



RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND THE EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

DISCRIMINAÇÃO RACIAL E AS EXPERIÊNCIAS DE ESTUDANTES UNIVERSITÁRIOS

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ABSTRACT: **Objective:** The objective was to discuss the experiences of racial discrimination suffered by university students who do or do not receive any type of university aid and/or scholarship. **Method:** Exploratory, descriptive, and cross-sectional study with a quantitative approach, carried out from September to December 2023, with a sample of 751 university students from public and private institutions in the state of Ceará, using the Discrimination Experiences Scale as an instrument. **Results:** It was evident that students who benefit from a university scholarship showed more concern about racial discrimination with high exposure, when compared to those who did not receive this assistance. However, despite suffering from negative experiences arising from racial discrimination, only 1.33% (n=10) of students have already filed a complaint against the racism they suffered. **Conclusion:** The university support policy portrays the intention of benefiting students with limited financial conditions, and therefore assists students who suffer racial discrimination.

KEYWORDS: Racial discrimination. University education. Students.

RESUMO: **Objetivo:** Objetivou-se discutir as experiências de discriminação racial sofridas por estudantes universitários que recebem ou não algum tipo de auxílio e/ou bolsa universitária. **Método:** Estudo exploratório, descritivo e transversal, com abordagem quantitativa, realizado de setembro a dezembro de 2023, com amostra de 751 estudantes universitários de instituições públicas e privadas do estado do Ceará, Brasil. Utilizou-se como instrumento a Escala de Experiências de Discriminação. **Resultados:** Evidenciou-se que os estudantes beneficiados com bolsa universitária demonstraram mais preocupação com a discriminação racial com alta exposição, quando comparados aos que não recebiam auxílio. Porém, mesmo sofrendo com vivências negativas oriundas da discriminação racial, apenas 1,33% (n=10) dos estudantes prestou queixa contra o racismo sofrido. **Conclusão:** A política de apoio universitário retrata a intenção de beneficiar os estudantes com poucas condições financeiras e, por conseguinte, atende aos estudantes que sofrem discriminação racial.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Discriminação racial. Ensino Superior. Estudantes.

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INTRODUCTION

Racism in Brazil has a historical context that began during the period of slavery and is currently present in a social, cultural, and structural way, making its presence felt in the daily lives of black people. This phenomenon is described by Almeida¹ as “a systematic form of discrimination based on race, which manifests itself through conscious or unconscious practices that culminate in disadvantages or privileges for individuals, depending on the racial group to which they belong”. In addition, racism in Brazil is also related to the construction of stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination, which perpetuate the marginalization and exclusion of the black population in society. In this sense, it is essential to understand and combat racism in its different dimensions, to promote equality and the appreciation of ethnic-racial diversity.

Racial discrimination presents itself as a discriminatory manifestation of racism, in which Black people are inferior and/or treated unfairly, based on the color of their skin¹. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics², the black population is made up of people who declare themselves black and brown, and in the 2022 census, this figure corresponded to 55.5% of the Brazilian population, meaning that more than half of Brazilians are likely to suffer from experiences of racial discrimination.

In addition to the above, black people constantly suffer from experiences of racial discrimination, whether at work, on the streets, at school or in other various scenarios³, despite the existence of some laws that typify the crime, such as Law No. 7.716, of January 5, 1989, which “Defines crimes resulting from prejudice of race or color”, and Law No. 14.532, of January 11, 2023, which states that racial insult is a crime of racism^{4,5}.

Despite these laws, the fight against racism is still a challenge and far from effective. The constant violation of Black people's rights highlights the need for more effective measures to guarantee racial equality and combat discrimination.

It should be noted that to enjoy basic rights, black people have always faced difficulties. In this context, the struggles of Black movements have emerged, dedicated to combating racial prejudice and discrimination, as well as seeking improvements aimed at the equal inclusion of black people in all areas of society, such as education, health, work and social participation⁶. It should be emphasized that the black movements also triggered the creation of the National Policy for the Promotion of Racial Equality, established by Decree No. 4.886/2003 which, in order to achieve one of the objectives of this policy, created the National Plan for the Promotion of Racial Equality (PLANAPIR), in which the Racial Equality in Schools Project was developed, which seeks to discuss the fight against racism, racial prejudice and racial discrimination in schools^{7,8}.

