



“And What About Us?”: Poverty and Social Inequality from the Perspective of Brazilian Adolescents

Jullyana Silva Rosa,
Guilherme Barbosa Souza,
Luiz Henrique Jardim de Castro,
and Maíra Lopes Almeida

Faculty of Education, Federal University of Goiás, Goiânia,
Brazil

Corresponding author:

Jullyana Silva Rosa, Faculty of Education, Federal University of
Goiás, Goiânia, 74605-050, Brazil.
Email: jullyanarosa@discente.ufg.br

Introduction

Adolescence is a period of intense biological, psychological, and social changes. Socioeconomic variables, considering the territory in which adolescents live, can serve as a risk factor for their full development. Social inequality affects adolescents and can result in social exclusion, as well as bring a range of potential stressors such as scarcity of social resources, violence, weakened family and community relationships, and lack of social and familial support (Oliveira et al., 2020). Social vulnerability during adolescence also implies a lack of guaranteed rights and opportunities in areas such as education, health, and social protection and can expose adolescents, for example, to child labor (Araujo De Moraes et al., 2012).

In the Brazilian context, many young people experience adolescence in conditions of vulnerability due to the country's deep socioeconomic inequalities. About 27.4% of the 216.4 million inhabitants live below the poverty line (IBGE, 2023). The number of children and adolescents in poverty in the country reached 28.8 million in 2023 (UNICEF, 2025). More than half of the population aged 0 to 17 years (55.9%) still faces deprivations in various dimensions, such as income, education, access to information, water, sanitation, housing, and protection against child labor (UNICEF, 2025). Previous studies have shown that non-white adolescents from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, whose parents have low levels of education and live in large families, tend to face greater academic difficulties (Triaca et al., 2020) and mental distress (Barros et al., 2022).

Social inequality not only limits access to essential resources but also restricts opportunities that could foster the development of skills and expand future possibilities (Arruda & Arruda, 2007). These limitations become even more apparent during adolescence, a stage in which socioeconomic inequality stands out as one of the primary obstacles to accessing fundamental rights, such as education, leisure, culture, and health. The precarious living conditions and the

fragility of collective bonds intensify social exclusion, hindering developmental opportunities (Gomes et al., 2020). Moreover, the consumer culture reinforces this inequality by creating pressure to acquire material goods as a form of social recognition (Gomes et al., 2020).

In this way, adolescents still experience the negative expectations placed upon them. These expectations are fueled by a culture marked by stereotypes, prejudices, and stigmas associated with their socioeconomic status (SES). As a result, youth undergo a process of social invisibility that excludes them from public policies, limits their participation, and restricts their access to collective spaces (Arruda & Arruda, 2007).

Adolescence in the national context is shaped by complex dynamics of inequality, especially regarding differences in the maturation and development processes among different races/ethnicities. Furthermore, there is the intersection of racism and sexism, which frequently leads to the early inclusion of non-white girls in low-paying and low-prestige job occupations, such as domestic labor, limiting their educational and developmental opportunities (Carneiro, 2011).

In this context, we follow the proposal of an intersectional analytical model, connecting social inequality to aspects of gender and race/ethnicity oppression (Cho et al., 2013). The intersectional analytical model reveals how oppressions and privileges overlap, making inequalities interconnected. Thus, the adopted model reinforces its political commitment and contributes to understanding systems of oppression (Pereira, 2022).

Given this, the question arises: how does poverty impact adolescence in a country marked by social inequality? To deepen the understanding of how adolescents experience this phase in contexts of social vulnerability, this research included the participation of low-income adolescents residing in a Brazilian city. Data collection was conducted through focus groups using a semi-structured guide and a sociodemographic questionnaire to characterize the participants. The data analysis followed all the steps outlined by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, the research team conducted a thorough reading of the focus group transcript, identifying the main themes and grouping them into three categories: Interrupted Adolescence, Meanings of Social Inequality, and Possible Futures in Poverty.

Results

This research was conducted in partnership with the Youth Training, Advisory, and Research Center (CAJUEIRO), a philanthropic organization based in the state of Goiás, Brazil. This

institution focuses on promoting the rights of children, adolescents, and young people, with an emphasis on civic education, supporting social projects, and producing knowledge about youth. Among its initiatives, CAJUEIRO runs the program "Na Trilha da Universidade" (On the Path to University), which provides educational support and academic guidance to adolescents and young people in vulnerable situations, thereby expanding their opportunities for access to higher education.

