

WHAT EYES CAN'T SEE BUT HEARTS CAN FEEL: THE EFFECTS OF FOOD PANTRIES AND OTHER POLICIES ON ACCESS TO RIGHTS IN THE UNITED STATES AND IN BRAZIL

O QUE OS OLHOS NÃO PODEM VER, MAS OS CORAÇÕES PODEM SENTIR: OS EFEITOS DOS *FOOD PANTRIES* E OUTRAS POLÍTICAS NO ACESSO A DIREITOS NOS ESTADOS UNIDOS E NO BRASIL

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of food pantries, food banks, and public and private policies in addressing food insecurity and poverty in the United States—focusing on the state of Illinois—and Brazil. Grounded in Judith Butler's theory of vulnerability and precarity, the study explores how these initiatives not only alleviate hunger but also shape individuals' autonomy and access to other fundamental rights. The primary objective is to assess the impact of these strategies on poverty reduction and social justice. To this end, the study analyzes the operations of food banks and food pantries in the U.S. and evaluates public and private policies in Brazil, including the Food Acquisition Program, Bolsa Família, and Zero Hunger Institute. The research employs a deductive approach and a mixed-methods design, integrating documentary sources, institutional reports, and statistical data. Findings indicate that while these initiatives play a crucial role in immediate hunger relief, they face structural challenges. The study underscores the need to strengthen partnerships with the private sector and expand their integration into a broader human rights framework, particularly in vulnerable and underserved areas.

KEYWORDS

Food security. Poverty. Social justice. Precarity. Autonomy.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa o papel dos *food pantries*, bancos de alimentos e políticas governamentais e privadas no combate à insegurança alimentar e à pobreza nos Estados Unidos—com foco no estado de Illinois—e no Brasil. Fundamentado na teoria de Judith Butler sobre vulnerabilidade e precariedade, o estudo examina como essas iniciativas não apenas aliviam a fome, mas também influenciam a autonomia dos indivíduos e o acesso a outros direitos essenciais. O objetivo geral é avaliar o impacto dessas estratégias na mitigação da pobreza e na promoção da justiça social. Para isso, são analisadas as operações dos bancos de alimentos e *food pantries* nos EUA, bem como políticas públicas e privadas no Brasil, incluindo o Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos, Bolsa Família e Instituto Fome Zero. A pesquisa utiliza uma abordagem dedutiva e métodos mistos, integrando fontes documentais, relatórios institucionais e dados estatísticos. Os resultados indicam que essas iniciativas desempenham um papel fundamental no alívio imediato da fome, mas enfrentam desafios estruturais. O estudo destaca a necessidade de fortalecer parcerias com o setor privado e ampliar sua integração a um arcabouço de direitos humanos, especialmente em áreas vulneráveis e desassistidas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Segurança alimentar. Pobreza. Justiça social. Precariedade. Autonomia.

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is an enduring global issue that affects millions of individuals across various contexts, presenting profound challenges to social equity and individual well-being. Despite its pervasive nature, it should not deter efforts to address its root causes and consequences. International organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), along with national bodies and local stakeholders in both the United States and Brazil, actively engage in combating this crisis (United Nations, 2020, 2021, 2025a, 2025b).

This article examines various initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty, with a particular focus on food pantries and food banks in the United States, as well as social projects and policies in Brazil, including Casa Viver in Costa Barros, Rio de Janeiro. It is worth mentioning that some of the information presented here came from informal participant observation periods and interviews and all of it is the free expression of opinion of the authors about the different public and private policies and its connections to the access to rights. By highlighting the measures undertaken by individuals, private entities, and governmental organizations, this study seeks to expand the discourse on poverty beyond the mere alleviation of hunger. Recognizing poverty as a multifaceted issue allows for a more nuanced understanding of its effects and underscores the necessity of implementing diverse and

comprehensive solutions.

Furthermore, this study aims to foster critical discussions on the prejudices embedded within poverty reduction initiatives and to encourage stakeholders to draw insights from different socio-economic realities. Such exchanges have the potential to contribute to the development of more effective policies capable of transforming the persistent nature of poverty into a future of greater opportunity. The selection of the United States and Brazil as case studies is justified by their distinct institutional and policy approaches to addressing food insecurity and poverty.

As one of the world's largest economies, the United States has developed a well-established network of food banks and pantries, largely supported by private initiatives, philanthropic organizations, and corporate partnerships. In contrast, Brazil has implemented a series of public policies and government-led social programs, such as Bolsa Família and the Food Acquisition Program, which directly target poverty reduction and food security in addition to private initiatives as Casa Viver. The initiatives chosen in both countries were selected due to the researchers' close connection to their operations and to the theoretical and deontological background that seems to be present in both that is to fight poverty through fighting hunger and malnutrition. By analyzing these two countries, the study offers a comparative perspective on how different socio-political frameworks shape food assistance mechanisms and their broader implications for human rights and social justice.

The parameters of analysis include the structure and operational strategies of food distribution programs in both countries, the legal and policy frameworks governing food security, and the extent to which these measures promote autonomy and access to fundamental rights. In this work it will also be brought information about the operation of the food pantries and food banks that was gathered in part through a literature review and also through participant observation and interviews done at the Stone Creek Food Pantry, Wesley Food Pantry and the Eastern Illinois Food bank in the State of Illinois in the U.S. during the years of 2021-2023 and at Casa Viver and other private food distribution projects in Brazil around 2018-2023. The study also considers historical and socio-economic factors that influence the development of food assistance policies, including income inequality, social welfare systems, and governmental involvement. This comparative approach not only highlights the strengths and limitations of each model but also contributes to a broader discussion on the role of food security in reinforcing or mitigating structural vulnerabilities within different legal and economic contexts.