Both schools and especially universities are elitist and segregated places, where Black people find it difficult to enter and stay without suffering from racist practices. On the other hand, these environments can also offer spaces for discussions about combating racism, since they are also recognized as an opportunity for advancement⁹. And when it comes to Black people at university, it is essential to mention Law No. 12.711 of August 29, 2012, which provides for admission to universities, in which Art. 3 discusses the vacancies for self-declared Black, Brown, Indigenous and Quilombola students, thus making historical reparations¹⁰.

In the university context, students encounter many obstacles during their academic career until they reach the end of their degree. During this time, the university environment has generated anxiety, stress, depression and even burnout syndrome¹¹. In addition, Black students find it more difficult to stay at university and one of the reasons is that they are poorer than white students, which means that they must work a double shift, combining studies and work at the same time. Therefore, the socio-economic

factor has an impact on the student's permanence at university. With the aim of reducing dropout and offering more qualified training, permanence programs and/or university scholarships have emerged^{12,13}.

Given this context, Black people need special attention, especially when it comes to promoting the health of this public. Thus, the National Policy for the Integral Health of the Black Population (PNSIPN) was created, one of the objectives of which is to promote equity in the care of the Black population, paying particular attention to the needs of these individuals¹⁴. However, the effectiveness of the PNSIPN is a challenge, mainly because health professionals are unaware of the policy and the importance of applying it, racism is present in its implementation and there are difficulties in considering racial variety when caring for black people¹⁵.

In this sense, there is an urgent need to promote discussion about the racial discrimination experienced by black university students, linked to this, the permanence of this public at university, and as much as the debate about racism is constantly perpetuated, it still impacts the lives of black people, which makes the debate pertinent. The aim was, therefore, to discuss the experiences of racial discrimination suffered by university students who do or do not receive some kind of university aid and/or scholarship.

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a larger study entitled "Racial discrimination and mental health in universities". The study is exploratory, descriptive and cross-sectional, with a quantitative approach. Exploratory studies seek to gain a greater understanding of a given subject, as the name itself makes explicit, by exploring aspects of the fact studied. In addition, this type of research establishes relationships between variables, so exploratory and descriptive studies are often used by researchers investigating problems that generate social discussions¹⁶. As for the approach, quantitative research often focuses on analyzing associations between variables¹⁷.

The study sample consisted of 751 students from public and private higher education institutions in the state of Ceará, Brazil. This total sample included participants of the following ethnicities: Brown, Black, White and Yellow, i.e. students of all races were included so that there could be a comparison between them, as was done in Fattore's study¹⁸. Data was collected between September and December 2023 at the following institutions: Universidade Estadual Vale do Acaraú (UVA), Faculdades Luciano Feijão (FLF), Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC) Campus Sobral, and Faculdade 5 de Julho (F5), all located in the city of Sobral-Ceará; and the Ieducare College (FIED), located in the city of Tianguá, Ceará. It should be noted that the inclusion criteria for the participants were having answered the Informed Consent Form (ICF), being over 18 years of age and currently enrolled and active in some of the courses at the institutions mentioned, and the exclusion criteria were not having answered the ICF and leaving the form incomplete.

Data was collected in a hybrid way, i.e. online and face-to-face. Online, some students from the institutions were approached through their respective institution's academic system, where the link to the instrument was sent, made available through Google Forms and shared on social networks, WhatsApp and Instagram. For the online collection, the Snowball technique was used which, according to Flick¹⁸, is like that of a good reporter who tracks down 'clues' from one person to another. Initially, the researcher specifies the characteristics that the sample members should have, then identifies a person or a group of people congruent with the necessary data, then presents the study proposal and,

after obtaining/recording this data, asks the research participant(s) to indicate another person(s) belonging to the same target population. Flick¹⁹ explains that, in this technique, the researcher asks the participant for references of new informants who have the desired characteristics.

The face-to-face collection was conducted by members of the Mental Health and Care Study and Research Group (GESAM), from UVA's Undergraduate Nursing Course, whose members went to higher education institutions to apply the survey instrument. Students were approached in classrooms, social spaces, University Restaurants and auditoriums, where they were invited to take part in the survey after being explained the object of the study and the importance of taking part.

