

SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE

Sociodemographic and socio-occupational profile of workers in the Brazilian Unified Social Assistance System

Perfil sociodemográfico y socio-ocupacional de las/os trabajadoras/es del Sistema Único de Asistencia Social brasileño

Perfil sociodemográfico e sócio-ocupacional das/os trabalhadoras/es do Sistema Único de Assistência Social brasileiro

ROZANA MARIA DA FONSECA

Psychologist

Specialist in Social Management

Master's student in State and Society at the Federal University of Sual da Bahia (UFSB)

Porto Seguro, Bahia, Brazil

rozanafonseca@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3190-4243>.

Sandra Adriana Neves Nunes

Psychologist

Master in Health

PhD in Psychology

Federal University of Southern Bahia (UFSB), Brazil, and Postgraduate Program in State and Society (PPGES-UFSB)

Ilhéus, Bahia, Brazil

Corresponding author: psandranunes77@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0816-6334>

Abstract

Introduction: The Social Assistance Policy (NSAP), approved in 2004, marks a significant milestone in Brazilian public policy by guaranteeing citizenship rights and enhancing social inclusion. Emerging post-democracy transition, NSAP addresses former paternalistic and nepotistic tendencies in social aid. Drawing from the 1988 Constitution, the policy emphasizes equitable support for vulnerable groups, underscored by principles of universality, decentralization, and participation. It laid the foundation for the Unified Social Assistance System (USAS), crucial for coordinated service delivery to marginalized communities. *Objective:* This study aimed to analyze the sociodemographic and socio-occupational characteristics of professionals employed within the Unified Social Assistance System (USAS). *Method:* The methodology involved the distribution of online questionnaires focused on demographic and occupational aspects, ensuring adherence to ethical research guidelines and promoting the voluntary participation of individuals working in social assistance. Results: The study finds a pronounced feminization trend, with 88.6% women and only 11.4% men. The largest representations are from São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Rio Grande do Sul, reflecting a workforce concentration in populous areas. Racial composition shows 52.2% identifying as white and 45.7% as black, indicating significant representation of black professionals. However, this data points to the need for a broader examination of workforce diversity. Less than 2% reported disabilities, spotlighting areas for inclusivity enhancement. In terms of edu-

cational attainment, a sizable 58.8% of participants possessed postgraduate qualifications, and 24.5% completed higher education. The workforce predominantly comprises psychology (44%) and social work (42%) professionals, reflecting the critical expertise needed in social services. Most workers (> four years' experience) operate within the public sector (94%), highlighting the public institution's pivotal role in policy implementation. Despite 62.2% having statutory contracts ensuring job stability, many workers reported low job security, with around 30% holding multiple jobs to offset low salaries, revealing compensation inadequacies relative to their job complexity. The role of Higher-Level Technician (68.8%) is prevalent, covering substantial responsibilities in service and program management. Despite employment challenges, a majority (72.8%) are committed to the profession, indicating a dedicated workforce amidst adversity. The discussion underscores the female dominance within USAS, continuing a historic trend. While black professionals feature significantly, a lack of comprehensive ethnic-racial data limits exhaustive diversity analysis. High educational levels starkly contrast with financial instability, as three out of ten need additional jobs. Geographic worker concentration in southern and southeastern Brazil highlights resource and opportunity disparities, suggesting the need for strategic investment in less-represented regions to ensure comprehensive nationwide support for vulnerable populations. Employment conditions present challenges with temporary contracts and limited resources affecting service delivery. This precariousness complicates professionals' effectiveness, necessitating integrated strategies emphasizing continued education, enhanced work management, and focused support for underrepresented areas. Developing robust training, job security frameworks, and career development avenues, alongside legislative actions on remuneration improvements, are imperative. Conclusion: This study highlights strengths and challenges in Brazil's social assistance framework. Addressing workforce complexities through targeted strategies can enhance job satisfaction and service delivery, ultimately creating a more resilient system that effectively serves vulnerable populations and promotes social inclusion nationwide.

Keywords: Unique Social Assistance System, sociodemographic profile, socio-occupational profile, Brazil.

Resumen

Introducción: La Política de Asistencia Social (NSAP), aprobada en 2004, marca un hito significativo en la política pública brasileña al garantizar los derechos de ciudadanía y mejorar la inclusión social. Surgida tras la transición democrática, la NSAP aborda las tendencias paternalistas y nepotistas anteriores en la ayuda social. Basada en la Constitución de 1988, la política enfatiza el apoyo equitativo para grupos vulnerables, subrayado por los principios de universalidad, descentralización y participación. Sentó las bases para el Sistema Unificado de Asistencia Social (USAS), crucial para la prestación de servicios coordinados a comunidades marginadas. **Objetivo:** Este estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar las características sociodemográficas y socio-ocupacionales de los profesionales empleados dentro del Sistema Unificado de Asistencia Social (USAS). **Método:** La metodología implicó la distribución de cuestionarios en línea enfocados en aspectos demográficos y ocupacionales, asegurando el cumplimiento de las pautas éticas de investigación y promoviendo la participación voluntaria de personas que trabajan en asistencia social. **Resultados:** El estudio revela una tendencia pronunciada de feminización, con un 88.6% de mujeres y solo un 11.4% de hombres. Las mayores representaciones provienen de São Paulo, Minas Gerais y Rio Grande do Sul, reflejando una concentración de la fuerza laboral en áreas populosas. La composición racial muestra que el 52.2% se identifica como blanco y el 45.7% como negro, lo que indica una representación significativa de profesionales negros. Sin embargo, estos datos apuntan a la necesidad de un examen más amplio de la diversidad de la fuerza laboral. Menos del 2% reportaron discapacidades, destacando áreas para la mejora en la inclusividad. En cuanto al nivel educativo, un considerable 58.8% de los participantes poseía calificaciones de posgrado y el 24.5% había completado educación superior. La fuerza laboral está compuesta predominantemente por profesionales de la psicología (44%) y el trabajo social (42%), reflejando la experiencia crítica necesaria en los servicios sociales. La mayoría de los trabajadores (> cuatro años de experiencia) opera dentro del sector público (94%), destacando el papel fundamental de las instituciones públicas en la implementación de políticas. A pesar de que el 62.2% tiene contratos estatutarios que garantizan estabilidad laboral, muchos trabajadores informaron baja seguridad laboral, con alrededor del 30% teniendo múltiples empleos para compensar los salarios bajos, revelando inadecuaciones en la compensación en relación con la complejidad de sus roles. El rol de Técnico de Nivel Superior (68.8%) es predominante, abarcando responsabilidades

