

# ICE Air Deportations

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## Has COVID-19 Changed Anything?



Witness at  
The Border  
- May 5, 2020



## INTRODUCTION

**The pandemic rages and ICE Air continues to shuttle detainees between detention centers and place them on deportation flights without regard for the safety of their passengers, employees or contractors.** Moreover, without concern for the receiving countries, many of which have undeveloped, ill-equipped, and over taxed medical emergency capabilities. There can be no doubt that these flights are spreading and seeding COVID. As of this writing only 1,073, or 3.6%, of the 26,700 detainees have been tested. Yet, of those tested, 522, or 49%, have tested positive. ICE has announced that they will be securing 2,000 tests per month to test detainees. That level is woefully inadequate to determine which deportees may have COVID, much less to identify infected detainees resident in centers before the virus spreads through the centers. Using very conservative numbers, if there are 7 deportation flights per week and there are 50 people per flight that is 350 deportees in a week. Based on the current percent positive of those tested it means you would have to test 2,800 per month just to determine who can be deported, with no consideration at all to testing deeper into the population of 26,700 detainees to mitigate the rapid spread there. Perhaps the testing is only to determine who can be deported and not to save the rest of the detainees? Or, all deportees will not be tested.

**Some countries, primarily Honduras and El Salvador, continue to accept repatriations to curry favor with the Administration to benefit from things such as promises of ventilators and the restart of aid. And, to avoid punishment such as the withholding of access to visas and the cloudy nature of aid reversals. It would be folly to think that the deportees on the 82 flights to Honduras and the 36 flights to El Salvador in 2020 have not seeded and spread the virus in those countries.**

**One exception has been Guatemala which has 3 times now suspended flights from the US after they reported a total of 103 infected deportees.** To put that in perspective, that number represents 7% of the 1,455 people the US deported to Guatemala since March 19, and 20% of Guatemala's total COVID cases at that time. After over a week of their 3<sup>rd</sup> suspension, on April 30, they accepted a flight of 92 for "humanitarian" purposes. All had been tested for COVID and all carried their medical papers with them. **Just today (5/04) we saw a report that this week Guatemala will accept 3 "humanitarian" flights of approximately 75 people, including unaccompanied children,** all of whom will be tested and who will have medical papers in addition to COVID exportations to Guatemala.

**It has been reported that 24, 3 and 1 infected people have been deported to Colombia, Haiti and Jamaica, respectively. Some other countries and many advocates, including some in Congress, have been pleading with ICE to halt these dangerous deportations.** As an example, a couple of weeks ago a group of **164 humanitarian organizations signed a letter petitioning ICE to stop deportation flights to Haiti,** the poorest country in our hemisphere. It was reported to have only 20 working ventilators and 124 ICU beds for 11 million people. How did ICE respond, **just days later ICE Air deported 125 people, including 49 children to Haiti.**

## ICE AIR WITNESS

**Witness at the Border** began witnessing ICE Air flights in January 2020 when it established its witness vigil in Brownsville, TX / Matamoros, MX for 62 continuous days after which the pandemic forced everyone to their homes around the country. The group witnessed in the encampment of approximately 2,500 asylum seekers trapped in Matamoros, MX to await their court dates, in the tent courts void of due process, and at the airport where ICE Air flights traversed and originated multiple times a day. The objective was to witness, document, and publicize the annihilation of asylum resulting from the MPP (Migrant Protection Protocol), metering, PACR, HARP, and Asylum Cooperation Agreement (ACA) policies creeping along the border.

## OBJECTIVES

**This analysis has a primary and secondary objective. The primary objective is to compare ICE Air deportation activity in the time period before and early in pandemic awareness to ICE Air's activity when deep in the pandemic.** To do that we have broken January – April into two time periods, each of which have the same number of days excluding weekends and holidays for comparative purposes. **The first time period, Pre/Early COVID, is January 1 to March 3. The second time period, In-COVID is March 4 to April 30.**

**The secondary objective is to contribute to the fact base that is being developed by others researching ICE Air with other organizations and the media.** The more transparency on ICE Air the better.

**Moreover, we welcome the dialogue from others working to open the closed curtain on ICE Air.** We are all working in the dark in a very dark place and none of us have all the right answers. Hopefully, this paper will add to, and advance the learning and conversation as did the recent work by Jake Johnson at the Center for Economic and Policy Research in his recent piece, *“Exporting COVID-19: ICE Air Conducted Deportation Flights to 11 LAC Countries, Flight Data Shows.”*

## TRACKING ICE AIR

**ICE Air contracted with the airline broker Classic Air Charters. They in turn subcontracted the flights to World Atlantic (Caribbean Sun) and Swift Air (nka IAero).** Flights on World Atlantic were substantially reduced in March and they have not flown an ICE Air flight since March 28.