In this context, Judith Butler's (2015, 2017, 2018, 2019) theoretical framework on vulnerability serves as a crucial lens through which to analyze the indirect effects of food distribution policies, such as those implemented by food pantries, in mitigating the consequences of poverty.

Butler argues that vulnerability, particularly in relation to gender, can serve as a catalyst for resistance and activism. She explores how precarious conditions emerge from unequal access to rights and the differential distribution of vulnerability, which exposes certain populations to heightened risks of violence and marginalization.

This unequal allocation of risk often renders individuals as “less than subjects of rights,” or even as “abject” (Butler, 2019, p. 52, translation ours). In examining food insecurity and poverty, this perspective is essential for understanding how social hierarchies are maintained, and how the operations of food banks and pantries intersect with broader social justice issues. Thus, this paper will delve into the core concepts essential to understanding Butler’s (2015, 2017, 2018, 2019) perspective and formulate a thesis regarding a crucial platform of struggle that transcends fragility and mere political strategy. Analyzing how vulnerabilities are exacerbated by power structures that exploit people’s innate desire for life is vital.

Additionally, the term “precarity” will aid in comprehending how humanity cannot survive or persist without reliance on a sustainable environment, social rationality, and economic structures that underpin interdependence (Butler, 2015). This framework will facilitate the identification of various forms of “unviability” in life. Ultimately, Butler’s (2015) exploration of vulnerability, power dynamics, and social inequality provides a robust theoretical foundation for examining the hidden struggles within the concept of autonomy, particularly as they relate to the indirect effects of food distribution policies in the ongoing fight against poverty.

The first section will explore the multifaceted nature of poverty, emphasizing that it cannot be understood through a single lens or measure. It will begin by defining poverty not merely as a lack of financial resources but as a complex interplay of social, economic, and political factors that contribute to individuals’ and communities’ marginalization. By analyzing case studies from the United States and Brazil, this study will illustrate the diverse ways in which poverty manifests across different socio-economic contexts. Additionally, it will emphasize the importance of adopting holistic strategies that target the underlying causes of poverty rather than merely addressing its symptoms.

In the second section, the analysis will turn to the direct impact of poverty on access to essential services in the United States and in Brazil, with a particular focus on healthcare, education, and food security. Statistical data and qualitative research findings that reveal the barriers faced by low-income populations in accessing these vital resources will be examined. The analysis will delve into the systemic inequalities that perpetuate this cycle of disadvantage, such as the geographical disparities in service availability and the stigma associated with seeking assistance. Furthermore, the role of food pantries and food banks as crucial interventions in alleviating food insecurity will be

discussed, while also addressing their limitations in providing sustainable solutions. This section aims to shed light on the interconnectedness of poverty and service access, arguing that improving access to services is essential for breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting social equity having Judith Butler's precarity concept as the theoretical background.

The third section will critically examine the concept of precarity and its relationship to social inequalities, emphasizing the invisible struggles faced by marginalized populations. Building on Butler's framework, how different dimensions of identity—such as gender, race, class, and sexuality—intersect to create unique challenges that hinder individuals' autonomy will be explored. Additionally, how food insecurity exacerbates these struggles will be analyzed, as individuals lacking basic needs are often stripped of their capacity to assert their rights and make choices. By unveiling these hidden struggles, this section will argue for a more nuanced understanding of autonomy that considers the broader social and structural contexts in which individuals operate, ultimately advocating for policies that address these intertwined issues to foster genuine empowerment.

1 MULTIDIMENSIONAL POVERTY AND FOOD SECURITY: GLOBAL INITIATIVES AND LEGAL PERSPECTIVES

The United Nations (2025a) defines poverty as “more than the lack of income and productive resources to ensure sustainable livelihoods. Its manifestations include hunger and malnutrition, limited access to education and other basic services, social discrimination and exclusion, as well as the lack of participation in decision-making.” This definition reflects the multidimensional issue that poverty is and in this work the focus will be on the aspects of hunger and malnutrition.

Poverty as a complex issue is also brought at Amartya Sen's (1999) *Development as Freedom* book. Amartya Sen's “capability approach” emphasizes that poverty should be understood not merely as a lack of income but as a deprivation of essential freedoms and capabilities required to lead a life one values. According to Sen (1999), true development occurs when individuals are empowered to access education, healthcare, and social participation, reinforcing that poverty is deeply tied to the denial of fundamental rights. A possible conclusion then can be that initiatives focused on combating poverty, and its consequences contribute to the feasibility of other rights.

To address poverty and its effects, a range of global approaches have been implemented. Among these it is worth mentioning the United Nations (2023, 2025b) establishing as its Sustainable Development Goal 1 to eliminate poverty in all its forms by 2030. This choice made by the organization reveals the importance that solving this issue has. To accomplish this first goal along

with the definition of the objective the United Nations (2025a) also presents some key strategies including ensuring access to social protection systems, economic resources, and improving the availability of essential services.