sustanciales en gestión de servicios y programas. A pesar de los desafíos laborales, la mayoría (72.8%) está comprometida con la profesión, indicando una fuerza laboral dedicada en medio de la adversidad. La discusión subraya la dominación femenina dentro de USAS, continuando una tendencia histórica. Aunque los profesionales negros aparecen significativamente, la falta de datos étnico-raciales integrales limita un análisis exhaustivo de la diversidad. Los altos niveles educativos contrastan con la inestabilidad financiera, ya que tres de cada diez necesitan empleos adicionales. La concentración geográfica de trabajadores en el sur y sureste de Brasil destaca disparidades de recursos y oportunidades, sugiriendo la necesidad de inversión estratégica en regiones menos representadas para asegurar un apoyo integral a nivel nacional para las poblaciones vulnerables. Las condiciones laborales presentan desafíos con contratos temporales y recursos limitados que afectan la prestación del servicio. Esta precariedad complica la efectividad de los profesionales, necesitando estrategias integradas que enfatizan la educación continua, la mejora de la gestión laboral y el apoyo enfocado a áreas subrepresentadas. Desarrollar programas de formación robustos, marcos de seguridad laboral y vías de desarrollo profesional, junto con acciones legislativas sobre mejoras en la remuneración, son imperativos. Conclusión: Este estudio destaca fortalezas y desafíos en el marco de asistencia social de Brasil. Abordar las complejidades de la fuerza laboral a través de estrategias dirigidas puede mejorar la satisfacción laboral y la prestación de servicios, creando finalmente un sistema más resiliente que sirva efectivamente a las poblaciones vulnerables y promueva la inclusión social a nivel nacional.

Palabras clave: *Sistema Único de Asistencia Social, perfil sociodemográfico, perfil socio-ocupacional, Brasil.*

Resumo

Introdução: A Política Nacional de Assistência Social (PNAS), aprovada em 2004, marca um marco significativo na política pública brasileira ao garantir os direitos de cidadania e melhorar a inclusão social. Surgida após a transição democrática, a PNAS aborda as tendências paternalistas e nepotistas anteriores na assistência social. Baseada na Constituição de 1988, a política enfatiza o apoio equitativo a grupos vulneráveis, sublinhado pelos princípios de universalidade, descentralização e participação. Estabeleceu as bases para o Sistema Unificado de Assistência Social (SUAS), crucial para a prestação de serviços coordenados a comunidades marginalizadas. **Objetivo:** Este estudo teve como objetivo analisar as características sociodemográficas e sócio-ocupacionais dos profissionais empregados dentro do Sistema Unificado de Assistência Social (SUAS). **Método:** A metodologia envolveu a distribuição de questionários online focados em aspectos demográficos e ocupacionais, assegurando a conformidade com as diretrizes éticas de pesquisa e promovendo a participação voluntária de pessoas que trabalham na assistência social. **Resultados:** O estudo revela uma tendência pronunciada de feminização, com 88,6% de mulheres e apenas 11,4% de homens. As maiores representações vêm de São Paulo, Minas Gerais e Rio Grande do Sul, refletindo uma concentração da força de trabalho em áreas populosas. A composição racial mostra que 52,2% se identificam como brancos e 45,7% como negros, indicando uma significativa representação de profissionais negros. No entanto, esses dados apontam para a necessidade de uma análise mais ampla da diversidade da força de trabalho. Menos de 2% relataram deficiências, destacando áreas para a melhoria da inclusão. Em termos de escolaridade, um considerável 58,8% dos participantes possuíam qualificações de pós-graduação e 24,5% haviam completado a educação superior. A força de trabalho é composta predominantemente por profissionais de psicologia (44%) e trabalho social (42%), refletindo a expertise crítica necessária nos serviços sociais. A maioria dos trabalhadores (> quatro anos de experiência) atua no setor público (94%), destacando o papel fundamental das instituições públicas na implementação de políticas. Apesar de 62,2% terem contratos estatutários que garantem estabilidade no emprego, muitos trabalhadores reportaram baixa segurança no trabalho, com cerca de 30% possuindo múltiplos empregos para compensar os baixos salários, revelando inadequações na compensação em relação à complexidade de suas funções. O papel de Técnico de Nível Superior (68,8%) é predominante, abrangendo responsabilidades substanciais na gestão de serviços e programas. Apesar dos desafios laborais, a maioria (72,8%) está comprometida com a profissão, indicando uma força de trabalho dedicada em meio à adversidade. A discussão ressalta a dominância feminina dentro do USAS, continuando uma tendência histórica. Embora os profissionais negros apareçam significativamente, a falta de dados étnico-raciais abrangentes limita uma análise exaustiva da diversidade. Os altos níveis educacionais contrastam com a instabilidade financeira, uma vez que três em cada

dez necessitam de empregos adicionais. A concentração geográfica de trabalhadores no sul e sudeste do Brasil destaca disparidades de recursos e oportunidades, sugerindo a necessidade de investimentos estratégicos em regiões menos representadas para assegurar um apoio integral a nível nacional para as populações vulneráveis. As condições de trabalho apresentam desafios com contratos temporários e recursos limitados que afetam a prestação de serviços. Essa precariedade complica a efetividade dos profissionais, necessitando de estratégias integradas que enfatizem a educação contínua, a melhoria da gestão do trabalho e o apoio focado em áreas sub-representadas. Desenvolver programas de formação robustos, marcos de segurança no trabalho e caminhos de desenvolvimento profissional, juntamente com ações legislativas sobre melhorias na remuneração, são imperativos. Conclusão: Este estudo destaca fortalezas e desafios no quadro de assistência social do Brasil. Abordar as complexidades da força de trabalho por meio de estratégias direcionadas pode melhorar a satisfação no trabalho e a prestação de serviços, criando, em última análise, um sistema mais resiliente que sirva efetivamente as populações vulneráveis e promova a inclusão social em nível nacional.