**ICE does not disclose information or data about their flights.** Our information is based on securing all flight information from the publicly available FlightAware application for World Atlantic and Swift. We then filter the flights to the likely ICE Air deportation and destination locations to identify, within a small margin of error, the deportation flights. **To do this we use the knowledge and experience we gained through tracking ICE Air for several months.** Any errors in our estimations we believe are quite small and certainly immaterial to the analysis that follows.

## OUT OF SCOPE

This paper focuses on ICE Air deportation flights from a single ICE Air departure point in the US to an International deportation location for the period January 1 – April 30, 2020. Let us be clear about what is NOT included.

- **Land-based deportations to Mexico that were effected through an ICE Air flight to a US border town** followed by land deportations. Witness observed this occurring with inbound flights to Brownsville where deportees disembarked in Brownsville and were driven by bus to the Gateway International Bridge where they were walked back to the Mexican National Institute of Migration for repatriation. **For flights landing along the border it is impossible to discern if they include Mexican deportees** because a number of the hubs for ICE Air are in border cities like Brownsville.
- **Multiple legs of a deportation flight that may include more than one stop in direct connection to deportation.** For example, a plane may travel from El Paso to San Antonio to Brownsville to El Salvador. For purposes of this report, that is counted as a single deportation flight even though there could have been deportees boarded at origin and every juncture.
- **The significant number of flights churning within the US detention center system.** We estimate that those flights may be a factor of 2.5 to 3x the deportation related flights presented here. We continue to analyze these flows.
- **Return leg of a deportation flight.**
- **The number of deportees in total or on any flight.** ICE discloses none of these numbers and there is no reasonable way to estimate. In April 2019 Phil Neff from the University of Washington Center for Human Rights published a piece that did analyze passenger data secured through a FOIA request in *“Hidden in Plain Sight: ICE Air and the Machinery of Mass Deportation.”* We understand that this piece may be updated and look forward to the analysis.
- **That said, we know from how the pandemic spreads that you do not need a plane load of infected people to seed and spread COVID. A few people carrying the virus can spread it quickly and devastatingly.**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **The volume of ICE Air deportation flights is substantial. ICE Air flew 300 deportation flights January 1 – April 30, 2020. Of those flights, 176 were flown in the Pre/Early COVID period and 124 in the In-COVID period, a reduction of 52, or 30%.**
- **Although there were fewer deportation flights in the In-COVID period, it does not appear to be the result of ICE initiatives to slow or stop the spread of COVID.** There is nothing we see in the data, or in most importantly the flight behavior domestically or internationally, that points to a behavior change on the part of ICE Air. Rather, it appears to be primarily related to resistance by Guatemala, the suspension of the Mexico Repatriation Agreement, and perhaps the first signs of less ICE book ins because of the CDC Order flowing through to a lower detention center population. **Just today (5/04) we see 5 deportation flights which is the first time we have seen this much volume on a single day in a month.**
- **Of the 52 flight reduction from the Pre/Early COVID period to the In-COVID period, Guatemala accounted for 40 (50% reduction), Honduras for 12 (26% reduction), and Mexico for 6 (60% reduction).**
- **Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador comprised 83% (146) of the flights Pre/Early COVID and 74% (92) In COVID.**

- **73% of all deportation flights departed from Texas (172; 57%) or Louisiana (47; 16%).** The single busiest departure point was Brownsville with 81, or 27% of flights.
- **Of the 52 flight reduction from the Pre/Early COVID period to the In-COVID period Texas accounted for 70% of the decrease, or 37 departures.** Reductions were primarily in flights to Guatemala (23), El Salvador (6), and Honduras (5).
- **Phoenix accounted for another 18 in flight reduction,** which represented a 69% reduction for Phoenix. Again, Guatemala was a driver here (12) as well as Mexico (7).
- **Of the 300 total flights, Swift operated 226 (75%) and World Atlantic 74 (25%).** However, the phase out of World is obvious. During the IN-COVID period, World operated only 12 flights, or 10% of the flights. The have operated no ICE Air flights since March 28. Swift operated almost the same number of flights with Pre/Early COVID at 114 and In-COVID at 112.
- **The four most traveled routes through April are Brownsville to Guatemala (41), Brownsville to Honduras (34), El Paso to Guatemala (25), and Phoenix to Guatemala (22). These 4 routes account for 41% of all flights.**
- **If the CDC Order stays in place for a long period of time, at some point we would anticipate deportation flights to decline because of the precipitous drop in book ins into custody. In January and February book ins ran around 22,000 in each month. April final numbers have not been published at this writing but it will most likely be in around 9,000,** reflecting the over 11,000 migrants expelled at the border with no ability to exert their legal right to seek asylum or other forms of protection. It may be early to see that impact right now as the Order has only been in effect for about 45 days and the average stay in detention is 85 days. But that's an average so we may be seeing some impacts in lower deportations. **The detainee population is down about 4,000 in just the last 3 weeks alone, not because of releases, but because deportations continue and the inflow has been slowed dramatically.**

