

# Income of Black Brazilians Doubles, But Social Disparities Persist

gatasnegrasbrasileiras

March commemorating the [Day of Black Consciousness](#) in São Paulo, Brazil

Note from BW of Brazil: *The article below summarizes many of the topics consistently covered on the BW of Brazil blog. For more details please click on the links included.*

A recent study released by Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV) in Brazil shows that the income of Brazilian blacks increased over 40% between 1999 and 2009, compared to a 20% rise of whites' wealth. However, the difference between the [income of whites and blacks in Brazil is still significant](#). Despite

improvements, Brazilian blacks still earn less than half as much as whites, according to DIEESE, a federal research institution for Brazilian labor unions.



Brazilianist Jeffrey Lesser, a professor of History at Emory University in Atlanta and a specialist in ethnicity and race, said the income disparity is due to hidden [racism in Brazil](#), though racism is officially considered a crime.

“Compared to the United States, Brazil in general has public environments with much more cordial relationships. It is so impressive that Brazilians do not like to put the finger on a wound. The law that regards [racism as a crime](#) also hides prejudices that many people indeed have,” Lesser said.

According to a study by Popular Data Institute, just slightly over 60% of Brazilian blacks owned cell phones, television or refrigerators in 2001. In 2010, ownership of these three items among blacks jumped to close to 90%, the same percentage of whites who owned these items before 2001. The percentage of black Brazilians who reported owning washing machines climbed from 10% to 53%.

The Brazilian government's Institute of Applied Economic Research attributed the [increased prosperity of blacks](#) in the last decade to social programs of income distribution such as *Bolsa-Família*, which provides financial aid for low-income families – the largest direct cash transfer program in the world. *Bolsa-Família* serves 13 million families in Brazil and is similar to the *Oportunidades* cash transfer program in Mexico. Economist Marcelo Neri, author of the FGV study, said an effort in the 90s to give more than 90 percent of the population access to basic education during Itamar Franco and Fernando Henrique Cardoso's terms especially benefited racial minorities. The government of former Brazilian president Lula da Silva later instituted [affirmative action](#) in Brazil's university admissions.

“The main effect of access to [basic education](#) is that blacks have left the informal economy and started to get the same labor rights as anybody else. They left [domestic labor](#), construction jobs, and agriculture work in distant areas. Finally, they joined the middle class work-force. *Bolsa-família* has helped a little, but not as much as education,” Neri said.

Neri also cited the [increasing number of Brazilians who self-identify as “black”](#) (“negro”) in the census as another crucial factor in blacks' reported income growth. “There are more and more people being considered black. This may be helping to improve the statistic. And also, that shows an improvement in their self-esteem,” he said. According to the 2010 census, there are 97 million African descendants in Brazil, comprising [50.6 percent of the Brazilian population](#) – the largest number of blacks outside of Africa.

Lesser praised the policy of the Lula administration to include African studies in the Brazilian schools. He denied that Brazil was a racial democracy before Lula, as often advertised. “That [policy] was very important. To be self-declared black in Brazil is much more acceptable than [in the past](#),” he said. However, the accuracy of the FGV survey is disputed by sociologist and columnist Demétrio Magnoli. He pointed out that the survey used the term *negros* in reference to Brazilians who may self-identify as [pretos \(blacks\) and pardos \(browns\)](#), terms provided on the IBGE (the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) census. “Negro is basically a term invented here and created based on a political doctrine called racialism. Also, they are talking about a group that represents almost half of Brazilians. It is a very big group of people to be statistically accurate data,” said Magnoli.

Magnoli argues that the FGV survey results represent changes in Brazil’s economic and regional reality over the last decade. “The so-called [new Brazilian middle-class](#) emerged in droves from the northeast and north, where everybody is self-declared *pardos* and where the economy is booming like China. In the center-south region, most people call themselves whites, but the economy didn’t grow much and there was already a large middle-class in states like São Paulo or Rio Grande do Sul,” he said.

[David Raimundo dos Santos](#), an equal rights activist and director of a non-profit pre-university course aimed at black students, said that despite improvements, the government has not given racial inequality the attention it deserves. “The Brazilian government, through different parties in power, has tried to improve the lives of northeasterners, blacks, and women. We started affirmative action. Prejudices are declining. However, some programs still carry the same old vices,” he said.



Frei David Raimundo dos Santos

According to Santos, a program launched by Brazilian President Dilma Roussef called *Ciência Sem Fronteiras* (Science without Borders) will give out 75,000 scholarships for study abroad, but only 5 percent of the scholarships benefit blacks.

Santos believes that civil participation is required to address inequality. Brazil’s Banco Itaú, now Itaú-Unibanco, had only 153 black employees in Brazil in 2003. After huge protests in front of some branches, the number of black employees has increased to 2,700 (1).

“Blacks and whites should be conscious that we are a society of privileges,” said Santos. “We have to think about that and pressure the government and the private sector. Then, we can move towards a more equal place.”

### Notes

1. Brazilian banks continue to be a place where black employees have difficulty securing employment and upward mobility once within the banking industry. See more [here](#).

Source: [Latin Dispatch](#)