Epidemiological and clinical characteristics of the COVID-19 epidemic in Brazil

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Abstract

The first case of COVID-19 was detected in Brazil on February 25, 2020. We report and contextualize epidemiological, demographic, and clinical findings for COVID-19 cases during the first three months of the epidemic. By May 31, 2020, 514,200 COVID-19 cases, including 29,314 deaths had been reported in 75.3% (4,196 of 5,570) of municipalities across all five administrative regions of Brazil. R_0 for Brazil was estimated at 3.1 (95% BCI 2.4–5.5), with a higher median but overlapping credible intervals compared to some other seriously affected countries. A positive association between higher per-capita income and COVID-19 diagnosis was identified. Further, the severe acute respiratory infection cases with unknown aetiology were associated with lower per capita income. Co-circulation of six respiratory viruses was detected but at very low levels. These findings provide a comprehensive description of the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic in Brazil and may help guide subsequent measures to control virus transmission.

Introduction

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a severe acute respiratory infection that emerged in early December 2019 in Wuhan, China[1]. The outbreak was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) by the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 30, 2020. COVID-19 is caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), an enveloped, single-stranded positive-sense RNA virus that belongs to the *Betacoronavirus* genus, *Coronaviridae* family[2]. SARS-CoV-2 is closely related genetically to bat-derived SARS-like coronaviruses[3]. Human-to-human transmission occurs primarily via respiratory droplets and direct contact, similar to human influenza viruses, SARS-CoV and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome virus (MERS-CoV)[4]. The most commonly reported clinical symptoms are fever, dry cough, fatigue, dyspnoea, anosmia, ageusia, or some combination of these[1,4,5]. As of June 16, 2020, more than 7.9 million cases have been confirmed worlwide, resulting in 434,796 deaths[6].

Brazil declared COVID-19 as a national Public Health Emergency (PHE) on February 3, 2020[7]. After the development of a national emergency plan and the early establishment of molecular diagnostic facilities across Brazil's network of public health laboratories, the country reported its first confirmed COVID-19 case on February 25, 2020, in a traveller returning to São Paulo from northern Italy[8]. São Paulo is the largest city in South America and no other Brazilian city receives a greater proportion of international flights[9]. Currently, Brazil has one of the fastest-growing COVID-19 epidemics in the world, now accounting for 1,864,681 cases and 72,100 deaths, comprising over 55% of the total number of reported cases in Latin America and Caribbean (as of July 14, 2020)[6]. About 21% of Latin American and Caribbean populations are estimated to be at risk of severe COVID-19 illness[10]. The region has been experiencing large outbreaks, with growing epidemics in Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Panama, and possibly Venezuela and Nicaragua, amidst growing

109 concerns on testing capacity for COVID-19[11-14]. Preparedness for laboratory surveillance of
110 SARS-CoV-2 in Latin America is centred around a network of national reference influenza
111 surveillance laboratories that is facing several challenges, including shortage of reagents and
112 equipment[15].

113 Conscious of the challenges associated with surveillance since the beginning of the
114 epidemic in Brazil, here we focus on two main objectives. First, we contextualize the
115 Brazilian SARS-CoV-2 epidemic by comparing local transmission dynamics with those
116 observed in selected other countries. Second, we use geospatial data related to confirmed
117 COVID-19 cases and severe acute respiratory infection (SARI) cases with unknown
118 aetiology to evaluate the relationship between socio-economic factors and COVID-19
119 distribution.

Results

Contextualizing COVID-19 data notification systems in Brazil

On January 22, 2020, more than one month before the first case in Brazil, the Brazilian Ministry of Health implemented the REDCap platform to notify prospective suspected, probable, and confirmed COVID-19 cases (see **Methods** for case definitions), as part of early response to the pandemic[16]. By March 27, 2020, the REDCap system was discontinued (**Fig. 1**). Since then, mild-COVID-19 cases started to be notified on e-SUS-VE (e-SUS Vigilância Epidemiológica), a new national COVID-19 notification system and hospitalised COVID-19 cases started to be recorded on a pre-existing SIVEP-Gripe system. The SIVEP-Gripe system has been in use since 2009 (influenza H1N1 2009 pandemic) and has since centralized the notification of respiratory viruses and SARI for the Brazilian Ministry of Health (**Fig. 1**). Both the e-SUS-VE and SIVEP-Gripe include suspected and confirmed COVID-19 cases by public health and private services (primary and emergency care). These two notification systems (e-SUS-VE and SIVEP-Gripe) are inter-related on the *Portal do COVID-19* website (https://covid.saude.gov.br/), which summarises daily the aggregated counts from both platforms.