## DETAILED ANALYSIS

**The following pages illuminate the data with charts and insights for each piece of the analysis.**

- Deportation Flights by Destination (#,%) – January 1 – April 30, 2020 for the total time period and each comparative period.
- Deportation Flights by Departure City (#,%) – January 1 – April 30, 2020 for the total time period and each comparative period.
- Deportation Flights by Destination (#,%) – January 1 – April 30, 2020. Comparison of change between time periods.
- Mix of Destinations (#,%) in total and for each comparative period.
- Mix of Departure Cities (#,%) in total and for each comparative period.
- Mix of Flights by ICE Air carrier (#,%).
- Deportation Routes Flown (#) January 1 – April 30, 2020
- Comparative Period Change in Deportation Routes Flown

## Deportation Flights by Destination January 1 – April 30, 2020

Total and Comparison Pre/Early COVID (Jan 1 – Mar 3) to In-COVID (Mar 4 – Apr 30)

- Year to date April 30 we are estimating there have been 300 ICE Air deportation flights
  - 176 flights occurred between 1 January and 3 March (Pre/Early COVID period), and 124 between March 4 and April 30 (In-COVID period). Both periods have 43 days, excluding weekends and holidays).
  - 120, or 40%, of the flights were to Guatemala; 82, or 27% of flights were to Honduras; and 36, or 12% were to El Salvador. Together those countries accounted for 238 deportation flights, or almost 80% of the total flights.
- Deportation flights fell in the In-COVID period by 52 flights, or 30%. The majority of the reduction can be explained by the reductions in flights to Guatemala by 40, or 50%, and Honduras by 12, or 26%.
  - Guatemala's drop may be related to several factors. First, the CDC order supplanting the Asylum Cooperation Agreement (ACA) in mid-March, although it may be early for those impacts roll through since the average stay in detention is 85 days. Second, the approximately 3 weeks of flight suspensions period by the Guatemalan Government as a result of deporting people with COVID. According to the Guatemalan Government, deportations by air from the US fell from a total of 8.6k in January/February to 3.6k in March/April. Last, It was also reported that Guatemala had received 900 Hondurans and Salvadorans under the ACA before it was suspended mid-March.
  - Honduran deportation flight reductions could be related to expulsions directly into Mexico under the CDC Order since 22 March. However, just today (5/04) there are 3 deportation flights to Honduras which is extremely unusual. It is unclear why. We don't think it is related to the ACA that was published in the Federal register last week, but we will watch.
  - It appears that the Mexico Interior Repatriation Agreement with the US is suspended. Under this program, re-initiated in December 2019, around 2,200 Mexicans that crossed along the border in California, New Mexico and Arizona were returned to Guadalajara, Mexico by ICE Air rather than by land. There have been no flights since March 16 which coincides closely to both border closings and the CDC Order.

Destination Country	Total		Pre/Early-COVID		In-COVID		In-COVID H/(L)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Barbados	2	1%	0	0%	2	2%	2	
Brazil	7	2%	2	1%	5	4%	3	150%
Colombia	3	1%	1	1%	2	2%	1	100%
Dominican Republic	6	2%	4	2%	2	2%	(2)	(50%)
Ecuador	16	5%	6	3%	10	8%	4	67%
El Salvador	36	12%	19	11%	17	14%	(2)	(11%)
Guatemala	120	40%	80	45%	40	32%	(40)	(50%)
Haiti	7	2%	4	2%	3	2%	(1)	(25%)
Honduras	82	27%	47	27%	35	28%	(12)	(26%)
Mexico	14	5%	10	6%	4	3%	(6)	(60%)
Nicaragua	7	2%	3	2%	4	3%	1	33%
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(52)</b>	<b>(30%)</b>

## Deportation Flights by Departure City January 1 – April 30, 2020

Total and Comparison Pre/Early COVID (Jan 1 – Mar 3) to In-COVID (Mar 4 – Apr 30)