Moved by the same goals as the UN, the World Bank created Poverty Reduction Strategies through which it offers support to nations through programs that enhance healthcare access, stimulate economic growth, and improve the availability of social services (World Bank Group, 2023a). The International Monetary Fund (2023) also has a schedule to fight this globally known issue and one of the tools used is providing financial assistance to low-income nations, aiming to foster sustainable economic growth and reduce poverty.

Hunger and malnutrition remain central issues in the fight against global poverty. The United Nations has also established the goal of achieving food security, improving nutrition, and sustainable agriculture. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2021), approximately one in ten people worldwide suffer from hunger, while one in three lacks access to adequate food.

In this context, understanding the interconnected concepts of food insecurity and hunger is crucial. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines that

[...] food insecurity occurs when households are unable to acquire adequate food because they have insufficient money and other resources. Food insecurity is measured at the household level and reflects limited access to food. This makes it different from hunger, which is a physiological condition experienced by an individual. The USDA does not measure hunger in the U.S., instead, the agency sees it as a consequence of people having limited access to food (Caspi, 2021).

While the USDA's definitions provide a framework for understanding food-related hardships, they overlook important nuances. The reliance on inexpensive, low-nutrient food or discarded food from stores and restaurants remains largely unaccounted for. Actions addressing food insecurity must differentiate between immediate relief measures and sustainable solutions that address underlying socio-economic factors such as employment, race/ethnicity, and disability if they want to produce a lasting and not temporary effect.

The Brazilian Federal Constitution (Brasil, 2025a) recognizes in its Article VI education, health and food as social rights, reinforcing the commitment to ensuring access to nutritious food without compromising other basic needs and providing legal background to Programa Fome Zero (Zero Hunger Program) and other initiatives (Manifesto [...], 2020). In Brazil, a proactive approach has been adopted through both public and private initiatives. Notably, the Instituto Fome Zero (Zero Hunger Institute), a private entity established in 2020 by activists, scholars, and researchers,

advocates for the right to adequate food (Manifesto [...], 2020). Drawing inspiration from the earlier government-led Programa Fome Zero, the institute promotes food security policies, legal frameworks, and sustainable agricultural practices.

The country has implemented various social programs and initiatives over the years. One of the most well-known is Bolsa Família. It consists of a conditional cash transfer program that provides financial aid to low-income families. This program has helped lift millions out of extreme poverty and provided basic support for many (Brasil, 2025b). It could be seen as simply getting material resources to the families so their right to food is safeguarded to some extent, but its impact goes beyond that because it also influences other rights like the right to education and the right to health. The Bolsa Família recipients need to prove that the children are attending school to continue in the program, in case of pregnant women they need to do the necessary pregnancy exams and the vaccinations need to be up to date so beyond offering a solution to an immediate need as avoiding struggles with hunger and food insecurity this policy influences the access to other rights in the long term (Brasil, 2025c).

Brazil is not the only country where action has been taken to fight poverty, the United States has also its experience. Food banks and food pantries have emerged as essential resources in combating hunger in the country (Winkler *et al.*, 2022). Food pantries can be seen as an immediate response to the lack of access to basic resources that Sen (1999) discusses. They provide food to those in need, addressing a direct aspect of poverty—hunger. Applying Sen’s framework, food pantries are important in addressing the capability deprivation of those who cannot afford sufficient and nutritious food. However, food pantries alone are not a solution to the broader issues of freedom deprivation that Sen (1999) emphasizes. There is a need for structural changes that go beyond charity, such as providing access to education, healthcare, employment, and fair economic systems along with the food banks and food pantries.

Food banks act as centralized warehouses that collect and distribute food to community partners such as nonprofits, nutrition programs, and pantries. These partners then provide food directly to individuals and families in need. Unlike food banks, food pantries serve as direct distribution points for clients, often resembling grocery stores or drive-through services to facilitate accessibility (What [...], 2021).

Food banks gather their supplies from partnerships with grocery stores, corporations, and individual donors. Food pantries, on the other hand, operate independently but often rely on food banks to obtain discounted food supplies. The contents of food banks and pantries vary, often depending on donations; however, staple foods such as rice, bread, and pasta tend to be consistently

available (What [...], 2021).

Notably, the food pantries observed in the U.S. provide assistance without income verification or citizenship requirements, ensuring that anyone in need can receive support without judgment or discrimination. The food pantries seem to be democratic in the distribution of the resources it collects not focusing on who they think lacks something but in serving whoever goes to them for help.

The food pantries and food banks keep expanding their area of reach according to the data collected during the interviews and participant observation done at the Eastern Illinois Food bank and at the food pantries. Innovative approaches like mobile pantries further enhance accessibility by delivering pre-packaged food directly to underserved areas, particularly in regions with limited access to traditional food distribution points or high populations of elderly and disabled individuals.

While food banks and pantries play a crucial role in alleviating immediate hunger, their impact extends into the realm of social recognition and human dignity. Food security is not merely about ensuring that a meal is available—it reflects the deeper structures of societal support and vulnerability. Judith Butler's (2019) work on precarity highlights the importance of reconceptualizing food insecurity as part of a broader spectrum of social inequities that determine who is valued and whose suffering is acknowledged. In this light, the provision of food becomes an act of resistance against the systemic forces that marginalize certain populations, reinforcing the idea that meeting basic nutritional needs is integral to maintaining one's autonomy and capacity for civic participation.

