

From dream to nightmare, interrupted trajectories: an analysis of the situation of Brazilians deported from the USA residing in the states of Minas Gerais and Rondônia, Brazil

Introduction

According to Montalvo and Batalova (2024), the number of Brazilian immigrants surveyed in the 2010 and 2022 American censuses increased in the period from 340 thousand to 619 thousand, presenting the second highest growth rate among South American countries in both censuses. In the 2022 census, Brazilians ranked third in the number of South Americans residing in the USA. On the other hand, data from the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024) indicates, in 2023, a much more expressive number of Brazilians live in the USA, 2.1 million people, which would represent 41.7% of Brazilians living abroad. Regardless of the source, there is no doubt that the Brazilian presence in the USA has special importance in the context of Brazilian migration. This process is not recent and emerged through the construction of networks that date back to the middle of the 20th century and include several Brazilian states, with special importance being the states of Minas Gerais, in the Southeast Region, and Rondônia, in the North Region (Margolis, 1994; Sales, 1999; Martes, 2000; Soares, 2002). In the last decade, for several reasons, this flow has expanded (Montalvo and Batalova, 2024), mainly due to easier access to information (Silva et al., 2024).

According to De Hass (2024), in general, the number of irregular immigrants is not significant when compared to the group of immigrants; however, in certain communities and depending on the estimates used, the results may indicate some relevance for the group of irregular immigrants. Although there is no precise data on the number of Brazilian immigrants in the USA and even in relation to their migratory status, estimates indicate that approximately 35% of Brazilians residing in the USA are in an irregular situation (Van Hook et al., 2023). Between 2018 and 2022, while the estimate of the total number of undocumented residents on American soil indicated a drop of 5%, the estimate of the number of Brazilians in this situation pointed to an increase of 21% in the same period (Baker and Warren, 2024).

The presence of undocumented immigrants leads to the action of police forces who try to curb illegal immigration. When it comes to Brazilians, information from US Customs and Borden Protection (2024) indicates that the number of apprehensions of Brazilians has been falling since 2021, when 58,059 people were detained, reaching 32,492 in 2023. However, in 2024, until July, the number of seizures reached 29,200 people of Brazilian nationality, indicating that the 2023 numbers will be exceeded. These seizures occur both at the borders and in other areas of the country. There are several processes that apprehended immigrants go through, which depend on several factors that may be aspects of the legislation in force or even the situation of the immigrant when they arrive at the border.

The processes, in any case of detention, can evolve into the possibility of remaining on American soil in a provisional situation or regularized with a temporary residence permit or can lead to deportation, both for those apprehended at the border and those who, in an illegal situation, were apprehended in some region of the country. According to the Track Immigration website, from July 1998 until the same month of 2024, 153,202 Brazilians underwent judicial procedures, and 10,768 were deported on flights to Brazil. Since the

beginning of the series(1998 to 07/2024) and until 2012, the percentage of deportees per month did not exceed, on average, 2.0% of the total for the period; however, from 2019 until July 2024, the volume of deportees represented more than 70% of the total. It is also from 2019 that an agreement between American and Brazilian authorities defined Confins airport, in the metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte, as the disembarkation place for deportees coming from the USA, on a flight chartered by the American government. The conditions under which these deportees arrive in Brazil are in total disregard of Brazilian legislation, since these people are handcuffed throughout the journey, even in Brazilian airspace. As Dias et al. (2024) indicate, these deportation procedures are also one of the expressions of the political alignment between the Brazilian and US governments in the geopolitics of dealing with international migration in South America.

The objective of this research is to contribute to the understanding of the networks that facilitate the smuggling of migrants, mainly in the eastern regions of the state of Minas Gerais and the eastern region of the state of Rondônia, states that are of great importance in the migration process to the USA. We also seek to understand the reasons for irregular migration and the risks inherent to the migratory process chosen by migrants. Finally, it is hoped that the results can support policies to welcome these immigrants and combat the actions of "coyotes."

Methodology

Considering that all deportees arrive at the same airport, the option presented was to do the interview upon arrival, upon disembarking. However, this strategy would not have a good result, as the potential interviewees were people who had spent 10 to 12 hours in handcuffs on a flight with several stops since leaving the United States and, possibly, would not be willing to undergo an interview. Therefore, it was decided to divide the survey into two simultaneous stages. The first step was to approach the airport and gather some information, including the city to which the migrant would be going in Brazil. This would provide indications of the cities with the highest number of deported migrants. Other information, such as the place of entry into the USA and the conditions of detention and incarceration, was collected too. The second procedure was to carry out in-depth interviews in cities with the highest number of returnees. Applying Latour's proposition (1994, 2012) in an adapted way, we sought to identify, in the regions with the highest number of deported returnees, researchers who already worked in the field of international migration. These researchers formed teams with people from the region who had access to people deported from the USA in their networks. The group went through an in-person and remote training process and went into the field to conduct interviews, which were recorded and later transcribed. In the first two months of research, some obstacles to the survey were observed. Firstly, the arrival of flights is uncertain, and, on average, there is one flight on the last Friday of each month. On average, there are 100 people per flight. In the first contact with deported people at the airport, there are several situations of refusal of interviews, and to overcome the problem, the opportunity was created to offer access to electrical outlets to charge cell phones for those arriving. This attitude, the only one in terms of a welcome at the airport, generated empathy with the returnees, and thus it was possible to increase the number of responses, but even so, on average, only 40% of passengers are interviewed. At the same time, the survey in destination cities was not having the desired effect. Despite the interviewers having the contact details of the deportees, sometimes even relatives, there was a lot of refusal to grant the interview. Perhaps some hesitation in telling the

situation experienced or fear of revealing the smuggling network, since, in most cases, the cities are small and the person responsible for preparing the trip, Coyote, is part of the interviewee's relationship network and could have his activity compromised. The option found was to maintain the process in the destination cities but, at the same time, expand the team at the airport, and also carry out in-depth interviews.