In Brazil, higher education can be accessed privately or through public, tuition-free universities. Access to public and free universities, at a national level, primarily occurs through entrance exams, whether nationwide, regional or in the form of specific entrance exams administered by individual universities. The scores obtained in these exams are crucial for gaining access to these opportunities.

Historically, universities have been occupied by families from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, reflecting and deepening social and economic inequalities. This is because students from higher SES families who attended private basic education generally achieved higher scores. As a result, access to universities has been dominated by wealthier students who occupy the majority of spots in public, free universities (Trevisol & Nierotka, 2016).

There has been an attempt to democratize higher education in recent years through policies such as financing and scholarship programs for access to the private higher education system. Additionally, the Quotas Law (Law No. 12.711/2012) was created, a public policy that reserves spots in federal public universities and institutes for students from public schools, aiming to reduce inequalities in access to higher education. Of the total spots available, 50% are reserved for students who completed their entire high school education in the public school system, leading to a significant increase in enrollments. However, these initiatives remain insufficient in the face of the large demand from low-income populations.

Preparatory courses, such as CAJUEIRO's "Na Trilha da Universidade," play a critical role in preparing students for entrance exams to higher education, particularly for public universities. Through the strategic selection of exam content and specialized pedagogical support, these courses assist young people in vulnerable situations in preparing for exams, thus increasing their chances of accessing public and free higher education.

In the context of this research, 11 adolescents participated, all of whom were students in the "Na Trilha da Universidade" program. The selection of participants was based on criteria of representativeness of the target population served by the organization, ensuring diversity of perspectives and relevance of the collected data. All participants are 17 years old, and to preserve their identities, their names were replaced with pseudonyms. Among them, seven identify as non-white, and three as white. In terms of socioeconomic status, all come from families with an income ranging from one to three minimum wages. The group consisted of nine women and three men, all of whom had completed elementary school. The central themes of the discussions will be presented next.

Interrupted Adolescence

For the research participants, adolescence can be a time of self-discovery and identity development, as well as a period filled with external pressures and the confusion of

being neither an adult nor a child. In this sense, the thematic category "interrupted adolescence" describes the phenomenon where young people are forced to abandon or postpone important aspects of this stage, primarily the positive ones, due to socioeconomic conditions. Many young people describe being deprived of leisure, socialization, and self-discovery due to the need to work, which increases the sense of overload and pressure. One participant's statement illustrates this reality: *"We end up losing our adolescence because we have to be adults, because we have to do things, we have to help at home [. . .]. And we end up losing our adolescence because we don't go out, we don't hang out, we don't have fun."* (A1).

Adolescents face multiple frustrated expectations that stem from an idealization of how adolescence should be. They collectively express indignation over the interruption of one of the stages of their lives. The group agrees that financial conditions lead to a "shortened adolescence." This situation is understood by all as intrinsic to their reality, and their frustration is directed toward societal stratification and poverty. One adolescent exclaims: *"We're becoming adults too quickly; instead of being adolescents, we're not adolescents anymore, that's it!"* (A3). Thus, the interruption of adolescence and the consequent premature entry into adulthood, imposed by the circumstances of social vulnerability, are pivotal experiences that affect the trajectories of these young people.

Meanings of Social Inequality

From the reflections on adolescence, it was observed that adolescents perceive the social reality as unjust due to social inequality. In this sense, the category "meanings of social inequality" was developed to deepen the understanding of this aspect reported by the youth. In their perspectives, social inequality is understood as a "division of layers, which many people say today is not as apparent, but as time passes, it's becoming more and more apparent" (A2) or even as a scenario where *"the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer"* (A4).

Moreover, the perception of poverty is something that structures the experience of the participants from childhood onward, meaning that *"those who are born with a lower financial condition don't discover it, we are born and already know it's different, and we only detect the problem, we ask ourselves why, 'oh, why is that person like that?', 'what's wrong with that?', 'why isn't everyone the same?', 'what happens?', we who are born like this, we already know, the only difference between us and them is that we ask ourselves and look for the problem, and they don't, they don't care"* (A4).

The perception of these contradictions comes from living with different realities. In this way, the frustration and sense of powerlessness in the face of social stratification often emerge when comparing their limited opportunities with those of other young people who have similar desires and feelings but many more possibilities.