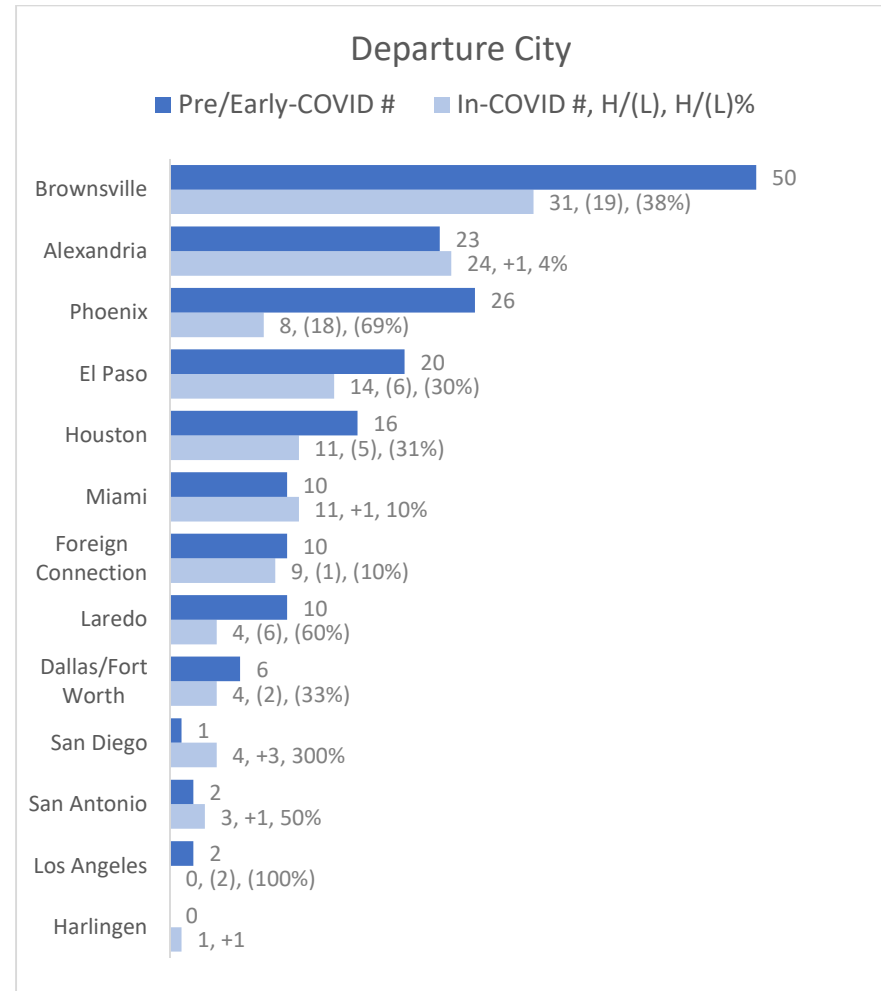
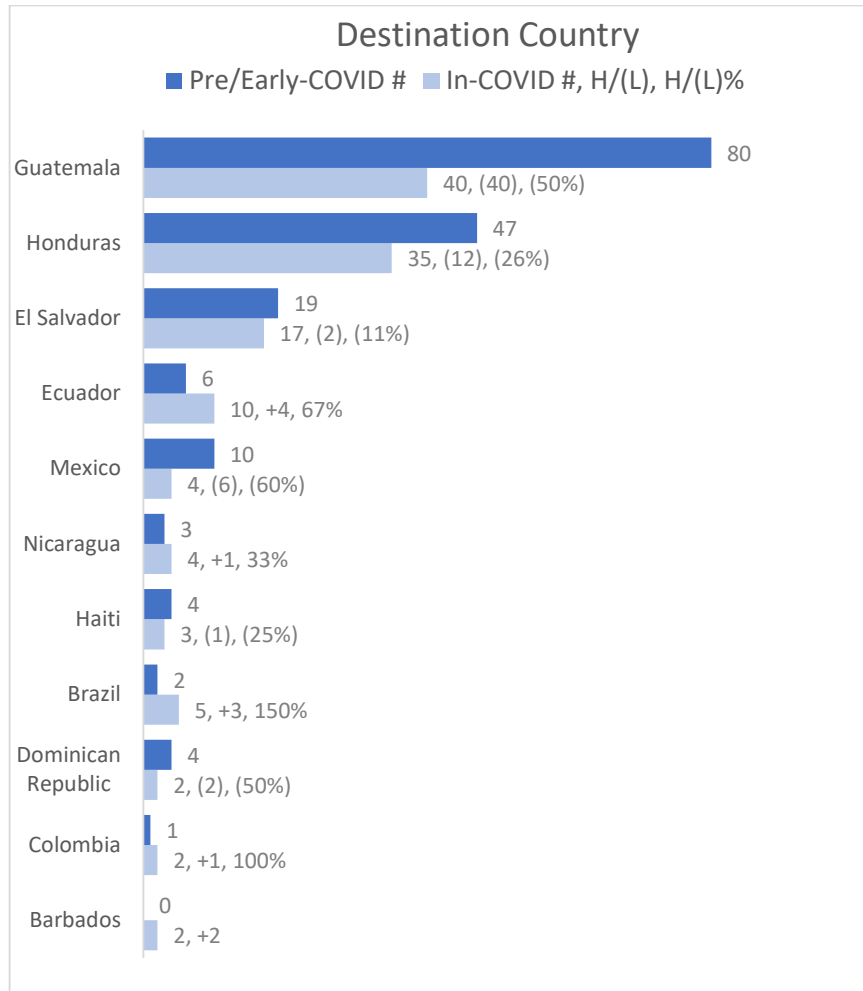
- 172 , or 57%, of the deportation flights departed Texas with 81, or 27%, from Brownsville alone.
- Alexandria (LA) originated the second largest number of deportation flights at 47, or 16%.
- El Paso and Phoenix followed then with 34, or 11%, of deportation flights each.
- Interestingly there are 19 flights that appear to be connections internationally where there are deportees placed in more than one country. It should be noted that it is difficult to determine if they are deportation stops or refueling stops.
- Most cities experienced a drop of deportation flight originations IN-COVID with Texas registering the largest state impact with 70% of the reductions. Brownsville dropped by the most at 19 flights, with both El Paso and Laredo dropping 6 flights. Phoenix fell by 18 flights, or 69%.