Palavras-chaves: Sistema Único de Assistência Social, perfil sociodemográfico, perfil sócio-ocupacional, Brasil.

Introduction

The National Social Assistance Policy (NSAP), approved in 2004, became an important public policy in the second half of the first decade of the 21st century, representing a significant advance in the provision of services and benefits aimed at guaranteeing citizenship rights and promoting social inclusion. This evolution contrasts with the history of social assistance in Brazil, which was often marked by paternalistic practices, nepotism, and lack of regulation.

After the political opening following the military dictatorship, new social demands emerged in a context of transition to democracy, intensifying discussions about a social assistance policy based on social rights, especially the right to social security, which includes health, assistance, and welfare (Brasil, 1988). Social groups, unions, and organizations played fundamental roles in drafting the Organic Law of Social Assistance (OLSA), aiming to ensure social rights for those in vulnerable situations.

The 1988 Constitution (Brasil, 1988) became the legal basis for a new approach to social assistance. Articles 203 and 204 define the pillars of the National Social Assistance Policy (NSAP), with Article 203 being crucial as it states that assistance should be offered to all, regardless of contribution to social security. This article sets objectives such as family protection, support for vulnerable children and adolescents, rehabilitation of people with disabilities, and poverty reduction. Article 204 mandates that social assistance actions should be organized with resources from the social security budget, ensuring public participation in policy formulation and control.

OLSA, approved in 1993, was a significant achievement that expanded rights and established a state policy aimed at defending social rights, combating social and income inequalities. This law establishes social assistance as a public policy of protection for the population in poverty situations (Yazbek, 2003). Although the context evolution was not linear, there were advances in regulatory standards and social control, leading to the proposal of the Unified Social Assistance System (USAS) during the IV National Social Assistance Conference in 2003. This proposal was formalized in the 2004 NSAP and the 2005 Basic Operational Standard (BOS/USAS), approved by the National Social Assistance Council (Paiva; Lobato, 2019).

NSAP transforms social assistance into a social right guaranteed by the State, allowing the population to claim this right in cases of lack of protection (Spotsati, 2009; 2016). The objectives of NSAP include social protection, socio-assistance surveillance, and rights defense, organized into two levels: basic and special, with special protection divided into medium and high complexity, aiming to strengthen family protection.

The Unified Social Assistance System (USAS) integrates various benefits and services, based on decentralization and intersectorality for its operation. Assistance is intended for citizens who meet the criteria for income transfer programs, in addition to people with disabilities, the elderly, and families in situations of violence (Brasil, 1993, 2004, 2009, 2012). In 2011, Law 12,435 amended OLSA, including USAS and socio-assistance services in national legislation, upda-

ting the Basic Operational Standard of USAS (Brazil, 2012).

Social assistance services, both basic protection and special protection, are crucial to expanding job opportunities for higher education professionals in USAS, especially social workers and psychologists (Brasil, 2006). The 2006 Basic Operational Standard for USAS Human Resources (BOS-HR/USAS) consolidated the professionalization of the sector by determining that reference teams should be formed exclusively by higher education professionals, establishing minimum quantities for these professionals. Additionally, these professionals are required to be approved through public competitive examinations, ensuring the continuity of services.

BOS-HR/USAS is recognized as an advancement, but gaps emerged, leading to the need for normative complements, as its wording did not meet real demands and did not include other professions that could contribute to socio-assistance policies. On June 20, 2011, the National Social Assistance Council (NSAC)

approved Resolution NSAC No. 17, which reaffirmed the reference team defined by BOS-HR/USAS and recognized eleven professional categories essential for the management of USAS.

Mandatory professionals in Basic Social Protection include social workers and psychologists. In Medium Complexity Special Social Protection, a social worker, a psychologist, and a lawyer are required; for High Complexity, the required professionals are a social worker and a psychologist (Brasil, 2011). BOS-HR/USAS received new normative guidance with NSAC Resolution No. 09 of 2014, which recognized medium- and fundamental-level occupations in USAS.

Finally, the units that support the socio-assistance network and socio-assistance services are organized according to NCAS Resolution No. 109, which approved the National Typification of Socio-assistance Services, detailing the complexities defined by NSAP and BOS/USAS. This structure aims to ensure better service and the adequate distribution of professionals in social assistance services.

TABLE 1 PRESENTS THE TOTAL NUMBER OF USAS SERVICE AND MANAGEMENT UNITS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL.

TABLE 1. NATIONAL QUANTITY OF USAS UNITS - USAS CENSUS 2021.

