

Persistent Inequalities in Brazilian Higher Education: Challenges Beyond Expanding Access

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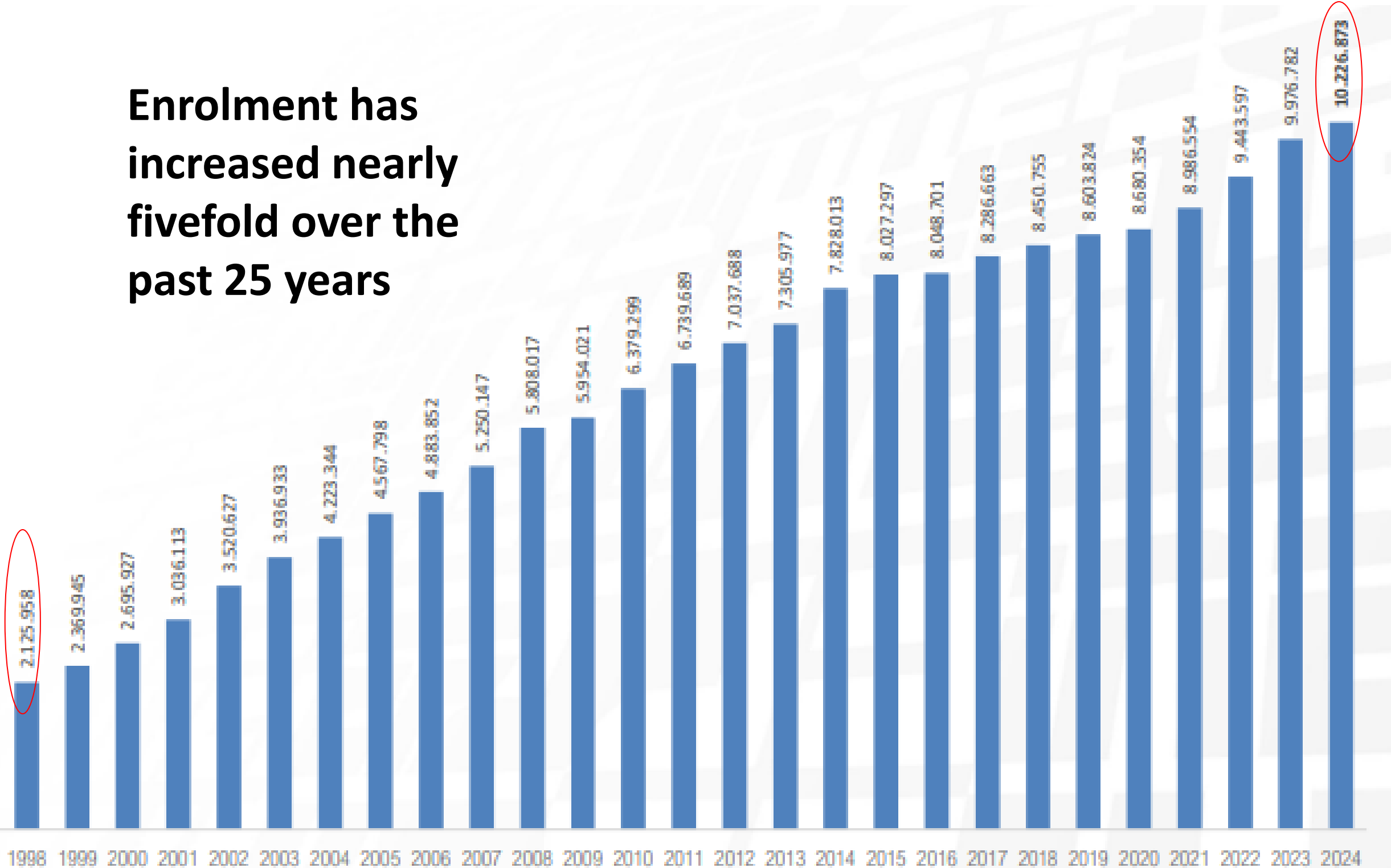
OVERALL PICTURE - BRAZIL

- 212.6 million inhabitants
- 7th most populous country in the world
- 8th largest economy in the world
- 10th most unequal country in the world



SIGNIFICANT EXPANSION IN ENROLMENT

Enrolment has increased nearly fivefold over the past 25 years



There are more than 10 million students enrolled in higher education, making Brazil one of the largest higher education systems in the world.

Source: INEP (2025).