SARS-CoV-2 notification in Brazil: international transmission to rapid internal dissemination

We analysed a total of 514,200 SARS-CoV-2 cases from the *Portal do COVID-19* website (SIVEP-Gripe, and e-SUS VE databases combined) that were confirmed by molecular diagnostic and clinical epidemiological criteria by May 31, 2020 (see Materials and Methods). Cases were reported in 75.3% (4,196 of 5,570) of municipalities across all five administrative regions of Brazil and included 206,555 (40.2%) recovered patients, and 29,314 fatal (17.5%) COVID-19 cases (**Fig. 2A**). We further analysed a total of 1,468 confirmed

144 cases from the REDCap system, including 342 imported cases with associated travel history
145 information. After excluding cases involving with that travelled to multiple countries before
146 entering Brazil (*n*=56) and that had an unknown country of origin (*n*=16). The self-reported
147 countries of infection for cases acquired abroad until March 19, 2020 were USA (28.6%,
148 *n*=76), Italy (24.4%, *n*=65), and the United Kingdom (10.5%, *n*=28) and Spain (8.3%, *n*=22)
149 (**Extended Data Fig. 1**). The first reported case (SPBR1) was reported on February 25, 2020
150 in the municipality of São Paulo, the fourth most populous urban area worldwide. Following
151 the first notifications of COVID-19 in Brazil's largest population centres, we find that SARS-
152 CoV-2 subsequently spread to municipalities with smaller population sizes (**Fig. 2B**). Until
153 May 31, 2020, most confirmed cases and deaths were reported in the states of São Paulo
154 (109,698 cases and 7,615 deaths), Rio de Janeiro (53,388 cases and 5,344 deaths), Ceará
155 (48,489 cases and 3,010 deaths) and Amazonas (41,378 cases and 2,052 deaths), which
156 together account for 49.2% of all cases and 61.5% of deaths in Brazil (**Fig. 2c**).
157
158 Basic reproduction number (R_0) of SARS-CoV-2 in Brazil and comparison countries
159 To estimate the basic reproduction number (R_0) of SARS-CoV-2 in Brazil, daily confirmed
160 cases in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Ceará and Amazonas states were compiled from the
161 Ministry of Health (for specification of the time-windows used in the analyses see **Extended**
162 **Data Fig. 2**). For comparison, we compiled time series of confirmed cases in several
163 European countries from the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center
164 (https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/, see also **Extended Data Fig. 3**). We found that São Paulo, Rio
165 de Janeiro and Amazonas were characterized by similar R_0 values of 2.9 (95% Bayesian
166 credible interval, BCI, 2.2–5.1), 2.9 (95% BCI 2.2–4.9) and 2.6 (95% BCI 2.0–4.5).
167 However, for Ceará, estimated R_0 was considerably lower, 1.9 (95% BCI 1.5–3.0) (**Fig. 3**,
168 **Extended Data Fig. 1**). This finding could be a result of the small window between the first

notified cases and the early implementation of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) in this state (**Supplementary Table 1**, **Extended Data Fig. 2**). On a national scale, the estimated R_0 for Brazil was slightly higher than that of the Brazilian states considered in this study, with a median of 3.1 (95% BCI 2.4–5.5), and also slightly higher than R_0 values estimated for other severely affected countries: Spain (2.6, 95% BCI 2.0–4.6), France (2.5, 95% BCI 1.9–4.4), United Kingdom (2.6, 95% BCI 2.0–5.1) and Italy (2.5, 95% BCI 2.0–4.4) (**Fig. 3**). While the incidence curves for European countries have consistently flattened and declined after the implementation of NPIs (suggesting R_0 has fallen below one), Brazil's daily incidence curve has continued to increase (**Fig. 2A and Extended Data Fig. 4**).

Severe acute respiratory infections (SARI) mostly reflect COVID-19 cases

In the early-phase of the COVID-19 epidemic in Brazil, we analysed the results for other respiratory pathogens tested in Brazil as part of the differential diagnosis by Central Public Health Laboratories and National Influenza Centres (Brazilian Ministry of Health) obtained from a REDcap platform[17] designed for COVID-19. The respiratory viruses most frequently identified between January 2020 and March 27, 2020, in patients with suspected but negative diagnosis of COVID-19 were influenza A virus (347 [14.3%] of 2,429 tested cases), influenza B virus (251 [10.3%] of 2,429) and human rhinovirus (136 [5.6%] of 2,429). We found co-detection of SARS-CoV-2 with six other respiratory viruses, the most frequently were influenza A (11 [0.5%] of 2,429) and human rhinovirus (6 [0.2%] of 2,429) (**Extended Fig. 7**).

