

Estimating years lived across racial categories in Brazil*

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Using multistate life tables techniques, Jerônimo Muniz, Aliya Saperstein, and Bernardo Queiroz estimate that about one out of two Brazilians initially classified as Black will be reclassified as Brown, as will almost four in every ten initially classified as White. On average, assuming current life expectancy and transition rates, Brazilians will spend about 30 years classified as White, 40.5 years as Brown, and six years as Black.

Race is a social construct subject to variation not only across historical epochs but also within an individual's lifetime. The fluidity of racial classification has been extensively documented in cases such as the United States and in Latin America (Davenport 2020, Loveman 2014, Nobles 2000), with growing attention to other parts of the world (Saperstein 2025). Despite this recognition, the incorporation of racial fluidity into demographic research has been notably sparse.

In a recent study (Muniz, Saperstein and Queiroz 2024), we estimated race-specific mortality and transition probabilities in Brazil, aiming to capture the variability inherent in racial classification over the life course using multistate life tables. We later slightly revised our estimates, using a technique that more accurately reflects classification fluidity over the life course (Muniz, Saperstein and Queiroz 2026). This note describes our most recent results. Brazil offers an illustrative case because of its long history of official racial classification in the census and major surveys, along with its pronounced racial dynamism (Muniz and Bailey 2022). In the most recent census (2022), the Brazilian population predominantly self-identified as Brown (i.e., as mixed-race or *pardo*, 45.3%), followed by White (43.5%), Black (10.2%), Indigenous (0.8%), and Asian (0.4%). This represents a notable rise of 16% in the number of people identifying as Black and Brown since 2010, while the share of the White population has declined by 3%. Our analysis focuses on changes in classification among these three largest categories.

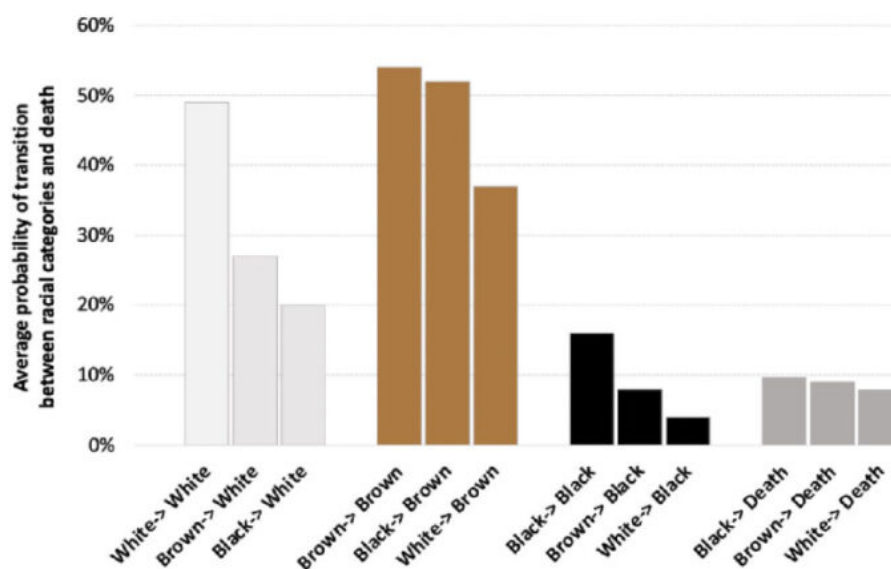
We estimated age and race-specific multistate life tables referring to the second half of the 2010 decade using nine-month longitudinal data from the Continuous National Household

Sample Survey (PNAD-C), conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), and death registration information from the Ministry of Health’s [Mortality Information System](#), alongside census population counts. In PNAD-C, one person provides information for the entire household, so race can be either self-identified or reported by a family member.

Transition to Brown is the most common racial reclassification

Our findings unveil varying degrees of stability in racial classification, with Black categorization exhibiting the least stability, followed by White and Brown. Notably, transitions from Black to Brown emerge as the most common racial shifts, while transitions from White to Black are relatively rare. In particular, Brazilians initially classified as Black are more than twice as likely to be reclassified as Brown than White (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Unweighted averages of age-specific five-year transition probabilities between racial categories and death



Notes: The height of the bars represents the unweighted average of age-specific five-year transition probabilities across all age groups. They are not population-weighted mortality risks and should not be interpreted as annual death probabilities for the Brazilian population as a whole. They compare transition patterns independent of population age composition. Probabilities are grouped by destination state for ease of interpretation, with the total summing to 100% across initial racial categories.

Source: Calculations based on Muniz, Saperstein and Queiroz (2024, 2026). Transition schedules are estimated from PNAD-C longitudinal data collected between 2017 and 2019 and converted from nine-month observations into five-year intervals using matrix diagonalization methods.