Departure City	Total		Pre/Early-COVID		In-COVID		In-COVID H/(L)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Alexandria	47	16%	23	13%	24	19%	1	4%
Brownsville	81	27%	50	28%	31	25%	(19)	(38%)
Dallas/Fort Worth	10	3%	6	3%	4	3%	(2)	(33%)
El Paso	34	11%	20	11%	14	11%	(6)	(30%)
Foreign Connection	19	6%	10	6%	9	7%	(1)	(10%)
Harlingen	1	0%	0	0%	1	1%	1	
Houston	27	9%	16	9%	11	9%	(5)	(31%)
Laredo	14	5%	10	6%	4	3%	(6)	(60%)
Los Angeles	2	1%	2	1%	0	0%	(2)	(100%)
Miami	21	7%	10	6%	11	9%	1	10%
Phoenix	34	11%	26	15%	8	6%	(18)	(69%)
San Antonio	5	2%	2	1%	3	2%	1	50%
San Diego	5	2%	1	1%	4	3%	3	300%
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>(52)</b>	<b>(30%)</b>



## Deportation Flights by Destination January 1 – April 30, 2020

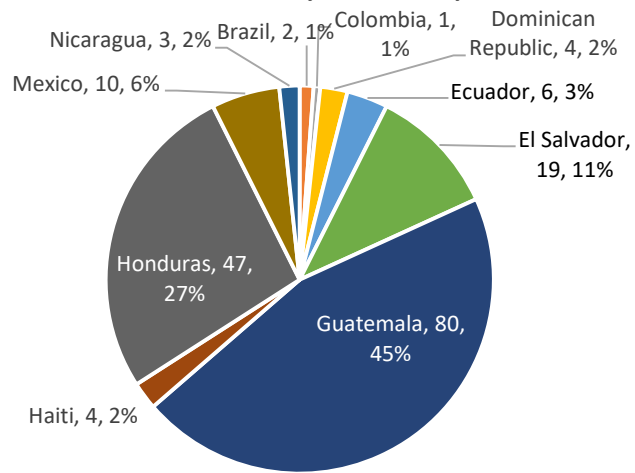
Total and Comparison Pre/Early COVID (Jan 1 – Mar 3) to In-COVID (Mar 4 – Apr 30)





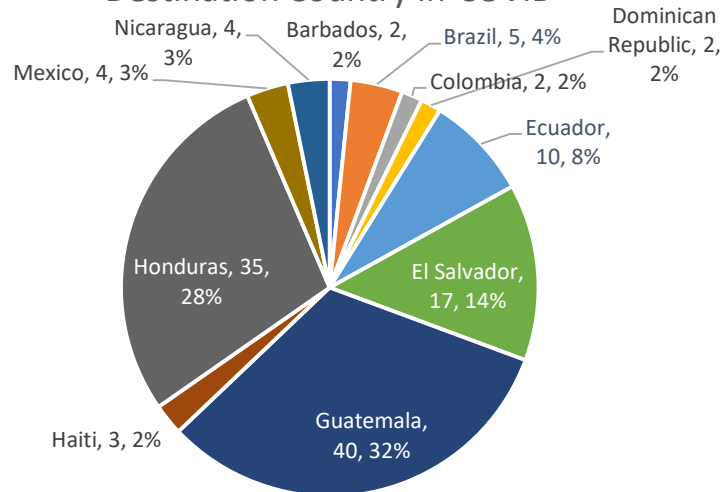
## Flight Mix by Deportation Destination