Type	Units	Quantity (2021)
Service	Reference Center for Social Assistance – RCSA (CRAS).	8,471 units
	Centros de Convivência	8,065 units (7 State units in the state of Amazonas)
	Specialized Reference Center for Social Assistance – SRCSA (CREAS)	2,782 of which 34 units are regional. (1 from Tocantins; 2 from Ceará; 26 from Paraíba; and 5 from Minas Gerais).
	Specialized Reference Center for the Homeless Population (POP CENTER)	235 units
	Day Reference Center	1,886 units
	Reception Units	6,460 units, of which 178 are State units and 6,282 are Municipal units
	Foster Families	463 unidades (sendo 03 Estaduais (01 TO; 02 PB))
	Unique Registration Posts	2,695 units
Management	Municipal Management	5,505 units
	State Management	26 units
	Municipal Fund for Social Assistance	5,445 units
	State Fund for Social Assistance	26 units
Social Control	Municipal Council	5,325 units
	State Council	26 units

The 2021 USAS Census recorded a total of 425,173 thousand USAS workers. The data, which is collected annually, is the most recent available from the National Secretariat for Social Assistance (SNAS), through the Socio-assistance Surveillance of the Ministry of Citizenship (Brasil, 2022). Table 2 shows the total number of USAS workers by professional training.

Adverse working conditions in social assistance

Within the context of Social Security, social assistance represents the Brazilian public policy that took the longest to be implemented and consolidated. Thus, the implementation of USAS (Unified Social Assistance System) has not developed linearly in accordance with regulations; rather, it has faced constant dismantling in recent years, both in budgetary and financial terms as well as in technical and political levels. This situation alone has become a subject of analysis for researchers aiming to understand how this slow and turbulent process, linked to a variety of historical, cultural, and political factors that shaped social assistance before it rose to the status of public policy, impacts the conditions and work processes of those working in social assistance (Camargo, 2021; Pereira, Tassigny & Bizarria, 2017; Rodrigues & Cariaga, 2015).

In this regard, Rodrigues and Cariaga (2015) highlight that the implementation of USAS and its nationwide expansion, while increasing job opportunities for social workers and other professionals in the field, also contributed to the deterioration of working conditions for several reasons: including the type of worker contracts (mostly temporary), the lack of policies for continuous training, and the material conditions of service provision. In a study conducted with social workers in Tocantins, the authors observed a predominance of temporary contracts (only 9 out of 42 professionals studied were permanent) and low wages (64% of respondents earned between three and four minimum Brazilian wages). Furthermore, 66% of social workers considered the USAS Human Resources Policy to be “poor,” also highlighting the absence of a Career, Positions, and Salaries Plan (for permanent employees) and the lack of stability (for contracted workers). According to the authors, this labor reality can “subordinate the professional to processes of alienation and limit their technical autonomy” (Rodrigues & Cariaga, 2015, p.11).

TABLE 2. TOTAL NUMBER OF WORKERS IN USAS - USAS CENSUS OF 2021.

Professionals/Professions	Total workers in USAS
Public Administration/Public Management	667
Administrator	7,409
Lawyer	5,524
System Analyst	717
Anthropologist	95
Social Worker	58,218
Political Scientist	76
Accountant	962
Economist	501
Home Economist	59
Nurse	3,486
Statistician	10
Physical Therapist	3,196
Geographer	124
Physician	937
Music Therapist	168
Not identified	20
Nutritionist	2,113
Other professional with a higher education degree	44,359
Pedagogue	27,992
Physical Education Professional	1,415
Professional with a secondary education degree	120,614
Programmer	516
Psychologist	29,434
Without professional training	114,129
Sociologist	629
Occupational Therapist	1,803
TOTAL	425,173

Camargo (2021), in her study, aimed to evaluate the extent to which the social worker profession is undergoing a process of proletarianization, characterized by precariousness, work intensification, and reduction of rights. More specifically, she examined how neoliberal policies and economic reforms directly impact the working conditions and professional practice of social workers. She concluded that there is a clear precariousness in the working conditions of social workers, reflected in low wages, lack of resources, excessive demands, and inadequate working conditions. Neoliberal reforms, with cuts in public spending and social policies, have significantly contributed to the deterioration of social workers' working conditions. This results in a scenario of greater vulnerability and professional instability. Finally, the flexibilization and informalization of labor relations, driven by labor reforms, have led to a reduction in the rights of social assistance workers, increasing exploitation and inequality in the sector.

In our review, no articles were found describing the sociodemographic and socio-occupational profile of USAS workers on a national level. However, the Federal Council of Social Service (2022) (Conselho Federal de Serviço Social (CFESS) published the book "Profile of Social Workers in Brazil: training, working conditions, and professional practice" which may help outline this profile. According to the work, most social workers have formal employment contracts, being employed by public agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private institutions. There is a significant portion of professionals working under temporary contracts or in precarious conditions, leading to job instability and insecurity. Social workers' working hours vary, with many facing long work hours. There are reports of overload due to high demand for services and insufficient staffing. The infrastructure conditions are often inadequate, directly impacting the quality of services provided. Many professionals work in environments lacking privacy, basic materials, and necessary equipment for the effective performance of their duties. The scarcity of material resources, such as computers, vehicles for home visits, and access to information systems, is a constant challenge. The availability and quality of working tools influence the effectiveness of service delivery and user satisfaction with social services. Social workers' remuneration is highly variable, with a salary range that does not adequately reflect the complexity and importance of the work performed. There is widespread dissatisfaction with the salaries offered, especially considering the requirements and

responsibilities of the profession. Additional benefits, such as health plans, meal vouchers, and continuous training opportunities, vary widely among employers. Many professionals must bear additional costs to maintain their training and professional updates.

As can be seen, the work relations and conditions for social workers in Brazil are marked by significant challenges. Job insecurity, inadequate infrastructure conditions, work overload, and unsatisfactory remuneration are issues that need attention to ensure not only the health and well-being of these professionals but also the quality of services provided to the population.

Aiming to fill the existing literature gap, the present study sought to describe the sociodemographic and socio-occupational characteristics of professionals working within the Unified Social Assistance System, with a national sample that included participants from all Brazilian states and the Federal District.