Moreover, this perspective underscores the notion that food security is foundational to the broader struggle for human rights. When individuals lack reliable access to food, their ability to engage in social, political, and economic life is severely compromised, effectively limiting their agency. Butler's (2019) analysis suggests that the conditions under which food is provided—or withheld—are deeply entwined with the mechanisms of state power and social control. Thus, policies aimed at improving food security should not be limited to short-term relief but must also address the structural determinants of vulnerability. This holistic approach not only supports immediate survival but also fosters the long-term empowerment of individuals, enabling them to participate fully in society and assert their rights as autonomous beings.

Efforts by food banks and pantries extend beyond basic sustenance. Special initiatives such as distributing holiday meals, desserts, and festive items aim to restore a sense of dignity and joy among those facing food insecurity. This approach can be associated with insights from Mullainathan and Shafir's (2013) work *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much*, which emphasizes how limited resources can dominate individuals' mental focus, inhibiting their ability to pursue other

opportunities. Taking care of basic needs that go beyond what regular approaches do is trying to make it possible for individuals to overcome the scarcity mindset and then be able to shift their energies to investing in long-term plans.

Given that the United States has more monetary resources than Brazil (World Bank Group, 2023b), it is noticed stricter eligibility criteria in Brazil, as for example, it is common in the country to check if the costumers are at social risk as a means to choose who gets the assistance and who doesn't (Tenuta *et al.*, 2021). The U.S. model emphasizes inclusivity, ensuring that all individuals that identify themselves as struggling with food insecurity can access resources without barriers. On the other hand, in Brazil, the goal seems to be to help those that need more and not everyone since the amount of supplies are not enough for everyone (Tenuta *et al.*, 2021).

Food insecurity rates in the United States remain a pressing concern. In 2021, 11.6% of the U.S. population experienced poverty (Creamer *et al.*, 2022). By 2022, one in eight Americans faced food insecurity, with Illinois alone reporting over one million residents, including more than 320,000 children, in this situation (Feeding America, 2022). In Champaign County, Illinois, 20% of the population faces food insecurity, significantly exceeding the state's average of 9.6% (Feeding America, 2022).

While long-term strategies such as economic reform and employment growth are vital for sustainable change, strengthening food pantry services offers a practical and immediate means of addressing hunger and food insecurity. By improving efficiency, expanding outreach, and encouraging collaboration between public and private sectors, food distribution programs can effectively reduce food insecurity and support vulnerable populations.

As Nelson Mandela (1995) famously stated, "Poverty is man-made and can be removed by the actions of human beings." Achieving lasting change requires a balanced approach—one that integrates government intervention with proactive community-driven initiatives to ensure that essential resources reach those in need while fostering sustainable solutions for the future.

2 POVERTY, PRECARIETY, AND SOCIAL POLICY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITIES IN THE U.S. AND BRAZIL

According to the World Bank, approximately 700 million people worldwide were living in extreme poverty as of 2024, representing 8.5% of the global population (World Bank Group, 2024). In the United States, the Census Bureau reported that in 2023, the official poverty rate was 11.1%, equating to 36.8 million individuals living in poverty (United States, 2024a). If considered the 2024

numbers of each U.S. state's population, the amount of poor people in the U.S. is near the number of inhabitants of the most populated state in the country that is California (39,431,263), is higher than the population of Texas (31,290,831) and higher than three times the population of Illinois, state where part of the participant observation and the interviews were conducted (12,710,158) (United States, 2024b).

In 2024, through the analysis of data of 2023, the IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) affirmed that 59 million people were in poverty and 9.5 million were in extreme poverty, which means that, at the time around, 27.4% of the country's population was considered poor and 4.4% was found in extreme poverty (Bello, 2024).

Judith Butler's (2019) concept of precarity offers a profound framework for understanding the social vulnerabilities that arise from economic insecurity, particularly in relation to poverty and food insecurity that the people who are inserted in the data above deal with. Butler's theory highlights how certain populations are disproportionately exposed to social and economic risks, making their very existence more fragile and uncertain. This notion of precarity intersects closely with the realities faced by those reliant on food pantries and other forms of aid.

Precarity, as Butler (2019) defines it, refers to the condition in which individuals or groups are denied access to social and economic support systems that ensure their well-being. This state is not merely an unfortunate side effect of poverty; rather, it is actively produced through political, economic, and social structures that marginalize certain populations. People living in precarity often experience unstable employment, lack of healthcare, minimal access to housing, and barriers to education conditions that are side by side with food insecurity.

At a study from the Center for Poverty Research, Director Ann Huff Stevens (2013) found that in the U.S. there is a connection between the time a person spends in poverty and the probability that they will get out of it. Among the study's key findings, it is seen that an increased time spent in poverty is associated with lower chances an individual will have to exit poverty, which goes from 56% after one year in poverty to 13% for those in poverty for seven or more years (Stevens, 2013). So, if people do not work to solve it now with all the tools (including legal frameworks) available, the poor are probably going to keep being deprived of a variety of rights.