Destination Country Pre/Early-COVID

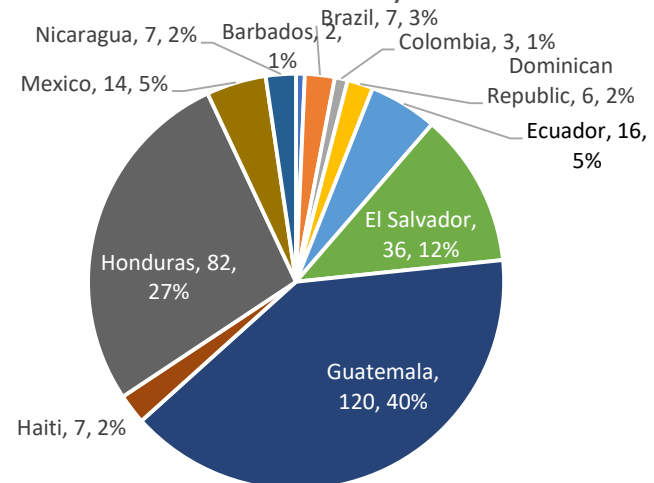


- Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador comprised 83% (146) of the flights Pre/Early COVID and are down to 74% (92) In-COVID.
- Guatemala comprised 45% (80) flights Pre/Early COVID and is down to 32% (40) In-COVID.
- Countries other than Mexico and Central America comprise 10% (17) of the flights Pre-Early COVID and are up to 19% (24) In-COVID.

Destination Country In-COVID

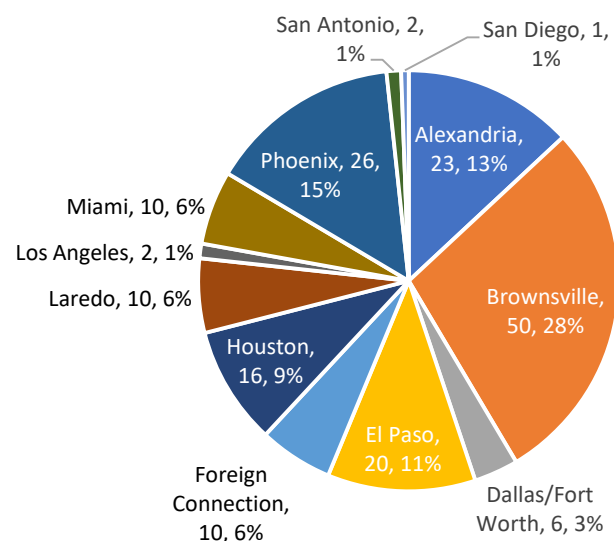


Destination Country Total



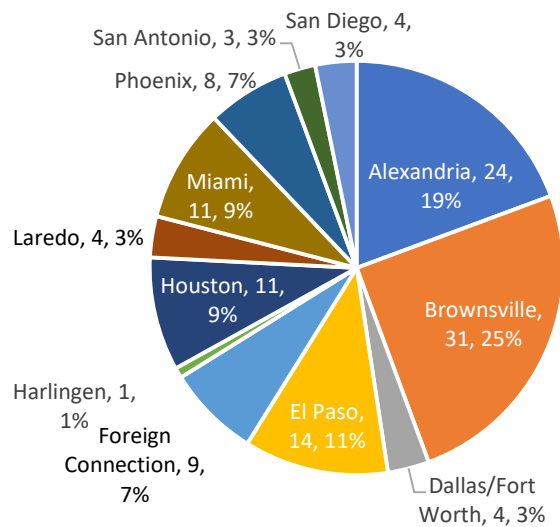
## Flight Mix by Deportation Departure City