BRAZILIAN EQUITY POLICIES ON ACCESS

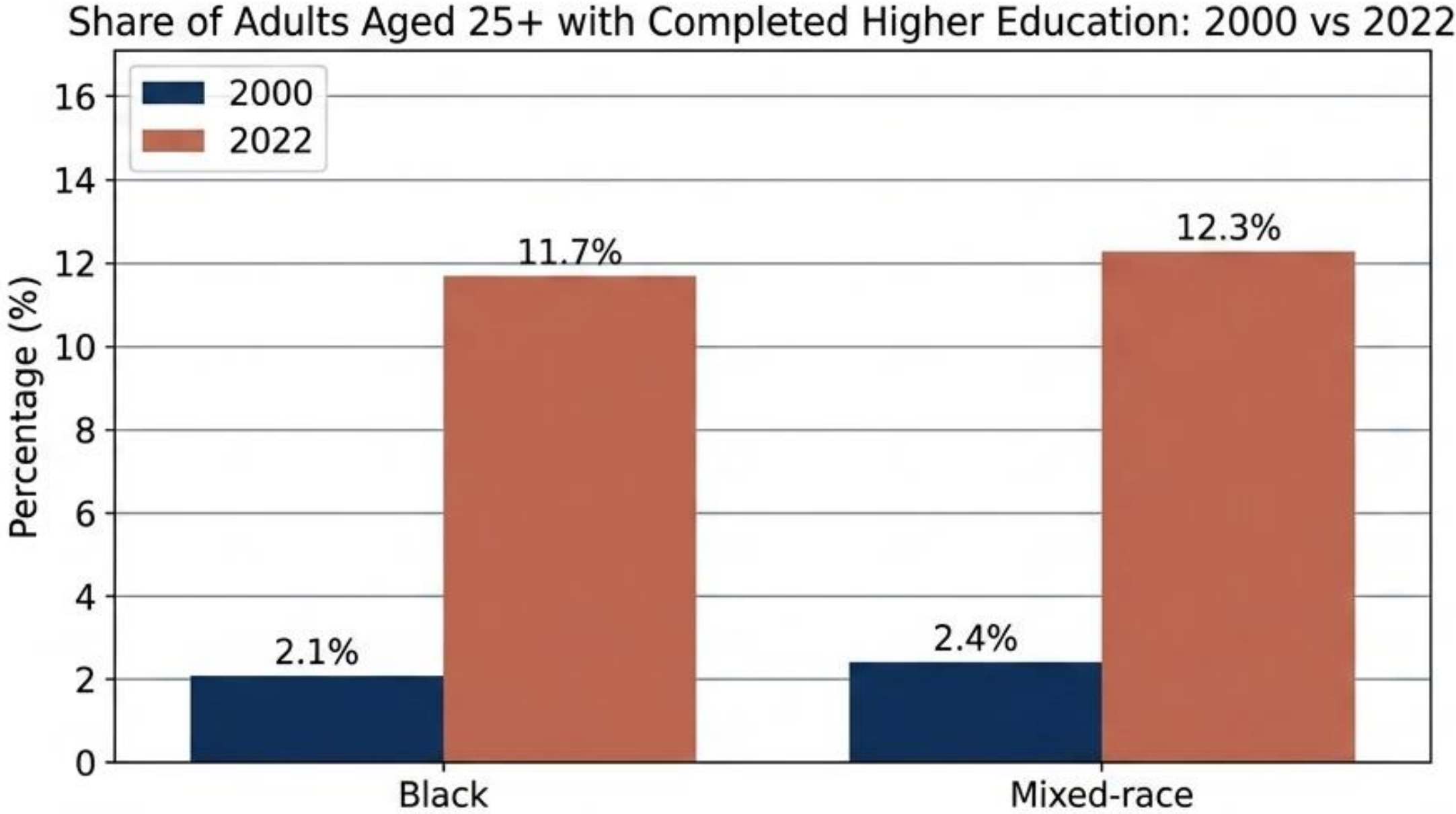
Aim: Expand the right to higher education to historically excluded social groups.

Reserved places in private and public higher education institutions for low-income students, people with disabilities, BIPOC and state school students.