The online and printed instruments for face-to-face collection had the same structure, with the following items: sociodemographic information; the Discrimination Experiences Scale; and the Mental Health Inventory, MHI-38. The Experiences of Discrimination Scale was validated for use in Brazil by Fattore¹⁸ and is divided into five items: response to unfair treatment; discrimination; concern about global issues and complaint. To be validated in Brazil, this instrument was translated into Portuguese, cross-culturally adapted and its psychometric properties validated through a population-based study in Salvador/Bahia. In addition, in this study, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) revealed satisfactory fit parameters, high factor loadings and adequate reliability values, confirming the scale's internal consistency^{18,20}.

The Mental Health Inventory (MHI-38) is a suitable instrument for differentiating levels of mental health in people without psychopathological or dysfunctional conditions. Research has demonstrated its usefulness and suitability in different cultures and non-clinical populations, both in Europe and Brazil²¹. The instrument contains 38 items, distributed over five scales, which are grouped into two major dimensions: Psychological Distress (negative) which includes traditional negative indicators of psychological distress or negative emotional and mental states. It contains the Anxiety (10 items), Depression (5 items), Loss of Emotional and Behavioral Control (9 items) Scales; Psychological Well-Being (positive) which contains the contemporary emphasis on positive mental health or positive states which includes the General Positive Affect (11 items) and Emotional Bonds (3 items)²¹. For this section, analysis was carried out on sociodemographic data, in which the mean and standard deviation of the age variable were calculated. The associations between the following variables were also assessed: Response to unfair treatment; Response to racial discrimination; Exposure of concerns related to racial discrimination; and Complaint made, associated with the variable: students receiving university grants or scholarships. This data was analyzed using the Chi-Square Test, which is used to study the relationship between two quantitative variables²². Thus, if the test value is equal to or less than 5% (0.05), it means that there is a relationship between the two variables analyzed; otherwise, it is concluded that the two variables are not related.

The study complied with the ethical requirements of the National Health Council²³ and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Vale do Acaraú State University (UVA), in accordance with opinion no. 6.279.258.

RESULTS

In addition to investigating the experiences of racial discrimination experienced by university students in the state of Ceará who do or do not receive scholarships and/or university aid, this study also sought to analyze the sociodemographic profile of the research participants, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of sociodemographic data of participating university students

		N	%
1 Gender	Female	394	52.5
	Male	350	46.6
	Non-binary	4	.5
	Not identified	3	.4
2 Age M=22.8 SD=5.02 Min=18 Max=64 (2 missing values)	18 or 19	165	22.0
	20 or 21	188	25.1
	22 or 23	183	24.4
	24 or 25	94	12.6
	26 to 30	71	9.5
	Above 30	48	6.4
3 Ethnicity	Brown	439	58.5
	Black	93	12.4
	White	209	27.8
	Indigenous	10	1.3
4 Marital status	Single	666	88.7
	Married	48	6.4
	Stable union	35	4.7
	Widower	2	.3
6 Family income	Less than minimum wage	168	22.4
	Half a minimum wage	146	19.4
	From 1 to 2 minimum wages	277	36.9
	From 2 to 5 minimum wages	120	16.0
	More than 5 minimum wages	40	5.3
7 What is your religion?	Catholic	446	59.4
	Christian	88	11.7
	Spiritist	10	1.3
	Umbanda	10	1.3
	Candomblé	1	.1
	Atheist	37	4.9
	No religion	135	18.0
	Other religions	24	3.2
	Total	751	100.0

Source: Authors¹.

As shown in Table 1, most of the participants were female, corresponding to a total of 52.5% (n=394), followed by males, 46.6% (n=350). The prevalent age was 20 or 21, 25.1% (n=188). With regard to race, 58.5% (n=439) of the students declared themselves to be brown, 27.8% (n=209) white and 12.4% (n=93) black. Single was the most common marital status, at 88.7% (n=439), followed by married, at 6.4% (n=48). Turning to family income, most participants had an income of between one and two minimum wages, 36.9% (n=277). Regarding religion, 59.4% (n=446) were Catholic and 18.0% (n=137) had no religion.