Departure City Pre/Early-COVID

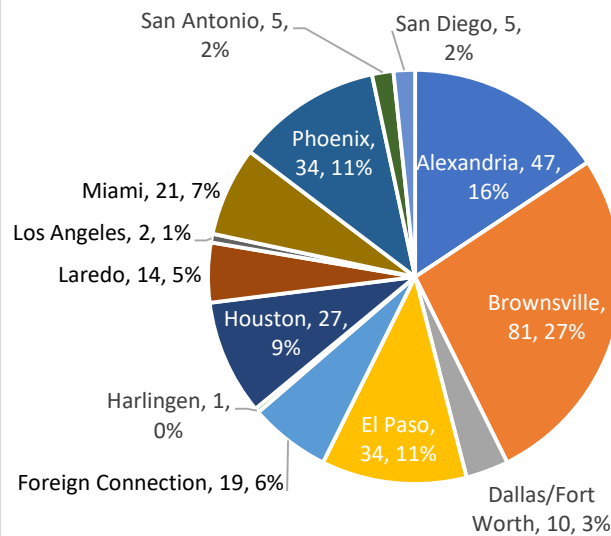


- About ½ of the departure cities are in Texas and they comprised 59% (104) of the departures Pre/Early COVID and 55% (68) In-COVID.
- Alexandria (LA) comprised 13% (23) of departures Pre/Early COVID and the mix increased to 19% (24) In-COVID, although departures remained fairly constant.
- Phoenix departures fell the most moving from comprising 15% (26) Pre/early COVID to 6% (15) In-COVID. The drop was driven primarily by the drop of flights to Guatemala.
- Brownsville departures also fell, more on a flight than a mix basis, but worth noting. Departures fell by 19 to drop their mix from 28% to 25% In-COVID. Similar to Phoenix the drop was primarily the result of fewer flights to Guatemala.

Departure City In-COVID

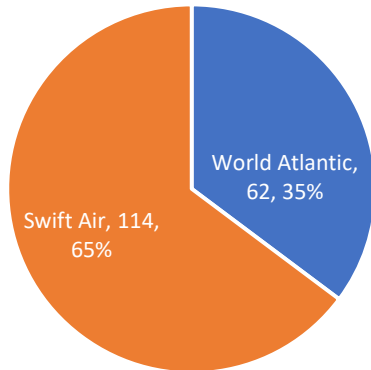


Departure City Total



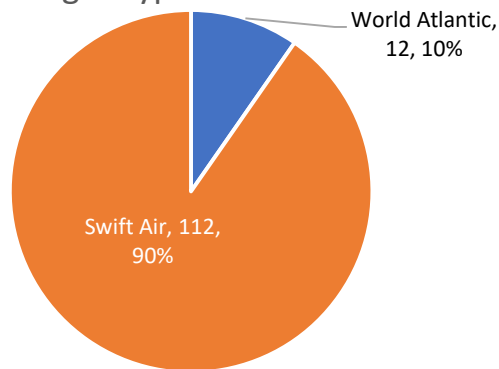
## Flight Mix by ICE Air Deportation Charter

Flight Type Pre/Early-COVID

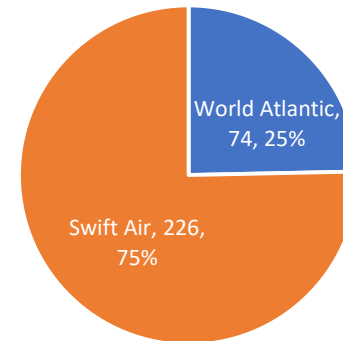


- The phase out of World Atlantic is obvious with a drop In-COVID of 50 flights, or 81%, almost all registered the last half of March through April.
- World Atlantic mix of flights dropped dramatically from 35% (62) Pre/Early COVID to 10% (12) In-COVID and their phase out became complete.
- World Atlantic's flights decreased at the same time as overall ICE Air flights decreased so Swift Air maintained about the same number of flights in each period at 114 Pre/Early COVID and 112 In-COVID.
- The contract between ICE and Classic Air Charters (CAC) is not public and neither are CAC's contracts with Swift or World, so we don't know if the exit of World is permanent or temporary. They flew very few ICE Air flights in the last half of March and have not flown one since 28 March.

Flight Type In-COVID



Flight Type Total



**Flight Type**  
World Atlantic  
Swift Air  
**Total**

Total		Pre/Early-COVID		In-COVID	
#	%	#	%	#	%
74	25%	62	35%	12	10%
226	75%	114	65%	112	90%
<b>300</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100%</b>

In-COVID H/(L)	
#	%
(50)	(81%)
(2)	(2%)
<b>(52)</b>	<b>(30%)</b>

## Deportation Routes Flown January 1 – April 30, 2020

Green to Red = Fewest to Most Routes Flown

- January through April there were 300 Deportation flights.
- The pattern of the routes flown from the different geographic locations may inform the country of origin of detainees within detention centers.
- Brownsville had the most flights at 81, driven by flights to Guatemala (41) and Honduras (34).
- Alexandria (LA) was the next busiest at 47 with Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras reasonably balanced which might say something about the population of the detention centers in LA.
- The next busiest ICE Airports are El Paso and Phoenix, both with 34 flights, heavily weighted toward Guatemala with 75% of El Paso's flights to Guatemala and 65% of Phoenix's flights to Guatemala.