Method

According to the 2021 USAS Census, the total number of professionals working in USAS was 425,173 (Brasil, 2022). The minimum sample size was calculated using the following formula: $n = [z^2 * p(1-p)] / e^2 / [1 + [z^2 * p(1-p)] / e^2 * N]$, where Z represents the z-score of 1.65 (related to a 90% confidence level) and p is the standard deviation, considered to be 0.5. This value is based on the most unfavorable scenario, ensuring that the sample size will be sufficiently large to accurately represent the total population, taking into account the established margin of error (e) and confidence level. The margin of error, also known as the "confidence interval," determines the maximum acceptable error in the obtained results. For this research, a margin of error of 5%, or 0.05, was defined. Thus, according to the formula, the calculated minimum sample size was 272 participants, but data

were collected from 747 workers. On other hand, the sampling procedure was convenience-based, meaning that participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate rather than through a random or systematic process.

The inclusion criteria are: a) being a social assistance worker (in both the public network and social assistance entities and organizations), regardless of the type of employment relationship, whether as a permanent employee, contracted, or commissioned;

and b) having signed the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF) made available online.

The exclusion criteria include: a) having less than 6 months of experience as a worker, and b) not having signed the FICF that was made available online.

Instrument

A questionnaire was used to collect sociodemographic and socio-occupational information from the participants.

Data Collection Procedure

To reach the study participants, posts were created addressing the study's objectives, which were shared on the following channels: the blog <https://www.psicologianoUSAS.com/> and the social media accounts @psicologianoUSAS (Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube). Additionally, emails with invitations were sent to state social assistance departments and other similar organizations. The research was also disseminated through groups and contacts of the researcher using instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram.

The dissemination of the research for data collection included providing a link to access the Informed Consent Form (ICF) in a digital format, which could be signed remotely on the Google Forms platform. After participants agreed to join the study, the same link was used to provide the questionnaire and scales that had to be completed.

The study was conducted in accordance with Resolution No. 466/12 of the National Health Council (CNS) and circular letter No. 2/2021/CONEP/SECNS/MS, which provides guidelines on research procedures. It was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee on Human Subjects at the Federal University of Southern Bahia, where it received approval in version 3, under decision number: 5.804.225 (CAAE 61822122.4.0000.8467), on December 9, 2022.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, the IBM SPSS statistical package, version 25, was used to tabulate the data and perform descriptive statistical analyses (frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation).

Results

Sociodemographic and socio-occupational profile of the participants

A total of 747 workers participated in the sample, with an average age of 38.34 years ($SD = 8.22$), a minimum age of 20, and a maximum age of 68 years, comprising 662 females (88.6%) and 85 males (11.4%). When asked to indicate their gender identity, 70 individuals (9.4%) identified as cisgender men, 519 (69.5%) identified as cisgender women, 1 individual (0.1%) identified as non-binary, and 14 (1.9%) identified as another gender identity. The remaining participants ($n = 143$; 19.1%) preferred not to identify.

Workers from all Brazilian states and the Federal District (DF) participated, with the five states with the highest participation being São Paulo ($n = 158$, 21.2%), Minas Gerais ($n = 104$, 13.9%), Rio Grande do Sul ($n = 80$, 10.7%), Bahia ($n = 56$, 7.5%), and Rio de Janeiro ($n = 50$, 6.7%). The states with the lowest participation were Sergipe and Tocantins ($n = 2$, 0.3% each), and Acre, Amazonas, and Rondônia ($n = 3$, 0.4% each). Table 3 presents the other sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

As can be seen in Table 3, most of the sample consists of individuals who identify as white (52.2%), followed by individuals who identify as black (45.7%). The ethnic group with the lowest participation was the indigenous, with only 5 participants (0.7%). Less than 2% of participants reported having any disability. The predominant level of education is among professionals who have a 'lato sensu' postgraduate program (58.8%), but a significant percentage also completed higher education (24.5%). The most common profession is Psychology (approximately 44%), followed by Social Work (approximately 42%). Table 4 presents the main socio-occupational characteristics of the participants.

As shown in Table 4, the socio-occupational profile of the study participants consists of workers who have been in social assistance for more than four years (76.7%) and who work in the public sector (approximately 94%). The predominant type of employment contract is statutory (62.2%), and the majority do not have another job (72.2%). The most common position is that of Higher-Level Technician (68.8%). The predominant working hours are between 21 to 40 hours per week (81.4%). Regarding the professional training offered, the vast majority have received

TABLE 3. SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS (N = 747).

Variable	Response Options	Frequency	%
Race/Ethnicity	Asian	10	1.3
	White	390	52.2
	Indigenous	5	0.7
	Black	341	45.7
	Missing	1	0.1
He/She is a person with a disability	No	725	97.1
	Yes	11	1.5
	Missing	11	1.5
Level of Education	Elementary Education	1	0.1
	High School Education	31	4.2
	Higher Education	183	24.5
	'Lato sensu' postgraduate program	439	58.8
	Master Degree	82	11
	PhD	11	1.5
Professions	Administration	5	0.7
	Anthropology	2	0.3
	Law	7	0.9
	Pedagogy	27	3.6
	Psychology	326	43.6
	Social Work	311	41.6
	Sociology	5	0.7
	Occupational Therapy	1	0.1
	Other	31	4.1
	Missing	32	4.3

ved at least one training session (87.3%), with 24.4% having received more than seven training sessions. Permanent Education has never been implemented in the municipalities or DF for 40.8% of the respondents, and 23.3% are unaware of this issue. The Work Management area has also not been implemented in the municipality or DF for 37.1% of participants, and

32.1% claim not to know. Approximately 74% state that there is no specific sector or service dedicated to the promotion and prevention of workers' health in their municipality or DF, and 12.4% are unaware if such services exist. Finally, the majority (72.8%) do not intend to leave social assistance.

TABLE 4. SOCIO-OCCUPATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS (N = 747).