The SIVEP-Gripe system started reporting hospitalised COVID-19 cases in early March 2020 (epidemiological week 10) (**Fig. 4**). In this system, the number of tested cases is unavailable. We found that the peak of influenza confirmed cases (n=447) occurred at

193 epidemiological week 12 (15-21 March 2020). During the same week 12, we detected an 8.5-
194 fold increase in total cases attributed to SARS-CoV-2 (*n*=3,789) and a 9.9-fold increase in
195 total cases notified as SARI with unknown aetiology (*n*=4,424) (**Fig. 4**). From January to
196 May 31, 2020, a total of 2,136 influenza cases and 272 cases caused by other respiratory
197 pathogens including human respiratory syncytial virus, human rhinovirus, adenovirus,
198 metapneumovirus were notified in the SIVEP-Gripe database. The low observed incidence of
199 influenza and other respiratory viruses may be influenced by limited testing for these viruses
200 during this period. Although NPIs may have an impact in reducing influenza virus
201 transmission, this does not necessarily reflect a lower co-circulation of other respiratory
202 viruses[18].
203
204 Socio-economic differences are associated with COVID-19 diagnosis

205 Until 31 May 2020, a total of 73,648 COVID-19 confirmed cases and 168,001 SARI
206 cases with unknown aetiology were notified in the SIVEP-Gripe system. We hypothesized
207 that the 2.3-fold increase of SARI cases with unknown aetiology was associated with
208 differential access to healthcare due to socio-economic factors.

209 We focus on the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo (MRSP) that has a population of
210 23 million inhabitants across 6 sub-regions (Central, West, North, East, Southeast and
211 Southwest) and 39 municipalities (**Fig. 5A**). To test this hypothesis, we obtained *per capita*
212 income at the census tract level (typically 150-300 households) in the MRSP, based on the
213 residential address of each case. We then linked this information to each patient's final
214 diagnosis outcome: COVID-19 confirmed case or SARI with unknown aetiology. While the
215 income distribution of SARI cases with unknown aetiology was similar to that of the MRSP
216 over the whole period (**Fig. 5B**), we observed that the income distribution individuals
217 conformed to be COVID-19-cases confirmed by laboratory and clinical criteria was initially

higher and decreased over time towards the distribution for the whole of the MRSP by epidemiological week 21 (**Fig. 5B**). Importantly, we found that the log odds of one or more confirmed COVID-19 case per census tract increased with per capita income in epidemiological weeks 12 and 22 (likelihood ratio test [LRT] *P*-value <0.001 (**Fig. 5B** and **Supplementary Table 2**). This provides statistical evidence of an association between confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis and *per capita* income, suggesting a socio-economic difference in access to COVID-19 diagnosis in the MRSP. For reference, we also provide a map of per capita income (**Fig. 5A**) and population density in each census tract (**Extended Data Fig. 8**).

We conducted a geospatial analysis to understand the distribution of relative risk of observing a COVID-19 case or an SARI cases with unknown aetiology in the MRSP, using a Bayesian method and adjusted for spatial and non-spatial effects defined by Besag-York-Mollié model[19] (**Fig. 5**). Our estimates show an increase in the relative risk of COVID-19 diagnosis in higher income census tracts between epidemiological weeks 12 to 21, especially in the central region of the MRSP (**Figs. 5A and 5C**). We observed a similar trend in the relative risk of SARI cases with unknown aetiology among residents of the central region. However, there is also increased probability of SARI cases with unknown aetiology in the southwest, west, north, and south sub-regions, where income per capita is typically lower. Overall, the relative risk of SARI cases with unknown aetiology is more spatially widespread in the MRSP than of confirmed COVID-19 cases (**Fig. 5C**).

The relative risk of SARI cases with unknown aetiology compared to confirmed COVID-19 cases in the central region of the MRSP decreases through time likely as a response to several NPIs implemented throughout the state of São Paulo (see **Supplementary Table 1**). By week 16, one month after the start of the NPIs in São Paulo, we detected an increased risk particularly of SARI cases with unknown aetiology outside the central region

of the MRSP, especially in the southwest region. SARI cases with unknown aetiology risk was also high in the east region. By week 21, the risk remained high throughout the central region and SARI cases with unknown aetiology risk decreased in the east region, possibly as a result of interventions targeting the reduction of SARS-CoV-2 transmission.

Demographics and characteristics of COVID-19 hospitalised and fatal cases in Brazil

Analysis of the age-sex structure of 67,180 confirmed COVID-19 cases notified on the SIVEP-Gripe system revealed a high proportion (44,027 [65.5%] of 67,180) of confirmed COVID-19 infections in middle or older-age individuals (≥50 years of age) and a lower proportion (1,454 [2.2%] of 67,180) in younger age groups (≤ 20 years of age) (**Fig. 6A**). The median age was 59 years (IQR = 44–72). The majority (38,654 [57.5%] of 67,180) were male. Similarly, 59% (14,498 of 24,519) of COVID-19 deaths were in men, and 85% (20,916 of 24,519) were in people aged ≥50 years. A total of 2.95% (1,983 of 67,180) cases were reported as nosocomial transmission, defined as a COVID-19 case acquired after hospitalization. Overall, 116 newborns (≤ one month old), 381 infants (≥1 to 12 month-old), 518 children (≥1 to 12 years old), and 258 adolescents (≥12 to 17 years of age) were diagnosed with COVID-19. In addition, 740 patients were pregnant, 61 in the first trimester, 172 in the second trimester, 447 in the third trimester, and 60 had missing gestational age.