Poverty is a layered problem and carries within itself many different consequences. If one is asked what the main problem caused by poverty is, one might say lack of money to buy food or any other fundamental items. This answer is not wrong but does not encompass the multitude of this social, political, and economic problem and the variety of consequences that come from it. This idea is defended by Blessing Gweshengwe and Noor Hasharina Hassan (2020) when they explained about

the fundamentals of poverty:

The characteristics of poverty have significant implications for, and should therefore be taken into consideration in, poverty analysis. The language of poverty reveals the dimensions and severity of poverty faced by a given community. It also enables poverty analysts to uphold the dignity of people and minimize misconceptions about poverty in a society. Lastly, the language of poverty provides an understanding of the context-sensitive meaning of poverty. The multidimensional and complex nature of poverty guides in the selection of an appropriate poverty worldview for analyzing poverty.

In the U.S. and in Brazil, it is possible to find different examples of the previous affirmation about the complexity of the definition and consequences of poverty. Poverty goes beyond the lack of income and can be manifested in a way that is more than someone not having what to eat in a day but can steal all the energy and resources that someone could be putting into building a better future or even fighting for their own rights in the present.

An example of this perspective is found in Champaign County, Illinois. The food pantries and the Eastern Illinois Food Bank that serve the area have helped those in extreme poverty to survive one more day, but they have also enabled college students to have a chance to pursue their studies. By hearing different testimonies, it became clear that not all families that send students to the universities have all the means to keep them there. A college degree in the United States is getting more and more expensive (CollegeBoard, 2023) and the reality by hearing people is that when a baby is born the parents start saving money and hope their kids have a good performance at school or at a sport to compete for scholarships.

Even with all the effort from families and students, sometimes the budget is not enough and being able to turn to food pantries to save in the expenses with food and other items are many times what makes possible for the family to pay all the bills and keep the student at the university. The food pantries and food banks are here going beyond overcoming hunger, they are actually enabling access to higher education by removing some of the burden from the students and their families.

Another topic that is worth mentioning is the importance of food pantries and food banks to guarantee the right to health in the U.S. and to think if that would be a valuable approach in Brazil given the current legal framework. It is important to remember that the right to quality health is safeguarded at the Article 196 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution that affirms that “Health is everyone’s right and a duty of the State, guaranteed through social and economic policies that aim to reduce the risk of disease and other health problems and the universal and equal access to actions and services for its promotion, protection and recovery” (Brasil, 2025a, translation ours).

A study found out that in the U.S. “traditional risk factors like hypertension, diabetes and smoking account for less than half of the excess burden of heart attacks and strokes among poorer

Americans” (Hamad *et al.*, 2020). They defend that sixty to seventy percent of the excess is attributable directly to other aspects of living in poverty:

1.3 million poor Americans who were 35 years old in 2015, 250,000 of them are likely to develop heart disease before they turn 65. That is almost twice the rate that would be anticipated in the higher-income group. Erasing the effects of traditional risk factors including smoking and obesity revealed that 70% of the excess burden of heart disease on this poorer cohort is due to poverty and its associated risks. In an analysis of Americans aged 35-64 right now, the same approach attributed 60% of the excess burden of heart disease to poverty (Hamad *et al.*, 2020).

Dr. Hamad, a member of the team that developed the study said that “We know as doctors that hypertension, for example, is more common in low-income communities” (Hamad [2020?] *apud* Scott, 2020). She also said that

[w]hen we prescribe and monitor appropriate blood pressure medications for our lower-income patients, we might feel we've done what we can do. But this study shows that if we really want to improve the health of our patients, we have to integrate social services into health care, potentially intervening outside of the health care system to address poverty, low education, housing affordability and the stress of poverty itself (Hamad [2020?] *apud* Scott, 2020).

When looking to a data like this it is clear that those that are trying to make healthy and regular meals get to those in need are not only contributing to solve a short-term problem as hunger but also to avoid a long-term health problem as heart diseases and hypertension and contribute for the low-income population access to a healthy lifestyle and consequently a life that is worth living.

If going through the line of the food pantries you can see how much this distribution of food matters to fight food insecurity but also to help students and their families save some money on food and hygiene products to be then able to afford college expenses because many times the scholarships cover the tuitions but not some university fees, accommodation, and books. Additionally, food pantries often provide resources such as toiletries, diapers, and even basic school supplies that families may otherwise struggle to access. This support can improve hygiene, educational access, and overall well-being.

Food pantries exemplify both the persistence of precarity and the community-based responses that attempt to mitigate its effects. For individuals struggling with poverty, food pantries often serve as essential lifelines. However, reliance on such services reflects deeper systemic inequalities. Rather than providing long-term stability, food pantries often operate as emergency relief, underscoring the absence of broader structural support. The need for these services highlights how certain lives are rendered “grievable” only when they reach a state of crisis—a key theme in Butler’s (2019) work.

In addition, food banks in Brazil aim fighting food insecurity but also its underlined causes besides combating the losses and waste of food, promote educational initiatives, support community kitchens, foster environmental sustainability practices and strengthen the circular economy (Brasil, 2025c). That can be seen as a way to go beyond taking food to the Brazilians' tables and also address the causes of food insecurity to build long-term solutions.

In Brazil, government initiatives such as Bolsa Família and the Food Acquisition Program (PAA) also play significant roles in alleviating more than food insecurity. Bolsa Família provides direct cash transfers to low-income families, ensuring they can purchase more essential items like healthy food and hygiene products (Martins; Monteiro, 2016) and guaranteeing that children are well-nourished and go to school. The PAA purchases food directly from smallholder farmers, simultaneously supporting local agriculture and distributing this food to social assistance networks like food banks and schools (Brasil, 2024, 2025d). These programs address not only immediate nutritional needs but also contribute to economic stability for both consumers and producers in the present and in the near future.