Variable	Response Options	Frequency	%
Time working in social assistance	Less than 1 year	45	6
	1 – 3 years	129	17.3
	4 – 6 years	154	20.6
	7 – 9 years	132	17.7
	More than 10 years	287	38.4
Network in which [he/she] works	Charitable Organizations of Social Assistance (OSC)	46	6,2
	Public network	701	93.8
	Commissioned position	31	4.1
Type of employment Contract	Celetista (CLT contract by OSCIP/NGO/private network)	37	5
	Consulting/Advisory	4	0.5
	Fixed-term contract	95	12.7
	Verbal/Informal contract	8	1.1
	Public Employment (CLT)	94	12.6
	Statutory	465	62.2
	Other type of contract of any nature established by an OSCIP/NGO/private network	3	0.4
	Other	10	1.3
Has more than one job	Yes	208	27.8
	No	539	72.2
Position held	Administrative Assistant/Receptionist	23	3.1
	Mid-level position (Educator, Advisor, or Social Agent).	48	6.4
	Coordinator	89	11.9
	Managers	16	2.1
	Workshop Facilitator	2	0.3
	General Services (cleaning, maintenance, drivers, etc.)	1	0.1
	Higher-Level Analyst Technician	514	68.8
	Other	53	7.1

Variable	Response Options	Frequency	%
Weekly Work Hours	Up to 10 hours	38	5.1
	From 11 to 20 hours	52	7
	From 21 to 30 hours	299	40
	From 31 to 40 hours	309	41.4
	From 41 to 44 hours	29	3.9
	More than 44 hours	20	2.7
Has received training offered by the municipality	None	82	11
	From 1 to 3	284	38
	From 4 to 6	186	24.9
	Above 7	182	24.4
	Missing	13	1.7
Has permanent education been implemented in your municipality or Federal District	Has already been implemented	104	13.9
	Has never been implemented	305	40.8
	In the process of implementation	164	22
	I don't know	174	23.3
Has the area of Work Management been implemented in your municipality or Federal District	Yes	141	18.9
	No	277	37.1
	It exists, but I am unaware of its operation	89	11.9
	I don't know	240	32.1
Is there a sector or service dedicated to the promotion and prevention of the health of female workers in your municipality or Federal District	Yes	72	9.6
	No	551	73.8
	It exists, but I am unaware of its operation	31	4.1
	I don't know	93	12.4
Are you interested in continuing to work in social assistance	Yes	544	72.8
	No	203	27.2

Discussion

The present study aimed to describe the sociodemographic and socio-occupational characteristics of workers in the Unified Social Assistance System (USAS), encompassing a sample of professionals from all regions of Brazil. The results revealed a predominance of women in the sample, aligning with previous studies (Cisne, 2004; Russo; Cisne & Bretas, 2008), which confirm this trend in USAS teams, especially among professionals in Psychology and Social Work, predominantly female professions (Motta, Brandolt & Pizzinato, 2021).

The Consejo General del Trabajo Social report, “Precarización, feminización y desprofesionalización: la realidad de la atención social primaria en Servicios Sociales” (Precarity, feminization, and deskilling: the reality of primary social care in social services), highlights significant gender disparities also in Spain. While 89% of social workers are women, they are concentrated in direct care roles. Men are more prevalent in management and leadership positions, especially at higher age levels. This gender imbalance negatively impacts women’s mental health, with those in primary care experiencing higher rates of anxiety and burnout (34%) (Consejo General del Trabajo Social, 2022, June 21).

This phenomenon of feminization in social assistance, addressed by Cisne (2004) and Russo et al. (2008), reflects the history of the profession, from the association of roles with first ladies to the feminization of professions and the audience served by this policy. The low representation of non-binary identities in the sample is also notable, which may indicate the exclusion of professionals who do not identify as cisgender in public service and USAS.

Although most professionals identify as white (52.2%), the percentage of black individuals is significant. The scarcity of studies and official documents on the ethnic-racial variable makes comparisons difficult. For example, the census survey conducted annually by the Ministry of Social Development (MDS) does not include data on race/ethnicity of USAS workers. This is reflected in the lack of consideration of the ethnic-racial issue in other studies, such as those by Santos and Manfroi (2015) and Vieira (2021), which also did not address the subject. Thus, it is important to emphasize that the percentage of black workers is close to that of white workers, indicating significant representation. Another relevant point is that the majority of partici-

pants have higher education, especially in the fields of Psychology and Social Work, reflecting a space of educational advancement, although the low salaries in the field limit economic mobility (Almeida, 2019). Almeida’s research found that most professionals came from poor or middle-class backgrounds, similar to the target audience of social assistance, with many being the first in their family to enter higher education. Regarding geographical distribution, there is a clear concentration of professionals in the South and Southeast regions, reflecting the greater audience of the blog “Psychology in USAS,” which was used as a dissemination channel for the research and is more accessed by states with a larger number of workers. Data from the USAS Census 2021 shows that São Paulo and Minas Gerais are the states with the highest number of social assistance professionals, with 219,646 workers, while states with the lowest participation have fewer than 21,000 professionals (Brazil, 2022).

The education level of participants shows that about 60% have higher education with specialization, with 44.1% being psychologists and 41.8% social workers. This predominance is consistent with the target audience accessing the blog Psychology in USAS. However, even though the sample was predominantly composed of higher education professionals, it is essential to recognize the presence of workers of all education levels in USAS, as the analysis did not restrict the sample.

The employment contracts observed in the present study differ from other studies on USAS, such as that of Pereira and Frota (2017), which identified 93.1% of outsourced workers in Ceará, and Rodrigues and Cariaga (2015), with 9 public servants among 42 social workers in Tocantins. In contrast, the findings of this research align more closely with the USAS Census 2017, which indicated that most workers in municipal departments and agencies are statutory professionals (Brazil, 2018).