By 31 May 2020, 91% (67,042 of 73,649) of patients with COVID-19 notified in the SIVEP-Gripe system had been hospitalized. Of these, 30.3% (22,332 of 73,649) were admitted to an intensive care unit (ICU). The median length of ICU stay for COVID-19 patients was five days (IQR, 2–10, range: 0-65 days), based on the ICU admission and discharge dates of 8,240 confirmed cases. Most symptoms reported by COVID-19 patients were cough (56,681 [85.2%] of 66,514 without missing data), fever (51,312 [79.6%] of

65,310) and dyspnoea (51,312 [76.6%] of 65,310) (**Fig. 6B**). These three symptoms compose part of the case definition of SARI in Brazil. In addition, 68% (40,806 of 60,400) of COVID-19 cases were hypoxic (O_2 saturation < 95%) reflecting the overall severity of cases notified on SIVEP-Gripe (as shown in **Fig. 1)**. The most prevalent comorbidities were cardiovascular disease (23,085 [66.5%] of 34,693 without missing data) and diabetes (17,271 [54.5%] of 31,672) (**Fig. 6A**). Among the COVID-19 patients, older age groups tended to have a higher proportion of comorbidities than younger age groups in different outcomes (**Fig. 6C**). The proportions of the general Brazilian population with cardiovascular disease and diabetes are 4.2%, and 6.2%, respectively[20]. A total of 83.7% (17,921 of 21,414 with complete comorbidity information) confirmed COVID-19 cases had at least one comorbidity (see **Supplementary Table 2** for information on data completeness).

Discussion

While the COVID-19 epidemic in Brazil continues to grow, details of its transmission potential and clinical and epidemiological characteristics remains poorly understood. We estimate a higher median transmission potential, R_0 of 3.1 (2.4–5.5), of SARS-CoV-2 in Brazil compared with Italy, UK, France, and Spain, which have point estimates of R_0 varying from 2.5 to 2.6, however the credible intervals overlap substancially. We have also observed rapid spread of COVID-19 through the country, with more populated and better-connected municipalities being affected earlier and less populated municipalities being affected at a later stage of the epidemic. In the São Paulo metropolitan region, we found a higher risk of diagnosed COVID-19 cases in census tracts with higher per capita income during the early-phase of COVID-19 epidemic but also as weeks progressed. This contrasts with the wider spread of SARI cases among sub-regions with lower per capita income. Our results provide new insights into the Brazilian COVID-19 epidemic and highlight the high transmission potential of SARS-CoV-2 in the country, the role of its large urban centres, and the lack of lockdown, the challenges in notification and non-equitable access to testing/diagnostic as factors potentially contributing to the rapid and sustained spread of the epidemic in Brazil.

Recent estimates of R_0 at the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic in Brazil have suggested that an infected individual would infect on average three or four others[21]. The credible intervals of our estimates broadly overlap with these observations and are lower compared to previously published estimates for Brazil[22]. As a comparison, reproduction number in Peru have been estimated at around 2.3 (2.0–2.5)[23]. Since the start of the epidemic in Brazil, several types of NPI have been adopted with varied success by the country's 27 federal units and 5,596 municipalities. Virus transmission seems to have dropped substantially in most affected states[21] and also in the city of São Paulo[24]. However, the estimated reproduction number remains above one[21,24]. Thus, only mitigation (and not

304 suppression) of the epidemic has been achieved so far, which has been linked to substantial
305 excess deaths due to poorer health care available[25,26]. Closer surveillance of viral
306 transmission at the local scales and an assessment of the impact of the different control
307 measures on COVID-19 transmission will help to determine a "optimal" mitigation strategy
308 to minimize infections and reduce healthcare demand in Brazil. Moreover, continued
309 monitoring of the genetic diversity of the virus lineages circulating in Brazil[24] will be
310 important, as recent data suggests that virus diversity may play a role in virus
311 transmissibility[27,28].