As there are two different collection sites and under different conditions, two quantities of questionnaires and interviews were defined for each situation. In the case of the airport survey, 300 questionnaires were administered, which, roughly speaking, corresponds to 25% of the number of deportees disembarked in a year. In relation to the in-depth interviews, two areas of activity were defined, one in the east of Rondônia and the other in the eastern region of the state of Minas Gerais and, later, the airport. In the end, 30 interviews were carried out. The data collection process was carried out from March to August 2024.

Results

The route

According to reports heard, the process begins with personal contact with an intermediary of the travel organizer at the migrant's place of residence. The intermediary provides the contact details of the person who will organize the trip. All transactions are carried out remotely without the interested party meeting the person responsible for organizing the trip. The price varies depending on the "type" of service to be provided. A journey that involves leaving your place of residence and arriving in an American city can cost up to USD 20,000 per person. On the other hand, if the proposal is to enter American territory, and present yourself to the migration authorities, and present a demand for refuge, known as the "Cai-Cai" modality, the price can reach USD 15,000 for a family of two adults and one child. Payment, in most cases, is made in installments, between 20% and 30% of the value, before departure, and the remainder is paid in minimum installments of USD 1,000 per month as soon as the immigrant finds a job in the USA. It may happen that a guarantee is required to pay the debt, such as a car or property, but as the intermediary, in most cases, knows the family of those who requested the "service," there is the possibility that relatives will be pressured to pay off the debt. In this context, the immigrant feels obliged to pay off the debt. If the crossing does not happen as agreed, for example, if the person is deported, the immigrant is not obliged to pay the debt. Some reports indicated that, if the immigrant wants to make another attempt, the price is lower and, in some cases, there is no charge at all, as the intermediary expects to receive the unpaid portion of the debt. Another point that favors the new attempt is that in the reports there was an indication that in the second and subsequent attempts, the immigrant is accompanied by other people, usually friends, who are going for the first time. Therefore, for the intermediary, a new attempt can be profitable, as new customers are introduced by the old user. In one of the reports, it was indicated by a person who was going for the third time that she played the role of coordinator of the group of immigrants who made the crossing, taking care of payments and contacts in Mexico. In the survey carried out at the airport of Confins, approximately 50% of those interviewed were thinking about the possibility of making another attempt to enter the USA.

The detention

The flights that transport deportees include people who had their migration path interrupted at the border and those who were detained after some time living in the USA. In this last

situation, there are people who were detained for illegal entry or who stayed for a period longer than that allowed in their travel document. For those detained at the border, reports indicate that, at first, they are placed in a room with a low temperature, known as a "glacier," where they can stay for a few hours or days before being transferred to other centers of detention. The holding period can vary from days to months. Families with children can be released more quickly, being able to leave detention and be available to the courts for a future hearing. There is no single standard that can be established. People with similar stories of persecution in Brazil, stories usually constructed from untrue reports, are treated differently; some remain in prison and others are released to await the court hearing. For those who are detained, in most cases there are transfers from one detention center to another; there were reports of transfers to five different detention centers within a period of five months. During detention, the opportunity to work in the cleaning and kitchen of the institution is offered. The salary paid for this activity is USD 1.00 per hour, and the resource goes to an "account" opened for the detainee, the same account that receives the money that was with the immigrant at the time of his detention. This resource can be used to purchase additional telephone credits and some supplementary food. Communication with the family is done through devices available at the detention center, using credits provided by the authorities or purchased by the detainee. The reports indicate that conversations should be very short, and if, due to any problem, there is a delay in answering the call, the credit will be lost.

The return

Return conditions are painful. The first point to highlight is that returnees are not aware of the date of the flight. In some reports there is an indication that it was through lawyers who represented the immigrants that news of the flight was heard; however, for some people the confirmation of the end of incarceration happened at the moment they were called to check the belongings collected at the time of detention. During the flight and stopovers, male migrants are handcuffed. Handcuffs are removed upon arrival or near the final destination. This situation is considered illegal from the moment you enter Brazilian airspace. Upon arrival at the airport, there is no support structure for these immigrants. In most cases, they arrive with the clothes they wore while they were detained and with their belongings in a cloth bag also provided by the American authorities, which is the first thing they try to get rid of. People arrive on the flight from various parts of Brazil, with more than 50.0% of the people approached indicating the state of Minas Gerais as their residence; Rondônia and São Paulo were indicated as their state of origin by approximately 20% of those returned.

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