Still, it is essential to highlight that USAS operates a variety of social assistance services with different objectives, and the contingent of workers should not be considered homogeneous. In the Social Assistance Reference Centers - SARC (CRAS) and Specialized Social Assistance Reference Centers – SSARC (CREAS), the predominance is of higher education professionals, while in other units, such as Sheltering Services and Community Centers, there is a greater number of professionals without specific training.

Despite the most common working hours being 40 hours per week, 30% of the respondents reported having more than one job, indicating precarious working conditions. According to Berwig (2018), this reality is characterized by the fragmentation of the labor market and part-time shifts, reflecting the work context of USAS. Having a heavy workload combined with multiple jobs can negatively impact a worker's mental health. Regarding mental health, Verde-Diego et al. (2021) aimed to assess the prevalence of burnout syndrome among social workers engaged in community social services. Their findings indicate that social workers within the Galician Social Services System display significant levels of burnout, with scores categorized as high risk. The study identifies several challenges contributing to the onset of burnout in Social Work, including: the hierarchical organizational structure and bureaucratic nature of the system; potential conflicts between personal ideals and designated roles; bureaucratization leading to fragmentation and a decline in professional status; budget constraints affecting resource availability; role conflict arising from conflicting expectations; and the connection between professional burnout and interactions with service recipients.

The analysis alongside the USAS Census 2017 shows that only 30.6% of managing bodies have implemented Work Management, highlighting the precariousness of work in USAS, since the quality of the social assistance network is directly linked to adequate management (Brazil, 2018).

It is also observed that the training experienced by workers, often one-off and instructional, does not meet the guidelines of the National Policy for Permanent Education (PNEP). This suggests that USAS is not providing the necessary support to ensure the sustainability of social work, further reinforcing an objectification of workers as mere mediators of social assistance protections, without ethical-political or technical backing.

Castro's (2021) insightful study examines the planning of social policy in Mexico from the late 20th century to the Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) administration (2019-2024), with a particular focus on AMLO's "Fourth Transformation" (4T) project. The research explores how economic crises and neoliberal reforms have impacted working conditions in the public sector and the provision of social services. The author critiques neoliberal policies for dismantling the welfare state, exacerbating inequa-

lity, and weakening social programs. He highlights the challenges faced by Mexican social workers, including budgetary constraints, role conflicts, and burnout. This aligns with findings from the present study showing precarious employment conditions, where 30% of respondents held multiple jobs due to low pay and job insecurity, underscoring the negative consequences of reduced funding, casualized work, and increased workloads resulting from neoliberal policies. Furthermore, this study reveals significant management deficiencies, with 69.4% of managing bodies lacking effective work management, impacting service delivery and echoing Castro's criticism of bureaucratic inefficiencies that hinder effective social programs. Therefore, this study underscores the importance of considering the sociodemographic and socio-occupational characteristics of USAS workers while highlighting the need for a critical perspective on working conditions within this system. It emphasizes that the expansion of education and ongoing training, the implementation of Work Management, and the consideration of ethnic-racial issues are fundamental to promoting the quality and sustainability of work in USAS.

The main findings of this study align with the work of authors examining the transformation of governance in 21st-century America, notably Kettl (2015). Kettl underscores the necessity for public sector employees to adapt to evolving environments, which demands new skills and competencies. This study implicitly supports Kettl's assertions by revealing that a significant portion of USAS professionals possess high educational levels, with many holding postgraduate degrees. This trend indicates an acknowledgment of the need for specialized expertise within the intricate social service landscape. However, the research also highlights a concerning disconnect, as this educational attainment often does not correspond to sufficient compensation or job security, pointing to a disparity between the skills required and the systemic support available.

Kettl further addresses the pressures faced by public sector employees and the ensuing effects on work-life balance and job satisfaction. The findings of this study reflect this reality, showing that a considerable percentage of USAS workers take on multiple jobs to supplement inadequate salaries, with 27.2% expressing intentions to leave their positions due to job insecurity, economic instability, and dissatisfaction. Additionally, the extensive number of hours worked weekly—with many exceeding 40 hours—illustrates

ongoing challenges related to work-life balance.

The profile of Brazilian social assistance workers presented in this study can also be examined through the lens of the OECD report on Public Employment and Management (OECD, 2021). While the high educational attainment of USAS workers is notable, the predominance of psychology and social work professionals raises concerns about a potential skills gap. Although these roles are essential, the system may lack professionals with expertise in critical areas such as data analysis, technology, and management—skills that the OECD identifies as vital for effective public service delivery. This reliance on core professions could restrict the system's ability to respond to emerging challenges demanding a broader range of skill sets, indicating a mismatch between the current workforce profile and future needs. This underscores the necessity of attracting and retaining talent equipped with evolving competencies.

Furthermore, the study reveals precarious working conditions for USAS professionals, with many resorting to multiple jobs to make ends meet, adversely affecting their well-being and potentially undermining service quality. These findings resonate with the OECD report's concerns regarding employee well-being and work-life balance in the public sector. The report emphasizes the importance of fostering fulfilling and supportive work environments to retain talent. The precarious circumstances detailed herein suggest that Brazil's social assistance framework falls short of these benchmarks, risking high turnover rates and challenges in retaining skilled professionals.

The challenges identified—including low job security, inadequate compensation, and the lack of permanent education and management practices—hint at potential deficiencies in leadership and management within USAS. The OECD report highlights the critical role of strong leadership in nurturing adaptability, collaboration, and a positive organizational environment. The obstacles faced by USAS employees point to deficiencies in effective leadership strategies and managerial support, hampering the system's ability to address the issues elucidated in this study. Rectifying these management weaknesses is essential for enhancing working conditions for USAS professionals and ultimately improving service delivery.

The sociodemographic and socio-occupational characteristics of Brazilian Unified Social Assistance System (USAS) workers reveal both enabling and obs-

tructive factors in citizen access to social welfare benefits. For instance, the predominance of women in the USAS workforce (88.6%) correlates with findings of low job security and salaries, as well as a significant proportion (30%) holding multiple jobs to support themselves. This precarious employment landscape implies that overworked and underpaid professionals may be less capable of delivering efficient services, resulting in delays and bureaucratic obstacles that diminish citizen access to benefits. Insufficient pathways for training and career development further compound this issue.