Possible Futures in Poverty

The final thematic category, "Possible Futures in Poverty," addresses the adolescents' plans and the concrete feasibility of their realization. Although they maintain hope for a better future through education, dedicating their Saturdays to preparatory courses for university, they face the uncertainties



imposed by social inequality. This reality directly affects their daily lives, making their opportunities increasingly limited.

Thus, it was possible to observe a sense of hopelessness in the statements of some youth. For example, when asked what adolescence is, one participant responds: *"It's the time when only adolescents suffer, when they get screwed"* (A6). Another adolescent points out: *"I think that we who don't have good finances, we have two options, either we work or we work"* (A2). This same adolescent also adds: *"You're so tired, both mentally and physically, so we no longer have the balance of, let's say, relaxing, having fun, working, and studying; it doesn't exist. It's either work and school, and that's it, or just work."* (A2).

The decision-making processes of these adolescents regarding their futures are influenced by multiple layers that interact and often conflict. On the one hand, there is the desire for achievement, which may be associated with vocations, personal interests, and subjective projections about an idealized life. Socioeconomic conditions thus become one of the main factors that either restrict or broaden the horizon of choices, determining access to opportunities and even the ability to imagine other possible futures.

Furthermore, one participant emphasizes: *"We who are poor have to fight a lot to get into a [federal university]"* (A2), highlighting that entering a public university is a difficult challenge. The verb "fight" expresses the perception that, for those in poverty, access to public university demands a disproportionate effort compared to adolescents who enjoy good conditions in adolescence, such as access to leisure, health, and quality education throughout childhood.

Given these restrictions, the possible futures for vulnerable adolescents imply the decision to work and study, the mediation of career choice influenced primarily by financial returns, and the heavy pressure of not studying or working enough. As a result, persevering and trying to focus solely on studies becomes an act of resistance, continuing to "fight" despite the social and economic context.

Discussion

The participants of this study reflect on the limitations imposed by poverty in their lives, conceptualizing poverty not only as a social inequality but also as a state of inertia reinforced by the perpetuation of inequalities on an ever-growing scale. Considering this reality, their future possibilities become restricted and strongly conditioned by financial factors, leading many to forgo a full adolescence in order to work prematurely and assume economic responsibilities at home while pursuing the dream of entering a university.

The experiences shared in this study highlight how social inequality in the Brazilian context impacts the lived experience of adolescence. The pressure to enter the labor market prematurely aligns with data from Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE) (2023), which warns of the lack of guaranteed rights for youth. Moreover, the composition of our sample, predominantly composed of Black and Brown adolescents, reinforces the intersectionality of multiple vulnerabilities, showing how socioeconomic and racial factors deepen inequalities and shape the experience of growing up and becoming an adult in this context.

The data gathered in this study converge with previous research (Arruda & Arruda, 2007; Gomes et al., 2020; Rizzo

& Chamon, 2010), reinforcing the idea that the experience of poverty imposes significant harm on human formation and development, especially considering your race and gender. Adolescence understood as a singular and decisive period in the construction of identity, reveals itself as a privilege shaped by issues of socioeconomic status, gender, and race-ethnicity. However, for many adolescents in vulnerable situations, this ideal remains out of reach, intensifying frustrations and challenges.

Regarding the specific relationship between work and poverty in adolescence, unlike the study by Rizzo and Chamon (2010), our participants do not recognize work as an effective mechanism for addressing social inequality. This can be explained by the fact that the participants in this study are part of a group that invests in education as the primary means of social ascension. Thus, the difficult balance between work and study leads to the prioritization of education despite intense internal and external pressures. In this way, an unequal struggle persists, where the national incentives aimed at democratizing access to higher education are insufficient to guarantee these adolescents' access to and retention in universities, hindering their social and economic ascension.

The majority of the sample in this study is composed of cisgender female adolescents. As Carneiro (2011) points out, women, especially racialized women, face disproportionately greater workloads shaped by inequality. In this sense, the relationship between adolescence and various social pressures, with an emphasis on the "interrupted adolescence" context, cannot be dissociated from the factors of gender and race oppression, which intersect with economic inequality and intensify the vulnerabilities faced by our participants.

This intersectional perspective emphasizes the need to broaden the understanding of social inequality, which is often reduced to economic resources. However, this inequality is directly linked to the barriers that hinder the social ascension of non-white women. As a result, this affects their future plans and their relationship with work, which may be experienced as a form of resistance to the imposition and pressure for early labor. For these young women, remaining in school becomes an act of resistance; as they said, "they are struggling."