In addition to the sociodemographic profile, we also studied the unfair treatment experienced by the students who took part in the survey, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Presentation of responses to unfair treatment and beneficiaries of university scholarships and/or aid

Response to unfair treatment	Does not receive scholarship (N=453)		Receives scholarship (N=298)		χ^2_1	p
	N	%	N	%		
I) If you feel you are being treated unfairly, you will usually:					1.087	0.297
a) Accept this as a fact of life	117	25.8	67	22.5		
b) Try to do something about it	336	74.2	231	77.5		
II) If you are being treated unfairly, you will usually:					.057	0.811
a) Talk to other people about this	350	77.3	228	76.5		
b) Keep this to yourself	103	22.7	70	23.5		

* p<0.05

** p<0.01

*** p<0.001

Source: authors' own elaboration (2024).

Of the students who took part in the study, 453 did not receive grants and/or university aid, while 298 did. When the total sample of 751 students was asked what their attitude would be if they felt they were being treated unfairly, the students who did not receive university grants and/or aid, which accounted for 74.2% (n=336), tried to do something about it, while 25.8% (n=117) accepted it as a fact of life; while the students who did receive university grants and/or aid, 22.5% (n=67) accepted it as a fact of life and 77.5% (n=231) tried to do something about it.

Table 3 shows the places where students experienced racial discrimination the most.

Table 3. Presentation of the experience of racial discrimination and university scholarship beneficiaries

Discrimination	Does not receive scholarship (N=453)		Receives scholarship (N=298)		χ^2_1	p
	N	%	N	%		
... Have you been exposed to discrimination ... because of your race, ethnicity or color?					2.891	0.089
No	323	71.3	195	65.4		
Yes	130	28.7	103	34.6		
a) At school					.851	0.356
Low exposure	314	69.3	197	66.1		
High exposure	139	30.7	101	33.9		
b) When looking for a job					.012	0.911
Low exposure	401	88.5	263	88.3		
High exposure	52	11.5	35	11.7		
c) At work					.233	0.629
Low exposure	402	88.7	261	87.6		
High exposure	51	11.3	37	12.4		
d) When buying a house					.023	0.880
Low exposure	440	97.1	290	97.3		
High exposure	13	2.9	8	2.7		
e) While seeking medical care					.450	0.502
Low exposure	421	92.9	273	91.6		
High exposure	32	7.1	25	8.4		
f) Requesting service in a store or restaurant					7.335	** 0.007
Low exposure	381	84.1	227	76.2		
High exposure	72	15.9	71	23.8		
g) When requesting credit or a bank loan					.839	0.360
Low exposure	439	96.9	285	95.6		
High exposure	14	3.1	13	4.4		
h) On the street or in a public establishment					7.676	** 0.006
Low exposure	362	79.9	212	71.1		
High exposure	91	20.1	86	28.9		
i) By the Police or in the Court					.240	0.624
Low exposure	418	92.3	272	91.3		
High exposure	35	7.7	26	8.7		

* p<0.05

** p<0.01

*** p<0.001

Source: Authors'.

When asked if they had experienced racial discrimination because of their race, ethnicity or color, considering the total number of participants, 751, 71.3% (n=323) who did not receive scholarships said no, and 28.7% (n=130) said yes; while those who did receive scholarships, 65.4% (n=197) said no and 34.6% (n=103) said yes. With regard to the places where the participants experienced racial discrimination, Table 3 shows that the school, the street or public establishment and when requesting service in a store or restaurant were the places with the highest numbers of high exposure for students who received and those who did not receive scholarships and/or university aid.

In addition to what has been discussed, we also sought to find out about students' concerns related to exposure to racial discrimination, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Presentation of concerns related to racial discrimination and university scholarship beneficiaries

Concerns	Does not receive scholarship (N=453)		Receives scholarship (N=298)		χ^2_1	p
	N	%	N	%		
a) When you were a child or teenager (under 18). did you worry about people in your racial group being treated unfairly because of their race or skin color?					9.255	** 0.002
Low exposure	188	41.5	91	30.5		
High exposure	265	58.5	207	69.5		
b) In the past year, have you worried about people in your racial group being treated unfairly because of their race or skin color?					11.431	** 0.001
Low exposure	159	35.1	70	23.5		
High exposure	294	64.9	228	76.5		
c) In the past year, have you been concerned about experiences of unfair treatment because of your race or skin color?					8.068	** 0.005
Low exposure	221	48.8	114	38.3		
High exposure	232	51.2	184	61.7		

* p<0.05

** p<0.01

*** p<0.001

Source: Authors'.