2004
Prouni
(Programa Universidade para
Todos – University for all)
Private HEIs

2012
Quota Law
(*Lei de Cotas*)
Public HEIs

Impact of efforts to democratize access to HE



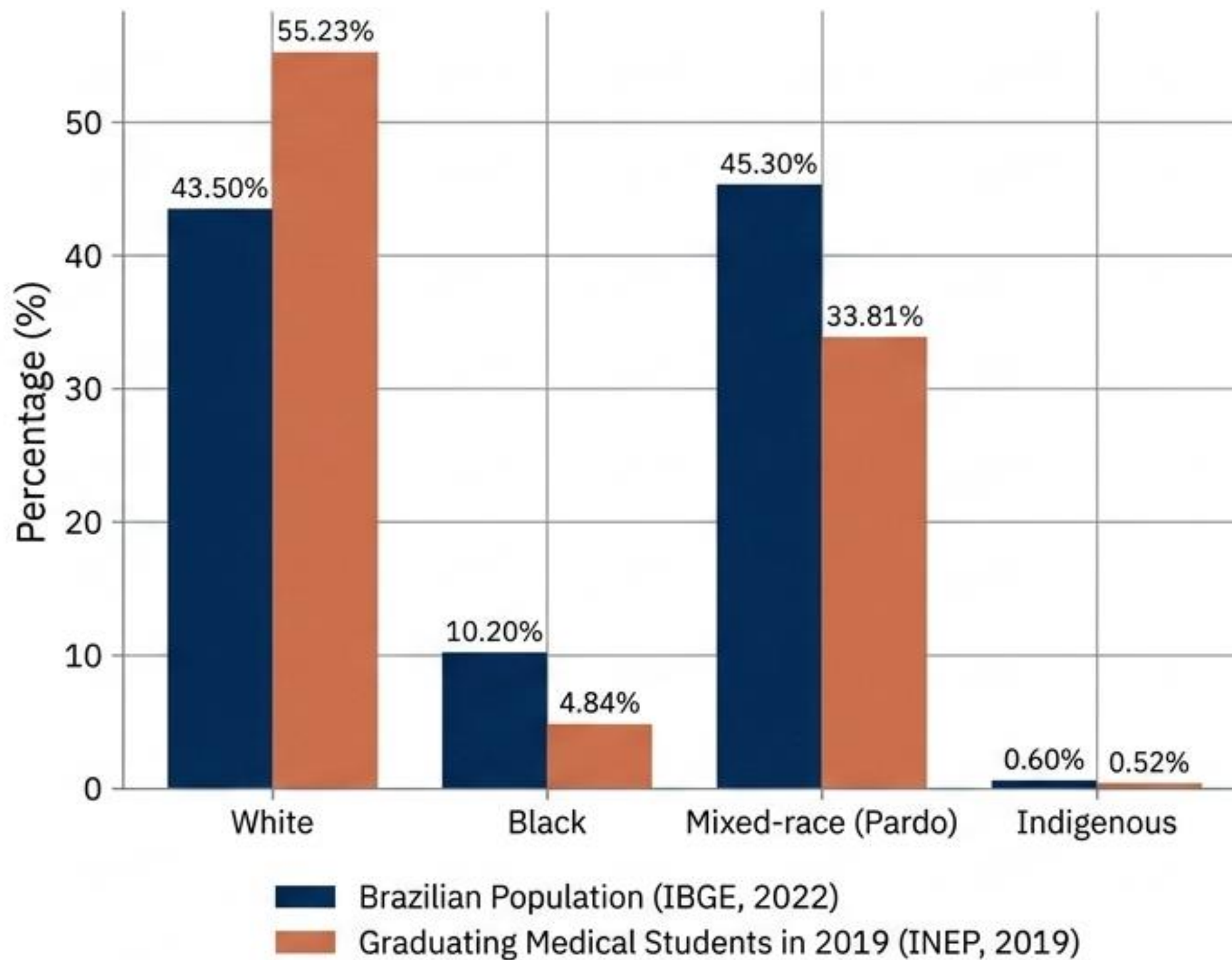
Source: G1 Educação (2025).

THE SITUATION IS IMPROVING, BUT IT IS STILL NOT ENOUGH

Despite overall growth, structural inequalities remain deeply rooted in the system

ELITISM REMAINS A CHALLENGE: Higher education remains highly elitist in high-prestige and competitive programmes.

Racial Distribution: Brazilian Population vs Graduating Medical Students



“What happens when students belonging to historically excluded social groups enter the University?”

We have conducted qualitative research* about the students' experience in a diversity context.

The study included students from social groups historically excluded from Brazilian higher education – such as Black and mixed-race students, people with disabilities, LGBT+ students.

*The research was developed with funding from the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

The results were organized in 3 thematic axes

**1. DIVERSITY
POTENTIAL**

**2. OBSTACLES
EXPERIENCED**

**3. SUGGESTED
PERSPECTIVES**

DIVERSITY POTENTIAL

- Diversity in the classroom contributes to qualifying the students in their respective fields

“It is through diversity that discussions, solutions and interventions emerge” (P4)

- Diversity in the classroom contributes to broadening the students’ world view

“You can always learn from things that are more diverse” (P2)

- Diversity in the classroom contributes to developing empathy

“It enables students to put themselves in someone else’s shoes” (P1)

OBSTACLES EXPERIENCED

- Students report invisibility and prejudice in the university experience

“The person who is different must be quiet. They don’t have a voice” (P2)

“No one wanted to talk to her, because she was a totally different person in our midst” (P6)

- Lack of preparation of the academic staff

“Because of a certain professor that spoke inadequate things about my disability I stopped liking the subject” (P3)

SUGGESTED PERSPECTIVES

- It is necessary for universities to adopt a proactive stance towards the diversity – the institutional neutrality reinforces the hostility to the differences

- The State and civil society need to adopt a stance that promotes higher education in the face of narratives against science

“The students support service should have greater visibility” (P1)

“We need to have someone who will listen to us and talk to us” (P7)

“There should be more awareness of how beneficial higher education is and how it can change lives [...]” (P6)

CONCLUSIONS

Brazil has expanded access to higher education and increased diversity through public policies.

Diversity improves learning and social development.

However, structural inequalities persist, especially in elite programs.

But students still face prejudice, invisibility, and lack of institutional support.

CONCLUSIONS

ACCESS

We can conclude that access is not enough: equity requires conditions for student retention and success.

RETENTION

There is a need for institutional policies on faculty training and inclusive communication to better support diverse students.

SUCCESS

Finally, advancing equity in higher education requires sustained and coordinated public policies.

These investments are essential to prevent student dropout and ensure academic success.

Thank you for your attention!

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