312 We find that 65.5% of notifications in the SIVEP-Gripe system, which includes most
313 severe COVID-19 cases are from patients aged ≥50 years of age. This observation is
314 remarkably similar to current estimates for Latin America[10], where 65% of the individuals
315 ≥50 years of age have been estimated to be at high risk of severe COVID-19, defined as
316 individuals with at least one condition who would require hospitalisation if infected.
317 Moreover, we find that 57% and 59% of the severe COVID-19 cases and deaths
318 (respectively) notified in SIVEP-Gripe were male, and that the most frequent comorbidities
319 were cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Overall 84% of SIVEP-Gripe notifications had at
320 least one underlying condition; of these, 21% (*n*=9,471/45,480) are included in the working
321 age (16 to 65 years of age). Moreover, only 2.6% (n=1892/73,673) of the COVID-19
322 confirmed cases notified in the SIVEP-Gripe system include occupation. Information on
323 socio-economic determinants as well as occupation and race/ethnicity are critical[29] as this
324 allows to prioritisation of control efforts, for example towards healthcare workers and
325 patients attending hospitals[30] or work settings[31].

326 Our data uncovers a socio-economic bias in testing and diagnostics in current
327 surveillance guidelines and suggests that the number of notified confirmed case counts may

328 substantially underestimate the number of cases in the general population, particularly in
329 regions of lower socio-economic status. Socio-economic differences are associated with
330 access to healthcare[32] and should be taken into account when designing targeted
331 interventions. We find that the proportion of SARI cases with unknown aetiology to
332 confirmed COVID-19 cases has increased across the entire country (as of June 15, 2020, the
333 number of notified SARI cases with unknown aetiology is nearly 2-fold greater than
334 confirmed COVID-19 cases). Based on clinical and epidemiological grounds, it is likely that
335 many SARI cases with unknown aetiology are caused by SARS-CoV-2. In order rigorously
336 establish the contribution of non-SARS-CoV-2 infections to the SARI cases, we would need
337 additional denominator data to understand the level of testing for these viruses, i.e., the
338 negative test results. Our findings with regards to socio-economic bias are likely to apply to
339 other states and regions of Brazil and highlight the importance of scaling up surveillance and
340 laboratory capacity within Latin America. Indeed, the largest Brazilian serosurvey conducted
341 to date suggests that undetedected cases may be seven times higher than reported cases[33].

342 We further show that SARI cases with unknown aetiology are associated with lower
343 socio-economic status in the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo. The socio-economic
344 disparities observed here were particularly evident at the beginning of the outbreak (**Fig. 5B**).
345 This can be explained in part by (*i*) the high proportion of early cases in returning travellers
346 with higher income and better access to private laboratories for diagnostics, and (*ii*) the more
347 limited access to freely available diagnostic screening. For example, between February 25
348 and March 18, 2020, two thirds (586 [66.9%] of 876) of diagnostic tests were performed in
349 private medical laboratories where costs varied typically between 300-690 Brazilian Reais
350 (BRL) (for context, current minimum monthly salary is 1,045 BRL). Thus, the true burden of
351 the epidemic in lower income neighbourhoods is most likely underestimated. In New York
352 City, for example, poorer neighbourhoods had higher disease burden, driven in part by the

movement of essential workers using public transport during the pandemic[34]. Data-driven analyses are urgently needed to help tackling health inequities during the ongoing epidemic in Brazil. Strategies to evaluate and control transmission should consider differential assess to COVID-19 diagnosis for lower income populations, changes in notification systems and delays in reporting which are key to accurately determine rates of epidemic growth[35]. Innovative infectious disease surveillance approaches such as those obtained from aggregated mobility data, when used properly, could help supporting public health actions across the COVIV-19 epidemic[36-39].

Epidemics of COVID-19 and influenza seem to have occurred simultaneously in Brazil (**Fig.4** and **Extended Data Figure 7**) and symptoms overlap between the two infections. We detected co-circulation of eight other respiratory viruses, the most common respiratory infections were influenza A and B, and human rhinovirus. We also detected multiple co-detection of SARS-CoV-2 with other respiratory viruses, such as influenza A, B and human metapneumovirus, which have also been reported elsewhere[40,41]. Although, co-infections with other respiratory viruses have been reported in other countries[42-44], no difference in clinical disease severity between cases with and without viral co-infection has been observed thus far[45]. The co-circulation of other respiratory pathogens highlights the need of scaling up laboratory and molecular screening of SARS-CoV-2 and other respiratory viruses in public laboratories across Brazil[15]. Continued molecular and genomic surveillance will be important to determine patterns of virus transmission and guide public health measures in forthcoming phases of the epidemic[24,46-48].