Table 4 shows that the majority of both students who received and those who did not receive scholarships and/or university aid were concerned about exposure to racial discrimination, in all items, with (a), (b) and (c) of the table showing the percentages corresponding to high exposure and were higher compared to low exposure, which means that most of the participants in the survey were concerned about exposure to experiences of racial discrimination being suffered by themselves or third parties.

According to Table 5, the majority did not file a complaint when they experienced racial discrimination, so, considering the total sample of 751 participants, 98.66% (n=741) did not file a complaint, compared to only 1.33% (n=10) who did.

Table 5. Presentation of the response to racial discrimination against university scholarship beneficiaries

Complaints filed	Does not receive scholarship (N=453)		Receives scholarship (N=298)		χ^2_1	p
	N	%	N	%		
Have you ever filed a complaint because of racial discrimination?					.000	0.983
No	447	98.7	294	98.7		
Yes	6	1.3	4	1.3		

* p<0.05

** p<0.01

*** p<0.001

Source: Authors'.

DISCUSSION

In line with the data described in Table 1, since the 1970s there has been an expansion in schooling in Brazil, especially for women. Census data shows that most women are in higher education, representing: 55% entering, 57% enrolled and 61% completing undergraduate courses²⁴. Furthermore,

in a study conducted to measure the exposure of a group of adults to discrimination, females were also predominant, with 95% compared to males (5%)¹⁸. The average age compares with that of other studies also conducted with university students, citing a study conducted with nursing students, in which the age varied between 20 and 24 years²⁵ and another with university students from a federal institution, whose ages varied between 20 and 29 years²⁶.

Regarding race, in a study conducted in the state of Ceará with higher education students, most participants declared themselves to be brown and white (54.1% and 30.6%, respectively)²⁷. Still from this perspective, although nowadays the black and brown population has greater access to higher education, due to affirmative action, such as Law 12.711/2012, there has been a notable increase in this population in universities, but many still suffer from inequality rooted in their skin color²⁸.

Unfair treatment due to race and/or skin color is an act of racial discrimination¹. With the data presented in Table 2, it was observed that the participating students tended not to accept being treated unfairly, similarly to what was found in Oliveira's study³, which indicated 87.3% of negative responses to accepting unfair treatment. As a result of black movements, the implementation of affirmative practices to promote racial equality has resulted in the right to education and, in the field of higher education, quotas allow black people to have equal chances of entering undergraduate courses and, thus, access to education has been forming more imposing individuals who fight for rights and do not accept discriminatory treatment²⁹.

In this context, in addition to getting into university, these students also need support to stay and finish their degrees, so it is important to mention the role of university grants and/or scholarships. In a study conducted by Cespedes¹³, it was found that the Student Permanence Programs help vulnerable students, and that the students who benefit from them have better levels of student performance.

Table 3 also shows that the students who did not receive a scholarship were the ones who most often answered yes to the question "have you ever suffered discrimination because of your race, ethnicity or color?", so the lack of financial support becomes more aggravating in the lives of these students. These financial difficulties, together with experiences of discrimination, increase the feeling that they don't have access to institutional and governmental support resources and can lead to a lack of interest among students and strengthen the belief that university is a place reserved for the few⁹.

And, when considering the total sample of participants, shown in Table 3, the figure for students who had already been racially discriminated against was alarming. The segregation, inferiorization and exclusion caused to the black population due to racism are routinely and explicitly evidenced³⁰.

According to Table 4, 30.7% (n=139) of the students who did not receive a grant and/or university assistance, the majority in this study, were discriminated against at school. Pastoriza and Borges³¹ point out that in the school environment, racial discrimination happens in both disguised and overt forms, with aggressors often uttering curses and/or discriminatory attitudes disguised as "jokes".