In Brazil, in Costa Barros, Rio de Janeiro, social projects like Casa Viver connect food distribution with many other services such as ballet classes, music lessons, and sports classes. The project sometimes not only sends small baskets of food with the kids when they go home but also offers snacks and sometimes meals during the time the kids are there, and the parents are at work (Junta de Missões Nacionais da CBB, 2021).

There the kids are not only having at least a meal guaranteed but they are also having a chance to learn a new musical instrument, a new language, a new sport and when they leave they go with more than food but they have hope and a chance to build a future, a chance to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty studies have proven that exists (Junta de Missões Nacionais da CBB, 2021).

The challenges of accessing affordable childcare directly impact the autonomy and economic empowerment of families, particularly single mothers, who often find themselves caught in a cycle of poverty (Schochet; Malik, 2017). As some parents secure positions in private childcare, enhancing their careers and financial stability, others face the hard reality of waiting lists and limited availability, which keeps them from entering or re-entering the job market. This disparity highlights how poverty not only acts as a barrier to employment and education but also reinforces social inequalities that inhibit personal and professional growth.

Consequently, the lack of access to essential services, such as childcare, reveals the deeper implications of precarious living conditions, where individuals must navigate an environment that undermines their autonomy and potential. Autonomy, often perceived as a fundamental right, is

severely compromised by the precariousness of social conditions. In the context of precarity, these invisible struggles expose the systemic factors that perpetuate vulnerability, making it crucial to analyze how social structures affect individuals' abilities to secure basic rights and pursue their aspirations.

To address the conditions that foster precarity, Butler (2018) advocates for political mobilization that demands more inclusive and equitable systems. Combating food insecurity, therefore, requires not only immediate aid through food pantries but also systemic changes to labor rights, healthcare access, and social welfare. By recognizing food insecurity as a symptom of broader social inequalities, Butler's (2018) framework emphasizes the need to move beyond temporary relief and toward sustained structural transformation.

Moreover, Butler's (2019) theory emphasizes the relational aspect of precarity, where interdependence becomes crucial for survival. In the context of food insecurity, mutual aid networks and grassroots community efforts illustrate this interdependence. While these efforts offer vital support, they cannot fully address the structural forces that perpetuate poverty.

A critical question arises when autonomy is addressed in the context of precarious life. Are the vulnerable in a state of vulnerability because they exist outside the recognized power structure, or are they vulnerable due to being recognized in specific and tangential ways? Judith Butler (2018, p. 89, translation ours) argues that "those who find themselves in a position of radical exposure to violence, without the basic protections of the law, are not therefore outside of politics or deprived of all forms of agency." Given the heightened exposure to precarious conditions and radical violence, it is essential to exercise caution in the use of language to avoid further harm and fragility.

3 PRECARIETY AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES: UNVEILING THE INVISIBLE STRUGGLES IN THE CONCEPT OF AUTONOMY

The death of prominent political figures, such as Queen Elizabeth II, often receives extensive global attention, while large-scale loss of life in regions affected by conflict, poverty, or displacement—such as Libya, Afghanistan, Syria, or Palestine—frequently does not elicit the same level of international recognition. This disparity raises critical questions about whose lives are deemed grievable, and which deaths are rendered visible within dominant political and media narratives. As Butler (2018, p. 17, translation ours) argues, "To be radically deprived of recognition threatens the very possibility of existence and persistence." While significant efforts have been made

to challenge these hierarchies of recognition, it remains essential to examine the mechanisms through which certain norms are established and perpetuated.

For Butler (2015), precarity—or precarious life—refers to the differential distribution of vulnerability, whereby certain populations are disproportionately exposed to illness, poverty, hunger, displacement, and violence, often without access to adequate forms of reparation. In this sense, “Precarity implies living socially; that is, the fact that someone’s life is always, in some way, in the hands of another” (Butler, 2015, p. 31, translation ours). The ways in which societies attribute or deny recognition to certain lives are thus deeply embedded in legal, political, and social structures, shaping the conditions under which mourning, justice, and protection are granted or withheld.

Precarious conditions manifest in gender when women suffer from the silencing of their demands or violence from their partners. They are evident in race when racist norms “operate to distinguish between those who can be recognized as human” (Butler, 2018, p. 43, translation ours). They reveal themselves in class when poverty prevents the exercise of political rights and resistance. They are apparent in religion when individuals are stigmatized and excluded from public discourse due to their beliefs. They are evident in sexuality when transgender individuals are murdered and denied the right to life.

As Butler (2018, p. 44, translation ours) suggests,

[...] questioning how these norms are established and normalized is the beginning of the process of refusing to take the norm for granted, of not ceasing to inquire how it was imposed and represented, and at whose expense. For those erased or degraded by the norm that they are expected to embody, the struggle becomes a corporeal battle for recognition, a public insistence on existing and being valued. Thus, it is only through a critical approach to the norms of recognition that we can begin to deconstruct these more insidious modes of logic that underpin forms of racism and anthropocentrism.