There are several limitations to this study. First, detailed individual-level data were only available for REDcap and SIVEP-Gripe systems, in which many cases had incomplete documentation, particularly regarding comorbidities. Second, our socio-economic analysis was based partially on ecological inference, using the *per capita* income in the census tract of

residence (tather than the actual income of the patients), and assuming the same denominator for each census tract (~300 households). We emphasize that our spatial analysis is prone to metholodological constraints caused by ecological fallacy and the modifiable areal unit problem. These constraints are inherent to any spatial analysis of aggregated data. Despite the above-mentioned limitation, census tract corresponds to small areas of analysis, of no more than 300 households but often less than that. Social science literature on Brazil not only highlights the country's socio-economic inequality but also how it is spatially pronounced, for that reason, census tract remains a useful tool to infer *per capita* income in the absence of individual-level data. In addition, our databases were predominantly composed of hospitalised COVID-19 patients, and we were unable to evaluate the rate of hospitalisation among the different socio-economic status. In the future, robust modelling of the relationships between socio-economic factors and disease severity will require a data collection system with detailed information on symptoms/signs and comorbidities both in severe and non-severe cases. Finally, our retrospective study has focused predominantly on symptomatic patients that presented or were referred to health services for testing. Therefore, we are unable and do not attempt to describe the full spectrum of disease, nor can we describe the full epidemiological picture of this epidemic.

In conclusion, we have provided a comprehensive assessment of COVID-19 notification and transmission in Brazil. Our findings provide important context for diagnostic screening and health-care planning, and for future precision studies focussing on the impact of non-pharmaceutical and pharmaceutical interventions, and the effect of social health determinats on COVID-19 transmission.

Methods

Ethical approval and case definitions

This retrospective national study was supported by the Brazilian Ministry of Health and ethical approval was provided by the national ethical review board (Comissão Nacional de Ética em Pesquisa, CONEP), protocol number CAAE 30127020.0.0000.0068.

A patient presenting with an acute respiratory syndrome (fever and at least one sign/symptom of respiratory illness), and (i) history of travel to a location with community transmission of COVID-19, or, (ii) contact with a confirmed or probable COVID-19 case in the 14 days preceding symptom onset, or (iii) absence of an alternative diagnosis that completely explains the clinical presentation[6] was considered as suspected COVID-19 case.

Initially, a traveller was considered a suspected case only when arriving from China, although the definition of suspected cases associated with travel later included Japan, Singapore, South Korea, North Korea, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia (February 21, 2020), Italy, Germany, Australia, United Arab Emirates, Philippines, France, Iran and Malaysia (February 25, 2020), the USA, Canada, Switzerland, United Kingdom and 4 additional countries (March 3, 2020). From March 9, 2020 onwards, the Ministry of Health decided to start testing all hospitalised patients with severe respiratory symptoms, regardless of travel history.

Contact with a confirmed or probable COVID-19 case was defined as face-to-face or direct contact with a COVID-19 case, or direct contact in a health-care setting. Moreover, patients reporting travel to an affected country in the preceding 14 days were considered imported cases. Cases not meeting this criterion were considered to be due to local transmission.

Suspected COVID-19 cases were confirmed by laboratory testing (i.e., molecular diagnostic with real-time quantitative PCR), or by clinical-epidemiological criteria. In the latter case, the classification is used when laboratory testing is inconclusive or unavailable, as recommended by Brazilian Ministry of Health guidelines, dated April 6, 2020[49], and by the World Health Organization interim guidance, dated March 25, 2020[50].

Individual-level notification of COVID-19 and SARI cases with unknown aetiology from Brazil

To investigate individual-level diagnostic, demographic, self-reported travel history, place of residence and likely place of infection, differential diagnosis for other respiratory pathogens, as well as clinical details, including comorbidities, we collected three epidemiological data sources: (*i*) *n*= 67,344 suspected and *n*=1,468 confirmed cases notified to the REDCap database from February 25 to March 25, 2020; (*ii*) *n*=73,637 confirmed SIVEP-Gripe (*Sistema de Informação de Vigilância Epidemiológica da Gripe*) from March 1 to May 31, 2020 (available at https://shiny.hmg.saude.gov.br/dataset); and (*iii*) *n*=514,200 confirmed cases from aggregated data daily released at the *Portal do COVID-19* (Brazilian Health Ministry) from February 25 to May 31, 2020 (available at www.covid.saude.gov.br/). SIVEP-Gripe system notifies severe acute respiratory infections (SARI), which can be defined as an acute respiratory infection with onset within the last 10 days of fever (≥ 38º C) and cough, and typically requires hospitalization (see also **Fig. 1A**).

Basic reproduction number (R_0) estimation

We estimated the basic reproduction number (R_0) for SARS-CoV-2 using time series of confirmed COVID-19 cases at the national and state level: São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro,

Ceará and Amazonas (**Extended Data Fig. 1**). To avoid the impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPI) on R_0 estimates, only data points up to 14 days after the implementation of the strictest interventions were used. As lockdown was not imposed in Brazil, the strictest measure was considered closure of non-essential commerce. For European countries, the date of lockdown was used as NPI date. NPI dates for Brazilian states were collected from state decrees. For Brazil as a whole the NPI date for São Paulo state was used, as by that point most states in Brazil had already closed non-essential commerce. For the European countries, lockdown dates were collected from https://www.covid19healthsystem.org/mainpage.aspx.