The concentration of USAS workers in populous regions (e.g., São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Rio Grande do Sul) creates geographic disparities, leaving less populated areas underserved and perpetuating unequal access to benefits for those residing in these regions. This imbalance underscores the urgent need for targeted investments and resource allocation to guarantee equitable service delivery throughout Brazil.

Conversely, a considerable number of USAS workers (58.8%) hold postgraduate degrees, and 24.5% have completed higher education. This high level of educational attainment indicates a skilled workforce adept at providing quality services and navigating complex systems to assist citizens. The presence of professionals specializing in psychology and social work highlights their relevance to the needs of vulnerable populations.

Most workers (94%) are employed in the public sector, signifying a strong governmental commitment to social assistance that could facilitate citizen access to benefits through publicly funded programs. Notably, despite the challenges faced, a majority of workers (72.8%) express a commitment to remaining in the social assistance field, indicating a workforce dedicated to improving service delivery and overcoming existing barriers.

Conclusions

The National Social Assistance Policy (NSAP), approved in 2004, represents a significant milestone in public policies in Brazil by offering services and benefits that guarantee citizenship rights and promote social inclusion. This evolution was a response to a history marked by welfare practices, nepotism, and a lack of regulation that previously hindered access to and the effectiveness of the services provided.

Social assistance, which emerged after the political opening in Brazil, reflects a context of transition to democracy, where the struggle for social rights, especially social security, became central. The Constitution of 1988 consolidated these rights, establishing, through articles 203 and 204, the pillars of NSAP. The Organic Law of Social Assistance (OLSA), approved in 1993, expanded these rights and defined social assistance as an essential public policy to address social and income inequalities, consolidating the role of USAS as an integrated social protection network.

The present study investigated the sociodemographic and socio-occupational characteristics of USAS workers across Brazil, revealing a predominance of women, a trend that aligns with the historical feminization of this area. Although the sample also showed a significant presence of black professionals, the scarcity of official data and studies exploring the ethnic-racial variable limits critical analysis of this issue.

The findings indicate that most professionals have higher education in the fields of Psychology and Social Work, reflecting educational advancement in the field, but contrasting with low salaries and precarious working conditions. Similar to data from the US Census, this study reveals a concentration of workers in the South and Southeast regions, implying geographical inequality in the distribution of resources and opportunities.

Regarding employment contracts, the results diverge from other investigations that point to a predominance of outsourced workers. The majority of participants in this study have statutory contracts, indicating a more favorable context compared to studies documenting the precariousness of labor. However, it is crucial to understand that the structure of USAS, which includes a variety of services, presents different working conditions depending on the type of service.

The working conditions identified in this study reflect a reality of precariousness, where a considerable portion of participants has more than one job, indicating fragmentation and insecurity in the labor market. Furthermore, the poor implementation of Work Management in USAS, which is present in only a fraction of managing bodies, exposes a weakness in the system. This undermines the quality of services provided and reinforces the need for more in-depth and systematic training, in accordance with the National Policy for Permanent Education.

This study makes significant contributions to the analysis of the sociodemographic and socio-occupational characteristics of workers in the Unified Social Assistance System (USAS), as it is the first national survey to include professionals from all professions across all Brazilian states. It highlights the predominance of women in USAS teams, a relevant aspect due to the implications of feminization in this field, emphasizing the need for specific policies that consider the particularities of these workers. Although the data collection on ethnic-racial composition was limited, it opens space to discuss representation and inequalities within USAS, broadening discussions on diversity and equity in social assistance. The study also establishes clear connections with the National Social Assistance Policy (NSAP) and the Organic Law of Social Assistance (OLSA), contextualizing the reality of workers within the normative framework and government guidelines. This connection is crucial for understanding how policies impact practices in USAS.

However, some limitations deserve attention. Even though the sample encompasses all regions of Brazil, the sampling procedure was convenience-based, which does not allow for the assurance of the representativeness of the findings. Consequently, the findings of the study may not be generalizable to all individuals within the target demographic. The lack of representativeness raises concerns about the validity of the conclusions drawn from the data, as the specific characteristics or experiences of the sampled individuals could significantly influence the results. Therefore, while the convenience sampling method may facilitate data collection and provide initial insights, it falls short in ensuring that the study's outcomes can be confidently applied to a wider context. It highlights the necessity for further research utilizing more rigorous sampling techniques to achieve a representative and comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Furthermore, the greater concentration of professionals in the South and Southeast may result in an underrepresentation of the realities of workers in the North, Midwest and Northeast. Additionally, the study focuses on the characteristics of higher education professionals, overlooking data on workers with secondary and elementary education, which limits the understanding of the entirety of the workforce in USAS.

The results of this study can inform the formulation of public policies and management practices aimed at improving the working conditions of USAS profes-

sionals. Identifying weaknesses in the system and the need for better work management are insights that can be utilized by policymakers and managers. It is imperative to promote actions aimed at expanding education and ongoing training, effective implementation of Work Management, and greater consideration of ethnic-racial issues. These measures will not only contribute to improving working conditions but will also strengthen USAS's capacity to adequately serve the population in need of social assistance services, enhancing the quality and sustainability of social work in Brazil.

Contribution of each of the collaborating authors

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN THE BIBLIOGRAPHIC REVIEW: FONSECA, M. F. AND NUNES, S. A. N.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE METHODOLOGY: FONSECA, M. F. AND NUNES, S. A. N.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN THE DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS: FONSECA, M. F. AND NUNES, S. A. N. REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF THE FINAL VERSION OF THE ARTICLE: FONSECA, M. F. AND NUNES, S. A. N.

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