The distinction between precarity and precarious conditions must be precisely analyzed, as these will be key concepts in defining how autonomy is affected in the realization of human rights. Precarity is a shared condition; it is a universal state to which all people are exposed when faced with violence, hunger, death, and so forth. In contrast, precarious conditions are politically induced, exposing certain populations to greater violence due to the unequal distribution of wealth and the ways in which they are targeted based on race, nationality, religion, and sexuality (Butler, 2019, p. 50).

Recognizing precarity introduces a new perspective on autonomy and the norms governing the recognition of individuals based on their circumstances. Autonomy does not exist in isolation but is shaped by the social structures that enable it, while also encompassing power, agency, and the potential for transformation. In this context, inequality in access to food—an essential component of

human dignity—is exacerbated not only by structural deficiencies but also by forms of state violence and mechanisms that produce, exploit, and distribute precarious conditions along identity-based lines. For Butler (2015, p. 55, translation ours),

[...] precarity transcends identity categories and multicultural maps, thus establishing a foundation for an alliance centered on opposing state violence and its capacity to create, exploit, and distribute precarious conditions for profit and territorial defense. Such an alliance would not require agreement on all issues of desire, belief, or self-identification. Instead, it would constitute a movement that embraces certain ongoing antagonisms among its participants, valuing these persistent and motivating differences as a signal and essence of radical democratic politics.

In this context, recognition is the first step, but it must be thought through and defined carefully. Autonomy constitutes people, and despite existing before and after recognition through norms, people are always, at the outset, subjects. For recognition to occur, it must happen through certain norms that govern it—norms people never chose, which have found their way to them and intertwined them with their structuring and encouraging cultural power (Butler, 2019, p. 47). Furthermore, “subjects are constituted through norms that, when repeated, produce and displace the terms by which subjects are recognized”—that is, the conditions for defining and recognizing “being” are embedded within a historically constructed ontology that influences people’s very discernment of who is the subject (Butler, 2015, p. 15-16, translation ours).

Recognizing within the normative structure reveals a political purpose based on the idea of “persisting and exercising forms of freedom that surpass narrow versions of individualism without collapsing into compulsory forms of collectivism” (Butler, 2018, p. 49, translation ours). The law, for instance, is a means that regulates the field of recognition’s appearance and establishes who can be seen, heard, and acknowledged.

Precarious conditions are present in the world from before birth to after death, including in the act of mourning itself. Acknowledging the necessity for a change in how people establish the concept of autonomy is not merely about delineating possibilities; it involves understanding how precarious conditions impede or limit individuals’ rights. Declaring autonomy as part of recognizing a subject is imperative, as when one cries out, there is an expectation that the voice will echo, resonate, and reverberate in social spaces. In the crevices of institutions, in the “dungeons” of justice, and on public debate stages. Those who claim seek to be heard, and “we make the claim [...] precisely because it is not presumed, precisely because it is not honored in any of the instances” (Butler, 2019, p. 65, translation ours).

Recognition is the condition for claiming rights, and autonomy is the condition that integrates need and liberation. It is essential to confront the structures that manipulate people into

believing that some are worth more than others. In this context, precarious life is directly influenced by state decisions that can silence or actively maintain oppression and perpetuate inequality regarding access to the essential needs of every human being. The autonomy people need is not about constructing new identities of self-recognition. It is a banner that is much more concerned with the alliances in the fight for social justice. There must be fertile ground for recognition to occur in a broader manner, ensuring that mere appropriation of identities does not take place.

Appropriation would be “a mode of knowing that is still not recognition, or that may remain irreducible to recognition” (Butler, 2015, p. 21, translation ours). It is not a contest over identity agendas; rather, it is the enrichment and visibility of elements ignored or silenced through a new intelligibility in the normative public debate. This aligns with what Judith Butler (2015) understands as an ethics of cohabitation. For her, the attribution of rights to one group cannot serve to deprive another group of basic prerogatives; if it does, the affected group must reject the terms under which political and legal recognition and rights are granted. Moreover, it is necessary to recognize that rights are only meaningful within the context of a broader struggle for social justice (Butler, 2015, p. 79), which

[...] means that we are not separate identities in the fight for recognition but are already engaged in a reciprocal exchange, one that shifts us from our positions as subjects and allows us to see that the community itself requires acknowledgment that we are all, in different ways, struggling for recognition (Butler, 2019, p. 65, translation ours).

Precarity is the condition that exposes individuals unequally to imposed risks and cannot be seen as an external element to the normative constructions of recognition. This perspective “ignores and devalues forms of political action that emerge precisely from those domains of political action” (Butler, 2018, translation ours). Thus, it is essential to view precarity also as an opportunity to disrupt the sphere of power. To resist is to fight, but it is also to live.

Being an autonomous subject means embodying collective struggle, whether through affinity or the capacity to resist. The concept of autonomy recurs in legal debate and normative recognition. It is necessary to reassess how autonomy distances a strong connection among those resisting a system that induces precarious conditions. A precarious individual does not only fight for food when hungry; the struggle is, more broadly, about social well-being and survival for people, for the social collective.