To test the estimation routine and provide international context, this analysis was replicated on equivalent time series from Italy, Spain, France, and the United Kingdom. Aggregated USA and China epidemiological data were not included due to possible heterogeneity within each country. Daily counts of confirmed cases were modelled with a negative binomial distribution with a mean equal to a fixed portion, ρ, of the total daily number of cases in an exponential model of incidence. The functional form of the incidence model is $\rho R_0 \gamma i_0 e^{(R0 - 1)\gamma t}$, which comes from an exponential approximation of the early dynamics where individuals cease to be infectious at a rate γ. The factor of $\rho R_0 \gamma$ accounts for the partial observation of the incidence. In this analysis was not accounted for the delay between infection and reporting.

Since ρ and i_0 only appear together, they were unidentifiable, we combine them into a single parameter, ξ. This identifiability issue prevents us from estimating the prevalence without additional information to inform either i_0 or ρ. The analysis was carried out in a Bayesian framework with an uninformative prior distribution on R_0 and an informative prior on the removal rate, all other parameters had weakly-informative prior distributions (details in the **Supplementary Information**, pp. 2-3). The informative prior ensured an individual is infectious for an average of 5 to 14 days[51] (**Supplementary Information**, **Fig. 5-6**). Standard

diagnostics were used to check whether the Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) samples were satisfactory. Full details of the model used, the estimation process and convergence of MCMC chains can be found in the **Supplementary Information**, pp. 2-3.

Geospatial analysis of COVID-19 cases and socio-economic status

The average household *per capita* income for the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo (MRSP) was retrieved at the census tract level from the 2010 census (https://censo2010.ibge.gov.br/). We geocoded 24,063 COVID-19 cases and 32,914 SARI cases with unknown aetiology from MRSP, which were notified until May 28, 2020. The geo-coding was based on self-reported residential address or postal codes using the Galileo algorithm[52] and coordinates were confirmed using the Google API.

To elucidate the distribution of COVID-19 cases and SARI cases with unknown aetiology cases, we mapped the mean relative risk of COVID-19 and SARI cases with unknown aetiology at the census tract level for MRSP for three epidemiological weeks (12, 16, and 21). As the observation process was a confounding process and without additional assumptions (e.g. covariates), we cannot disentangle an increase in prevalence from an increase in case ascertainment. The cumulative number of cases in each tract is modelled as a Poisson random variable with a mean specified by the expected number of cases under a null model adjusted by tract specific risk due to spatial and non-spatial effects: the Besag-York-Mollié model[19]. Estimates of the risk of COVID-19 diagnosis or SARI cases with unknown aetiology were obtained using approximate Bayesian methods (Integrated Nested Laplace Approximation). A complete specification of the model and the computational methodology can be found in the **Supplementary Information,** pp.1-2.

The association between final diagnostic category (COVID-19 or SARI cases with unknown aetiology) and socio-economic status in the subset of cases in the MRSP with geocoded residential information was evaluated using logistic regression models. We focused on the cases in epidemiological weeks 12, 16 and 22. Within each of those weeks, if a census tract reported any COVID-19 or SARI cases with unknown aetiology, we calculated the proportion of the number of COVID-19 cases. Since most census tracts reported only one case each week, the proportion of COVID-19 of each census tract were mostly either 0 or 1 in a given week. For this reason, we defined two categories: (i) the census tract only reported SARI of unknown etiology, i.e. no COVID-19 cases, (ii) the census tract reported at least one COVID-19 case in the week. We used these two categories as the binary response, and applied logistic regression models to investigate whether income per capita was associated with this response. The analyses were adjusted by the logarithm of the population sizes and the longitude and latitude coordinates of the census tracts. The analysis was performed individually for each of epidemiological weeks 12, 16 and 22. Further details of this analysis can be found in the **Supplementary Information**, pp. 1-2.

Data availability

Datasets of clinical and laboratory data presented in the current study from SIVEP-Gripe and *Portal do COVID-19* database are available at https://doi.org/10.5061/dryad.n8pk0p2sp. The REDCap database and geolocation information are available from the corresponding authors upon request and ethical approval.

Code availability

The custom code used in this study is avaiable at https://doi.org/10.5061/dryad.n8pk0p2sp.