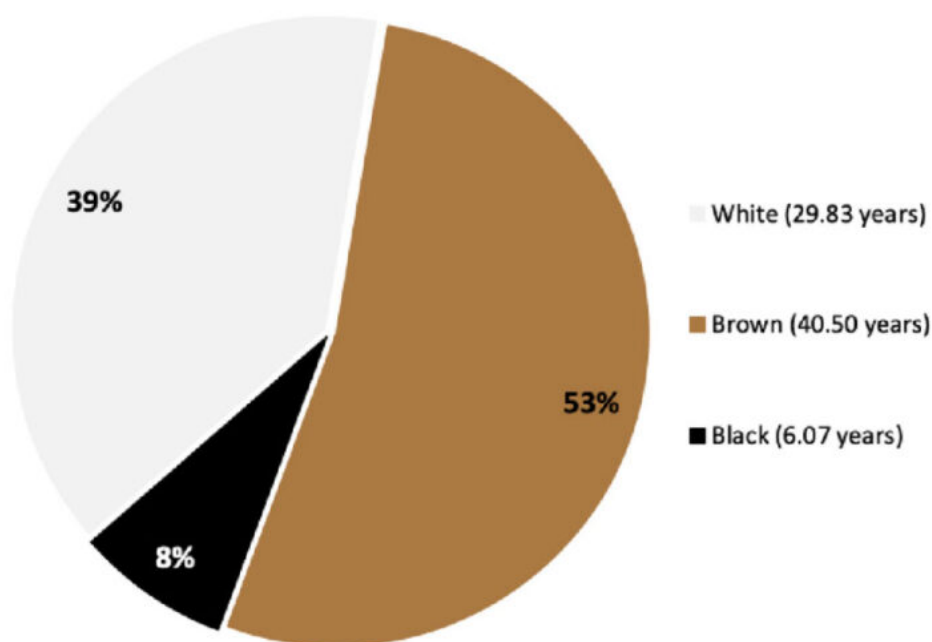
Overall, transitions to the Brown category are the most common pattern of racial shifting. This has contributed to recent increases in the share of *negros* (Blacks + Browns) in Brazil, making it the largest racial population in the country. These racial reclassification patterns likely derive from recent darkening among Brazilians with higher socioeconomic status and incentives from affirmative action policies in universities and the labor market (Miranda 2015, Senkevics 2022).

On average, people will experience 6.07 years in the Black category

According to IBGE, life expectancy at birth was 76.4 years in 2023. Given current patterns of racial fluidity, the results show Brazilians will spend 39% of their lives as White, 53% as Brown, and 8% as Black, regardless of their racial classification at birth. These percentages correspond to about 40.5 years spent in the Brown category, on average, and 6.07 years lived as Black (Figure 2).

These figures emphasize the dynamic nature of racial classification, challenging fixed notions of race and highlighting the importance of contextual and temporal dynamics in shaping the distribution of racial populations.

Figure 2. Proportion of life and number of years spent in different racial categories



Note: Estimates refer to the expected number of years lived in each racial category at age 0, assuming a life table distribution of 76.4 years. The sum of multistate life expectancies – about 71 years for around year 2015 – typically does not equal the total life expectancy of the population because multistate life tables account for transitions between different states within a population, and individuals who change racial classification are assumed to adopt the mortality characteristics of their destination subgroup.

Source: Based on Muniz, Saperstein and Queiroz (2026)

Implications for demographic projections

Racial reclassification has several implications for how populations, identities, and inequalities are defined and measured. When a person's race is reclassified, either by themselves or others, it affects not only the size but also the composition and estimated growth rates of racial populations.

Given the level of racial fluidity in Brazil, in particular, ignoring racial reclassification in population forecasts can have social, political, and economic consequences, from resource allocation to political representation, making it critical to address this issue in demographic studies. Acknowledging temporal racial fluidity, preferably through multistate demographic projections, should be integrated into the practice of demographers and policy planners.

Conclusions

By employing multistate life tables, our study not only illuminates the fluidity of racial classification over the life course but demonstrates avenues for investigating temporal and regional variations in racial dynamics. Future research endeavors should explore the spatiotemporal dimensions of racial fluidity, shedding light on the evolving nature of racial classification and its intersection with broader social phenomena. Multistate life tables offer a powerful tool for revealing the complexities of racial classification, paving the way for more nuanced analyses of race and its implications for social inequality and public policy. More broadly, our research underscores the importance of conceptualizing race as a mutable attribute rather than a static construct. As research continues to unravel the intricacies of race and racism, it becomes increasingly clear that understanding racial fluidity is essential for advancing the comprehension of social stratification and inequality in contemporary societies.

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