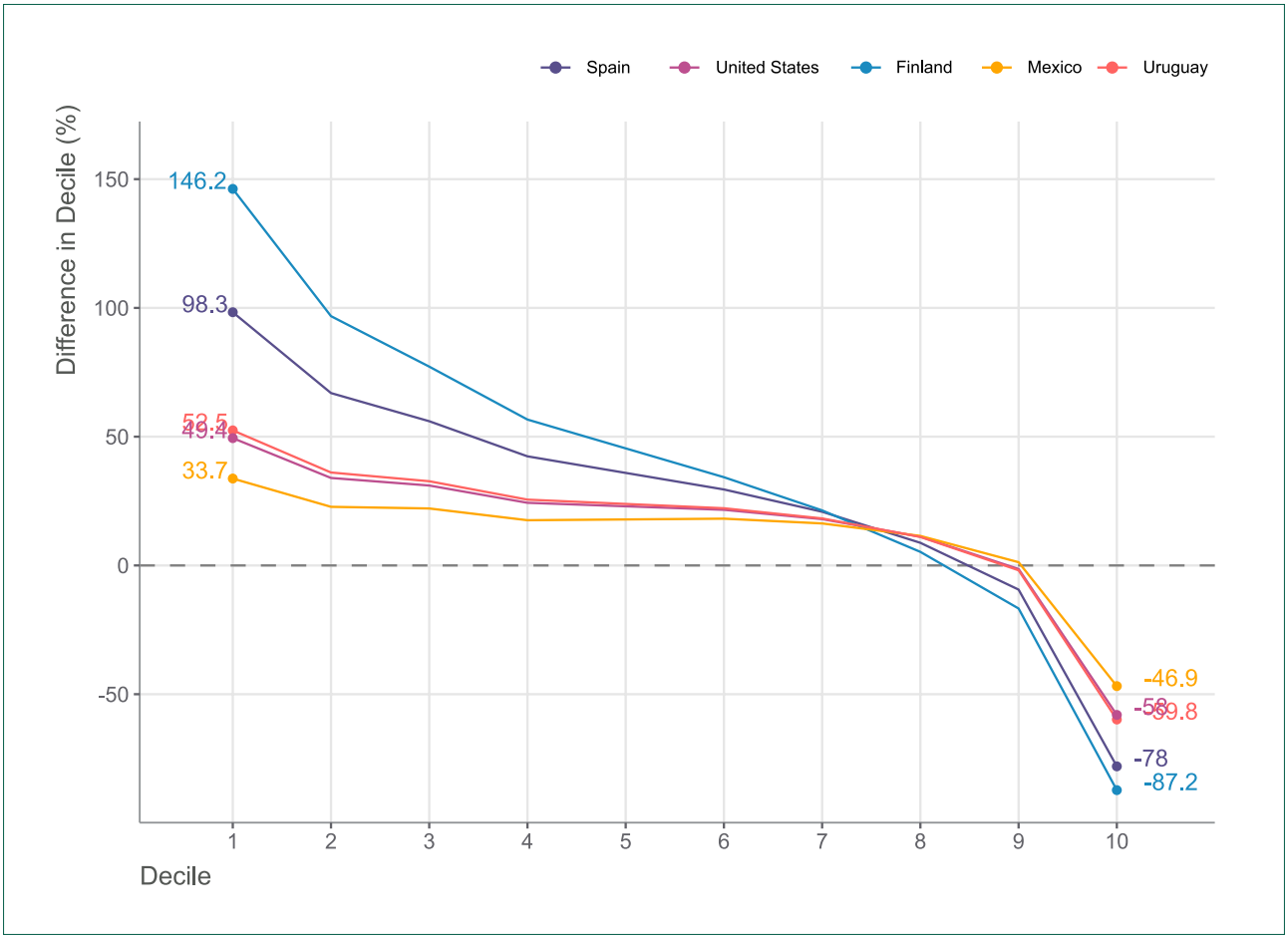
Figure 6 also highlights the need for an intersectional perspective. Jointly observing the magnitude of inequality and poverty ("how much inequality?") alongside the populations gender and race ("inequality among whom?") shows that poverty reduction would have a greater impact on women and Black people, especially Black women, as well as children, who remain insufficiently protected in Brazil by comparative standards. It is worth noting that PCHI is useful for measuring poverty and inequality but assumes equal distribution of resources among household members. This can mask internal inequalities, especially gender-based, underestimating the economic vulnerability of women in unequal relationship contexts.