Author contributions

W.M.S, L.F.B, D.S.C, R.H.M.P, C.A.P, J.C, J-P.C, V.H.N, A.E.Z, J.M, F.C.S.S, P.S.A, F.G, A.A.S-S, B.G, C-H.W, S.L, N.G, S.B.O, K.V.P, M.C.T.D.B, V.B.G.P, C.K.V.B, F.G, W.A.F.A, F.F.S.T.F, E.M.M and W.K.O collected the epidemiological, spatial and clinical data and processed statistical data. N.R.F, W.M.S, L.F.B, C-H.W, J-P.C, D.C.S, R.H.M.P, J.M, E.C.S, P.M, S.L, L.A, A.A.S-S, G.L, A.T, M.F.V-G, M.U.G.K, R.S.A, N.A, P.M, O.J.B, I.O.M.S, N.G, G.L, O.G.P, A.E.Z, M.L.N, and J.C interpreted the results and wrote the manuscript. All authors read and revised the final manuscript. W.M.S, L.F.B, J.C, and N.R.F are responsible for summarising epidemiological and clinical data.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Legend figures

Fig. 1 | Timeline of national COVID-19 notification systems in Brazil. The REDCap system operated between late January until March 25, 2020. Aggregated numbers from e-SUS-VE and SIVEP-Gripe data for mild and hospitalised COVID-19 cases, respectively, are updated on a daily basis at the *Portal do COVID-19* website (https://covid.saude.gov.br/).

Fig. 2 | COVID-19 epidemiology in Brazil. a. Number of COVID-19 cases (blue filled line) and deaths (blue dashed line) reported to the Ministry of Health (*Portal do COVID-19* website), and number of COVID-19 confirmed cases (salmon filled line) and number of SARI with unknown aetiology (salmon dashed line) reported to the SIVEP-Gripe database. **b**. First COVID-19 cases by date and Brazilian municipal population size based on the Ministry of Health, from March 28, 2020. Each circle represents the first confirmed COVID-19 case in the municipality (n= 4,196 Brazilian municipalities). **c**. Map coloured according to the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases per state reported to the Ministry of Health (*Portal do COVID-19* website). Circle sizes are proportional to the number of reported COVID-19 deaths in each federal unit. SPBR1 is the first detected SARS-CoV-2 infection in Brazil [8]. The codes for the 27 federal units in Brazil were: Acre (AC), Alagoas (AL), Amapá (AP), Amazonas (AM), Bahia (BA), Ceará (CE), Distrito Federal (DF), Espírito Santo (ES), Goiás (GO), Maranhão (MA), Mato Grosso (MT), Mato Grosso do Sul (MS), Minas Gerais (MG), Pará (PA), Paraíba (PB), Paraná (PR), Pernambuco (PE), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Rio Grande do Norte (RN), Rio Grande do Sul (RS), Rondônia (RO), Roraima (RR), Santa Catarina (SC), São Paulo (SP), Sergipe (SE) and Tocantins (TC).

Fig.3 | Estimated R_0 values for four Brazilian states and selected countries. Left, R_0 for the Amazonas, Ceará, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo states. Right, R_0 for Brazil, France, Italy, Spain and United Kingdom. Daily number of infections used in each analysis can be found in **Extended Figs. 3-4**. Daily number of infections and prior distributions can be found in **Extended Figs. 5-6**.

Fig. 4 | COVID-19, SARI with unknown aetiology and influenza. Red and orange lines indicate cases notified in 2020, blue lines indicate cases notified in 2016 for influenza (filled blue line) and SARI cases with unknown aetiology (dashed blue line). Grey lines indicate influenza and SARI cases with unknown aetiology for 2017, 2018 and 2019.

Fig. 5 | COVID-19 diagnosis and socio-economic factors in the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo. A. Spatial distribution of income per capita of MRSP based on census tract of residence. **B.** Distribution of household *per capita* income based on census tract of residence for COVID-19 cases and SARI cases with unknown aetiology. The distribution of average *per capita* income for MRSP as a whole, weighted by population size, is shown on the left. **C.** Posterior mean relative risk of COVID-19 confirmed diagnosis (upper panels) and SARI cases with unknown aetiology (lower panels) for epidemiological weeks 12 (pre-implementation of NPI in São Paulo state, and weeks 16 and 21 (post-implementation of NPI in São Paulo state) (see **Methods** for details).

Fig. 6 | Age-sex structure and clinical features of confirmed COVID-19 cases notified on the SIVEP-Gripe system. A. Age classes are shown on the left of the panel. On-going cases were those still active on the SIVEP-Gripe database and without a recorded clinical outcome

761 (death or recovered). **B.** Symptoms, signs and comorbidities of confirmed COVID-19 cases.
762 **C**. Comorbidities among confirmed COVID-19 cases according to age groups and outcome.
763 Confirmed COVID-19 cases with complete comorbidity and outcome (death or recovery)
764 information (n = 15,720). Confirmed COVID-19 cases with complete information on
765 comorbidities and ITU admission (n = 19,409). Horizontal axes show the proportion of
766 patients in each age/outcome stratified with each of the comorbidities recorded.
767