In a survey conducted by *Inteligência em Pesquisa e Consultoria Estratégica* (IPEC), 3.8% of every ten victims of racism were students at schools, universities or colleges, a fact that also occurs on the streets and in public spaces. The data from this survey shows that n=187 participants were discriminated against in these spaces. In another study conducted with young black people from capital cities in the Northeast, the interviewees reported being constantly approached by police officers on the streets and others said they were treated inferiorly in stores and malls. According to their perception, this is due to racial issues³².

According to research conducted by the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA), the black population is gaining more ground in higher education. The research shows that blacks are more present

in public and private higher education. In 2015, they represented 44% of students, compared to 22% in 2001. In addition, this increase reflects a 17% rise in the total number of individuals who declared themselves black or brown, from 46.1% to 53.9%. Attendance at public undergraduate courses increased from 31.5% to 45.1% in the same period, although the survey considered public and private networks, public education and federal public institutions³³.

Also in this context, in a study carried out with people who declared themselves black, the school environment, followed by the fact of looking for a job, in public establishments and restaurants, were the places where they suffered the most from experiences of racial discrimination, in line with the data in this study³.

Table 4 also shows that students who received scholarships and/or university aid were more wary of racial discrimination with high exposure when compared to those who did not receive this aid, which can be explained by the large number of participants in this study who declared themselves to be brown and black. According to Barbosa and Nascimento, there are a considerable number of vulnerable black students in higher education who need university aid to stay at university³⁴.

Returning to the data in Table 1, 58.5% (n=439) of the students declared themselves to be brown and 12.4% (93%) black, these figures are significant when compared to the data in Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5, since in all of them the percentages related to unfair treatment, racial discrimination, concern about exposure and complaints of racism were always alarming. The reality of racial discrimination and inequality increases distress, which can damage the mental health of these university students. Because of this, it is important to consider black students as a vulnerable group in terms of mental health and well-being in the university environment³⁵.

Turning to cases of racial discrimination, a study carried out by Costa³⁶, in which 97 criminal decisions in cases of racism were analyzed, found that, in most cases, the defendant was acquitted, some crimes were committed in places of leisure, social interaction and in a professional environment, and individuals with low levels of education were most victims.

At the same time as the survey data showed a significant number of incidents of racial discrimination, the survey showed practical implications, as it was difficult to go into subjective details of the participants, such as the reasons why students did not report. In addition, the instrument used did not allow for a better understanding of the daily social experiences of the students who took part in the study. Another factor was the lack of scientific articles on this subject, which made it difficult to conduct a more detailed and in-depth discussion.

CONCLUSION

In summary, racism in Brazil is a complex problem that requires a comprehensive approach aimed at promoting equality and social justice. Awareness-raising, dialog and collective action are the foundations for combating structural racism and creating a more inclusive and just society for all citizens.

It was observed that both students who received and those who did not receive scholarships and/or university aid frequently experienced racial discrimination, as well as being treated unfairly because of their skin color and/or race and were concerned about this exclusionary treatment. It was noticed that the participating students experienced racial discrimination in various spaces and shared these experiences with other people but did not complain when they were victims of racist practices. In addition, the university support policy reflects the intention to benefit students with low financial conditions and, as a result, caters for students who suffer racial discrimination.

It was also possible to see that students who did not receive a scholarship were the ones who most often responded that they suffered racial discrimination because of their race, ethnicity or skin color, and this, combined with the lack of financial support, only intensifies the difficulty these students have in completing their undergraduate courses.

Even though it is a relevant subject, there are few studies that address it, but it needs to be discussed. In addition, we emphasize the need for studies in school environments, on the streets and in public spaces, as they have been found to be prone to acts of racial discrimination.

This research had limitations, such as the difficulty of delving deeper into the subjective aspects experienced by the participants, such as why students did not make complaints, even though the data showed a significant number of experiences of racial discrimination. Furthermore, the instrument used did not allow for a deeper understanding of the social experiences faced on a daily basis by the students who agreed to take part in the study.

Finally, it should be noted that the experiences of racial discrimination suffered by black university students at various times in their lives can have an impact on their academic career and/or other fields. It is therefore essential to create public policies aimed at black students in order to strengthen social protection networks and reduce the vulnerabilities experienced as a result of racial discrimination, both inside and outside universities.

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