In light of this scenario, it is urgent to expand incentives for the entry and retention of vulnerable adolescents in tuition-free universities. However, this measure is insufficient, serving merely as a temporary solution to the complexity of social inequality among youth. To ensure full and equitable development, it is also essential to promote a fairer redistribution of socially produced wealth, ensuring not only access to education but also leisure and experiences that enable a fully lived adolescence, contributing to a fairer and more inclusive social development.

This study presents certain limitations, including the lack of a comparison between the experience of adolescence in different socioeconomic and racial contexts, as well as the absence of a deeper analysis of gender implications. These intersections make the understanding of this process even more complex. Therefore, it is suggested that future research explore comparisons between different adolescent groups, investigating how factors such as social class, race, and gender influence the lived experience of adolescence. The conclusion that social pressures are significantly greater for adolescents in poverty, considering race and gender, underscores the urgency of public policies that effectively guarantee and protect the rights of youth.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Araujo De Moraes, N., Raffaelli, M., & Koller, S. H. (2012). Adolescentes em situação de vulnerabilidade social e o continuum risco-proteção (Adolescents in situations of social vulnerability and the risk-protection continuum). *Avances en Psicología Latinoamericana*, 30(1), 118–136.
- Arruda, B. K. G. de, & Arruda, I. K. G. de. (2007). Pobreza e desenvolvimento humano (Poverty and human development). *Revista Brasileira de Saúde Materno Infantil*, 7, 457–460. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1519-38292007000400013>
- Barros, M. B. de A., Lima, M. G., Malta, D. C., Azevedo, R. C. S. de, Fehlberg, B. K., Souza Júnior, P. R. B. de, Azevedo, L. O., Machado, Í. E., Gomes, C. S., Romero, D. E., Damacena, G. N., Werneck, A. O., Silva, D. R. P. da, Almeida, W. da S. de, & Szwarcwald, C. L. (2022). Mental health of Brazilian adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychiatry Research Communications*, 2(1), 100015. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psycom.2021.100015>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Carneiro, S. (2011). *Racismo, sexismo e desigualdade no Brasil*. Selo Negro.
- Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs*, 38(4), 785–810. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669608>
- Gomes, A. H., Toni, K. A. da S. de, & Brito, S. L. dos S. de. (2020). O trabalho de educadoras sociais: Adolescências e desigualdade social (The work of social educators: adolescence and social inequality). *Humanidades & Inovação*, 7(6), Article 6.
- Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. (2023). *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios Contínua: Indicadores multidimensionais (National Survey by Continuous Household Sample: Multidimensional Indicators)*. <https://www.ibge.gov.br/estatisticas/sociais/trabalho/17270-pnad-continua.html>
- Oliveira, P. C. de, Reis, M. L., Vandenbergh, L., Souza, M. M. de, & Medeiros, M. (2020). “Sobrevivendo”: Vulnerabilidade social vivenciada por adolescentes em uma periferia urbana (‘Surviving’: Social vulnerability experienced by adolescents in an urban periphery). *Interface - Comunicação, Saúde, Educação*, 24, e190813. <https://doi.org/10.1590/Interface.190813>
- Pereira, B. C. J. (2022). Sobre usos e possibilidades da interseccionalidade (On uses and possibilities of intersectionality). *Civitas - Revista de Ciências Sociais*, 21(3), 445–454. <https://doi.org/10.15448/1984-7289.2021.3.40551>
- Rizzo, C. B. da S., & Chamon, E. M. Q. de O. (2010). O sentido do trabalho para o adolescente trabalhador (The meaning of work for the adolescent worker). *Trabalho, Educação e Saúde*, 8, 407–417. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1981-77462010000300004>
- Trevisol, J. V., & Nierotka, R. L. (2016). Os jovens das camadas populares na universidade pública: Acesso e permanência (Young people from lower social classes in public universities: Access and retention). *Revista Katálysis*, 19, 22–32. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1414-49802016.00100003>
- Triaca, L. M., dos Santos, A. M. A., & Tejada, C. A. O. (2020). Socioeconomic inequalities in obesity in Brazil. *Economics & Human Biology*, 39, 100906. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ehb.2020.100906>
- UNICEF (2025, January 16). *Pobreza multidimensional na infância e adolescência no Brasil – 2017 a 2023 (Multidimensional poverty in childhood and adolescence in Brazil 2017 to 2023)*. <https://www.unicef.org/brazil/relatorios/pobreza-multidimensional-na-infancia-e-adolescencia-no-brasil-2017-2023>