		Total Jan 1 - Apr 30												
		Destination Country												
Departure City		Barbados	Brazil	Colombia	Dominican Republic	Ecuador	El Salvador	Guatemala	Haiti	Honduras	Mexico	Nicaragua	Total	% of Total
	Alexandria			2	2	2	10	14	3	10		4	47	16%
	Brownsville					1	4	41		34		1	81	27%
	Dallas/FW						1			9			10	3%
	El Paso					4		25		5			34	11%
	Foreign Connect		7		4	5		1				2	19	6%
	Harlingen					1							1	0%
	Houston						6	7		14			27	9%
	Laredo						14						14	5%
	Los Angeles										2		2	1%
	Miami	2		1		3		8	3	4			21	7%
	Phoenix						1	22		4	7		34	11%
	San Antonio							2	1	2			5	2%
	San Diego										5		5	2%
	Total		2	7	3	6	16	36	120	7	82	14	7	300
% of Total		1%	2%	1%	2%	5%	12%	40%	2%	27%	5%	2%	100%	

## Increase or (Decrease) in Routes Flown Pre-Early COVID to In-COVID

Green to Red = Highest to Least Reduction in Routes Flown

- Brownsville and Phoenix experienced the majority of the reductions in flights to Guatemala with reduced flights on those routes of 15 and 12, respectively.
- Brownsville also experienced declines on flights to Honduras of 6. When combined with the reductions in flights to Guatemala those two routes account for all of the reductions in flights from Brownsville In-COVID.
- Phoenix also experienced reductions in flights to Mexico of 7. When combined with the reductions in flights to Guatemala those two routes account for all of the reductions in flights from Phoenix In-COVID.

In-COVID H/(L) Pre/Early-COVID													
Destination Country													
	Barbados	Brazil	Colombia	Dominican Republic	Ecuador	El Salvador	Guatemala	Haiti	Honduras	Mexico	Nicaragua	Total	% H/(L)
Departure City													
Alexandria			0	2	0	2	(2)	1	(2)		0	1	4%
Brownsville					1	0	(15)		(6)		1	(19)	(38%)
Dallas/FW						1			(3)			(2)	(33%)
El Paso					0		(5)		(1)			(6)	(30%)
Foreign Connect		3		(4)	(1)		1				0	(1)	(10%)
Harlingen					1							1	
Houston						0	(3)		(2)			(5)	(31%)
Laredo						(6)						(6)	(60%)
Los Angeles										(2)		(2)	(100%)
Miami	2		1		3		(6)	(3)	4			1	10%
Phoenix						1	(12)		0	(7)		(18)	(69%)
San Antonio							2	1	(2)			1	50%
San Diego										3		3	300%
Total	2	3	1	(2)	4	(2)	(40)	(1)	(12)	(6)	1	(52)	(30%)
% H/(L)		150%	100%	(50%)	67%	(11%)	(50%)	(25%)	(26%)	(60%)	33%	(30%)	

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*Witness At The Border shines a light on the cruelty and inhumanity of current immigration policy; we bear witness to the human rights abuse of asylum seekers and refugees, and the lack of due process in the courts and through immigration policies. Witnesses hail from across the country and abroad. Over 15,000 people follow Witness At The Border Facebook page.*

*From the Tornillo, TX and Homestead, FL Child Detention Centers to the Brownsville/Matamoros border, many have stood as witnesses in solidarity with the victims of these policies, to witness and report on the mass incarceration of innocent children and the practice of forcing asylum-seekers to wait in Mexico for their day in a tent court presided over by a remote judge on video, and to be faced with denial, without due process, at the border of their legal rights to seek asylum and protection.*

*According to Joshua Rubin, founder, witnessing is the subversive act of seeing. Our members witness, report and strive to effect change in policies like family separation, incarceration of unaccompanied youth, Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), Prompt Asylum Claim Review (PACR), Humanitarian Asylum Review Process (HARP), Asylum Cooperation Agreements, the CDC Order, and ICE Air deportation flights associated with these policies.*

<https://www.witnessattheborder.org>

FaceBook: Witness at the Border (formerly Witness:Tornillo)

Twitter: @WitnessBorder

Instagram: Witness At The Border

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