

# Brazilians Giving Up Their American Dream

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Like hundreds of thousands of middle-class Brazilians who moved to the United States over the last two decades, Jose Osvandir Borges and his wife, Elisabeth, came on tourist visas and stayed as illegal immigrants, putting down roots in ways they never expected.

After packing up their plasma-screen TV, scholastic trophies and other fruits of 12 prosperous years in the Ironbound in Newark, the couple and their American-born daughter, Marianna, 10, were scheduled to fly back to [Brazil](#) for good this morning. They expect their son, Thiago, 21, to follow in a year or two, despite his reluctance to leave the only land that feels like home.

“You can’t spend your entire life waiting to be legal,” said Mr. Borges, 42, reflecting on a hard decision born of lost hopes, new fears and changing economies in both countries since he arrived in 1996. By law, the couple faces a 10-year bar on re-entering the United States, even as visitors.

That decision — to give up on life in the United States — is being made by more and more Brazilians across the country, according to consular officials, travel agencies swamped by one-way ticket bookings, and community leaders in the neighborhoods that Brazilian immigrants have transformed, from Boston to Pompano Beach, Fla.

No one can say how many are leaving. But in the last half year, the reverse migration has become unmistakable among Brazilians in the United States, a population estimated at 1.1 million by Brazil’s government — four to five times the official census figures.

To explain an often wrenching decision to pull up stakes, homeward-bound Brazilians point to a rising fear of deportation and a slumping American economy. Many cite the expiration of driver’s licenses that can no longer be renewed under tougher rules, coupled with the steep drop in the value of the dollar against the currency of Brazil, where the economy has improved.

“You put it all together, and why should you stay in an environment like that if you have a place like Brazil, where there’s hope, a light at the end of the tunnel and it’s not a train to run you over?” said Pedro Coelho, a businessman in Mount Vernon, N.Y., who is known as the mayor of Brazilians in Westchester County. “Are they leaving? Yes, by the hundreds.”

In Massachusetts, says Fausto da Rocha, the founder of the Boston-area Brazilian Immigrant Center, his compatriots — many here illegally — are leaving by the thousands, some after losing homes in the subprime mortgage crisis. In New York and New Jersey, travel agents and others who sell airline seats say that one-way bookings to Brazil have more than doubled since last year, to about 150 daily from Kennedy International Airport, and that flights are sold out through February.

And at Brazil's consulate in Miami, which serves Brazilians in five Southeastern states, officials said a recent survey of moving companies and travel agencies confirmed what they had already surmised from their foot traffic: More Brazilians are leaving the region than arriving — the reversal of an upward curve that seemed unstoppable as recently as 2005, when Brazilians unable to meet tightened visa requirements were sneaking across the United States-Mexico border in record numbers.

It is too soon to say whether the reverse migration of Brazilians puts them in the vanguard of a larger trend among immigrants, or underscores their distinctiveness. Like Mr. Borges, who said he was poorly paid as a university teacher of religious studies in his native city of Curitiba, they generally come from more urban and educated classes than other major groups of illegal immigrants from Latin America, studies show. Many returning now have been investing their American earnings in Brazilian property.

But their own explanation for the surge back to Brazil contradicts conventional wisdom on both sides of the [immigration](#) debate.

For years, advocates of giving people like the Borgeses a chance to earn legal status have argued that illegal immigrants will only be driven further underground by enforcement measures like raids or denying them driver's licenses. Advocates of harsher restrictions and penalties have argued that illegal immigration is now growing independently of the ebb and flow of the American economy. Returning Brazilians defy both contentions.

Faced with diminishing rewards and rising expenses in the United States, long separated from aging relatives in Brazil, "people say, 'Is this worth it, being illegal, being scared?'" said Maxine L. Margolis, a professor of anthropology at the [University of Florida](#) in Gainesville who has written extensively on Brazilians in the United States.

There are regional variations, but the pattern is consistent. In South Florida, the expiration of a driver's license is often a turning point for families already caught short by the slump in housing construction, said Sister Judi Clemens, a pastoral assistant with Our Lady Aparecida Mission, which serves five different Brazilian communities in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Miami. She noted that until seven years ago, Brazilians with tourist visas could get Florida licenses valid for eight years, but they are all expiring now and cannot be renewed.

"There's no public transportation here in Florida, so people drive to work in fear and trembling," worried that a traffic stop could mean months in immigration detention, she said. "A lot of people have just simply said, 'I've had enough.'"

In Massachusetts, where there is more public transportation, a spate of high-profile immigration raids, coupled with home foreclosures, have played a key role in the exodus, said community leaders like Mr. da Rocha, a legal resident who came in 1989. "I believe we lost 5,000 Brazilians only this year," he said. "The landlords are going to face a crisis soon."

While Brazil does not yet offer the job opportunities of Ireland, which has drawn back emigrants in droves, neither is it an economically bleak or war-torn country. And like Italian immigrants early in the 20th century, who typically planned to return to Italy —

half of them eventually doing so — many Brazilians arrived with the intention of going back as soon as they met their financial goals.

But like the Borges family, they soon changed their timetable.

“We came here to save enough money to buy a house” in Brazil, Mr. Borges said, recalling the early weeks when the family slept in a friend’s basement and he worked in construction for the first time. They expected to return to Brazil after two years.

Instead, he found his inner entrepreneur. He started a plumbing and construction business that soon employed upward of seven compatriots, paid taxes and helped build name-brand hotels in three states.

But in 2005, as the construction boom began to go bust, larger companies, prompted by labor unions, started to demand working papers, he said. And when his crew could not produce them, they were let go.

As the housing market faltered, weekly earnings in his business shrank from a high of \$6,000 to barely \$2,000, he said. Expenses like gas and rent rose, making it harder for him and Ms. Borges, who cleaned houses in New York, to pay off loans for the farm they were buying in Brazil.

The dollar, which once bought four Brazilian reals, dropped to a historic low of 1.7 reals in May. Then in June came their personal tipping point: the collapse of the bipartisan bill in Congress that would have offered them, and millions of other illegal residents, a path to legal status.

“After the law didn’t pass, it was like all the hope went away at once,” said Mr. Borges, who had traveled, with other members of St. James Catholic Church in Newark, to rallies supporting the bill in Trenton and Washington.

In past years, he allowed, he spent \$26,000 on dubious and doomed efforts to secure a green card. Now, he hopes to make a living by processing sugar cane for ethanol on his Brazilian farm. “If we had papers, we’d stay forever,” said Ms. Borges, 41, who has been active in their children’s public schools. “We love this community.”

Proudly, they showed off the trophy that Marianna won in third grade in an anti-littering poster contest, for a design that is now featured in shop windows throughout the Ironbound.

It is in such neighborhoods, where Brazilians brought fresh bustle to faded storefronts or abandoned factories, that the departures are being felt most keenly.

“I’m scared,” said Francine Melo, the owner of the travel agency in Newark where Mr. Borges bought three one-way tickets for \$1,708. “I make my living through these people.”

Another of her last-time customers, Norma dos Santos, a former house cleaner, said she felt she had no choice. Seven years after overstaying her visa, she said, she does not

drive to work or pick up her children at school for fear that a traffic stop could put her in immigration detention.

“It’s just getting harder and harder to stay here without documents,” she said.

Still, she is uncertain that she is doing right by her American-born children, a newborn and a 2-year old boy.

“I’m worried they’ll grow up and ask me, ‘How could you have left America?’” she said.