## Impacts across PCHI Deciles

Synthetic measures like the Gini index estimate the magnitude of inequality but reveal little about the underlying distributive profile; countries with similar Gini coefficients may have very different income distributions across population percentiles. Figure 7 helps address questions such as the share of the population that would benefit from redistribution, the magnitude of these gains, and who would bear the associated costs under the different parameters established in the simulation. To a large extent, answering these questions amounts to identifying which segments of the population concentrate the largest income shares and which are most adversely affected by unequal distribution.

Figure 7 demonstrates that redistribution would benefit the vast majority of Brazilians: at least 80% of the population if the distributive parameter were Finland or Spain, or at least 90% if the reference were Mexico, Uruguay, or the United States, would see their incomes increase significantly. The highlight is the income increase for the poorest 10% of the population: in the most modest simulation (Mexico), the income would increase by one-third (33.7%); in all other counterfactuals, the first decile would see an income increase greater than 50%, doubling (98%) when Spain is the country of reference, or even increasing by more than 150% if Finland is the reference. These increases occur without any extraordinary conditions; they result from applying existing distributions from other countries to Brazil's 2023 mean income.

**Figure 7** – Percentage difference in deciles




Note: Prepared by the authors based on PNADc (IBGE, 2023) and the World Bank PIP (2025).
*Difference in the 1st decile for the United States: 49.4; difference in the 1st decile for Uruguay: 52.5.
* Difference in the 10th decile for the United States: -58; difference in the 10th decile for Uruguay: -59.8

At the other end of the distribution, the counterfactual exercise makes clear the difficulties in terms of power dynamics for any decisive redistributive effort. Regardless of the reference country, the top income decile would lose between 47% (Mexico) and 87% (Finland) of its current income. Applying Wilson's model, this configuration corresponds to a case of highly concentrated costs—borne by groups with substantial resources and veto power—and diffuse benefits. As noted by Costa et al. (2020), such a configuration poses challenges for coalition-building and highlights that, while economic growth does not necessarily produce redistribution, redistributive policies are more feasible in contexts of overall income growth. Income growth enables the progressive allocation of gains, avoiding a zero-sum outcome that would otherwise require imposing losses on groups with significant veto power.

Finally, the simulation reveals a peculiar characteristic of Brazilian inequality: "the excess wealth of the very rich." The main anomaly in the Brazilian distribution is the proportion of income concentrated at the top, a theme repeatedly emphasized in the literature, notably by Medeiros (2023). Relatively speaking, Brazil's wealthiest are at least twice as rich as their counterparts in Mexico, Uruguay, the United States, and Spain – and the distance from the Finnish top decile is abysmal.

## CONCLUSION

A consensus has emerged across various fields of research: regardless social justice considerations, addressing persistent and extreme inequality benefits society as a whole. Greater equality is associated with improvements across a broad range of domains—from interpersonal trust and lower corruption to better health and education outcomes, reduced violence and incarceration, and more sustainable economic growth. In principle, it would be rational for everyone to support redistributive policies.

However, historically, the behavior of economic and social elites in Brazil—and, more recently, in other parts of the world—has been marked by a short-sighted rationality. This perspective is often neither capable of nor willing to consider long-term stability or values that extend beyond immediate gains and the preservation of status. This has been repeatedly demonstrated, whether in the constant questioning of even the most basic social protection and distribution policies, or in the fragility of democratic commitment when redistributive agendas arise.

When Brazilian inequality is placed in comparative perspective, its socially dysfunctional nature becomes clear. None of the counterfactual scenarios considered here are utopian; they are based on the actual distributions of real countries with different profiles. Any of these scenarios would produce highly positive impacts for the vast majority of the population, and especially for the most vulnerable groups in terms of gender, race, and age. Moreover, the simulations show that redistribution alone would allow for a significant reduction in poverty and, in the case of extreme poverty, at worst, cut it in half and, at best, eliminate it altogether.

At the same time, the exercise highlights the predatory nature of income appropriation at the top of the distribution. Considering that high economic inequality almost always translates into political inequality, it is clear that the struggle for social justice in Brazil will be a protracted one. It will require great capacity for mobilization, the building of distributive coalitions, a willingness to negotiate and compromise, and, above all, significant social and political conflict.

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## NOTE

The initial translation of this article into English was performed with the assistance of large language model (LLM) technology. The resulting text was subsequently subjected to a careful review and refinement process by a professional academic translation service to ensure accuracy, linguistic fluency, and adherence to international academic standards. The article was submitted for approval; the authors reviewed it and maintain full responsibility for the final content.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

All datasets supporting the results of this study have been deposited in SciELO Data and can be accessed at https://doi.org/10.48331/SCIELODATA.VLVBCH

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Bruno Lazzarotti Diniz Costa: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Software; Supervision; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

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