It is coherent to assert that those who experience hunger occupy a different position in the struggle for recognition compared to those who do not face such conditions. The lack or reduction of public funding for education leads to the disenfranchisement of individuals, limiting their ability to exercise full citizenship. Similarly, when resources for healthcare are withdrawn, access to medical

care becomes not only restricted but also directly contributes to preventable loss of life. The factors that shape norms of recognition cannot be understood in an isolated or deterministic manner; rather, they intersect and reinforce one another. According to Butler (2019, p. 55, translation ours),

It is not merely a “discourse” of dehumanization that produces these effects but the existence of a limit to discourse that establishes the boundaries of human intelligibility. It is not just that little evidence is given to a death; rather, it is that it becomes impossible to evidence it. Such death disappears, not in explicit discourse, but in the ellipses through which public discourse progresses.

Autonomy is not an element for visualizing the inequalities of a specific life; it pertains to all. The central argument is that it concerns the analysis of survival conditions, whose dependency imposes an evaluation of the meaning of precarity and the conditions of life worthy of mourning. For Judith Butler (2015, p. 43), “precarious life implies life as a conditioned process, and not as an internal aspect of a monadic individual or any other anthropocentric construct.” Precarity, in turn, transcends identity categories and multicultural maps, making collective struggle an action centered on opposing state violence and the political channels that induce the precarization of life. For Bell Hooks (2017, p. 63, translation ours), “Multiculturalism compels educators to recognize the narrow boundaries that shape how knowledge is shared in the classroom. It obliges all of us to acknowledge our complicity in the acceptance and perpetuation of all forms of bias and prejudice.”

These layers of vulnerability underscore the complex relationship between socio-economic instability and food insecurity, as populations marginalized by systemic inequalities frequently face both conditions simultaneously. Empirical studies (Vilar-Compte *et al.*, 2021) indicate that restricted access to adequate nutrition is often linked to broader structural disadvantages, further limiting individuals' autonomy by constraining their ability to exercise rights and agency. Therefore, a nuanced understanding of the interconnections between precarity, food insecurity, and autonomy is essential for developing evidence-based policies that address these overlapping crises and promote social justice.

In conclusion, recognizing precarity as a universal condition experienced by all individuals, rather than as merely a politically induced state, reframes the understanding of autonomy and human rights. It calls for critically confronting the societal structures that perpetuate inequality and the conditions under which lives are lived and recognized. Butler's (2019) insights remind that the struggle for recognition is not merely a battle for visibility but a collective endeavor to challenge the systemic forces that create and sustain conditions of precarity. By advocating for a broader interpretation of recognition that includes the diverse experiences of marginalized communities, the aim is to foster a political landscape that honors the interconnectedness of people's struggles for

justice and dignity. Ultimately, the fight for autonomy must encompass the shared realities of precarity, transforming the approach to social justice into one that is inclusive, empathetic, and grounded in the lived experiences of all.

4 CONCLUSIONS

At the same level that poverty is an issue that is created by people it can also be reduced and maybe even extinguished by people. Data reveals how much being impoverished can influence someone's life and consequently the society as a whole. Every approach aimed at addressing poverty—or at least mitigating its effects—deserves careful consideration, analysis, and refinement to enhance its effectiveness. This study examines various initiatives, with a particular focus on food banks and food pantries in the United States, assessing their methodologies and impact. By critically evaluating these programs, this work seeks to provide insights into their applicability within the Brazilian context, considering both their potential benefits and limitations.

A precarized person does not fight solely for food when they are hungry. The struggle is more broadly about social well-being and the survival of people. The fight against racism, for instance, cannot be viewed as an issue exclusive to Black people. When Indigenous communities fight for the recognition of their territories and for socio-environmental protection, they are not merely seeking social support and political emancipation, but their resistance constitutes their own social form. Similarly, those who fight for housing are not just fighting for a roof over their heads, but against a system that consciously silences individuals asymmetrically positioned within power structures. These struggles are also forms of recognition because human existence transcends traditional normative boundaries.

Conversely, it is reasonable to argue that individuals experiencing hunger occupy a distinct position in the struggle for recognition compared to those who do not face such deprivation. The reduction or absence of public funding for education weakens individuals' ability to fully exercise their citizenship. Likewise, the withdrawal of resources from the healthcare system not only restricts access to essential services but also directly contributes to preventable loss of life. The factors that shape autonomy cannot be examined in isolation or through a deterministic lens; rather, they intersect and reinforce one another.

Making precarious conditions and, consequently, vulnerability visible is not limited to presenting or formulating new frameworks. It also involves questioning how these very frameworks are shaped and how they influence the perception of individuals. It is not merely about exposing the

conditions, but also about how they are presented, contextualized, and interpreted. Frameworks are subject to scrutiny, just like their contents. Precarious conditions reveal how autonomy is constrained and how this affects broader access to rights, whether in relation to food security or other interconnected rights.

Beyond mere survival, food security is fundamentally about the ability to live with dignity. The fulfillment of basic life conditions—such as clothing, breathing, walking, and eating—is not only a matter of existence but also of resistance. Within the broader struggle for dignity, food security stands as one of the most essential elements. Without the certainty of having food on the table, how can a more expansive discussion on human rights be meaningfully sustained? Judith Butler's theoretical framework offers a critical perspective on how the conditions of life are, in fact, the conditions of existence itself. However, what remains of life after securing a meal? Everything. The ability to envision the future, engage politically, assert one's autonomy, and demand justice all depend on the foundational security of one's most basic needs. Thus, food security is not just about nourishment—it is about ensuring the possibility of agency, resistance, and the pursuit of a life beyond mere subsistence.

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