

ICE AIR EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – DECEMBER 2023

- *4 YEARS OF ICE AIR FLIGHTS TRACKED, DOCUMENTED, AND REPORTED: 27,002 FLIGHTS OF WHICH 4,956 WERE RETURN FLIGHTS.*
- *2023 WAS A 4-YEAR RECORD FOR RETURN FLIGHTS (1,482) AND TOTAL FLIGHTS (8,053).*
- *MEXICO STEPS UP INTERIOR MOVEMENT FLIGHTS BEGINNING 22 DECEMBER WITH AT LEAST 22 LIKELY LONGITUDINAL FLIGHTS, AND POSSIBLY AS MANY AS 35, AND BEGINS DEPORTATION FLIGHTS TO VENEZUELA.*
- TOTAL FLIGHTS AVERAGED 28 PER WEEKDAY (EX CHRISTMAS), BELOW THE PRIOR 6-MONTH AVERAGE OF 31, AND SAME AS NOVEMBER.
- 563 TOTAL ICE AIR FLIGHTS IN DECEMBER, DOWN 31 (5%) FROM THE PRIOR MONTH AND 110 (16%) BELOW THE PRIOR 6-MONTH AVERAGE OF 673 AND DOWN 166 (23%) FROM DECEMBER 2022.
- 128 REMOVAL FLIGHTS IN DECEMBER, DOWN 12 (9%) FROM THE PRIOR MONTH AND 1 (1%) BELOW THE PRIOR 6-MONTH AVERAGE OF 129. UP SIGNIFICANTLY BY 33 (35%) OVER DECEMBER 2022.
- REMOVAL FLIGHTS AVERAGED 6.4 PER WEEKDAY IN DECEMBER, SLIGHTLY ABOVE THE PRIOR 6-MONTH AVERAGE OF 6.1, AND DOWN JUST SLIGHTLY FROM NOVEMBER AT 6.7.
- 27,002 TOTAL ICE AIR FLIGHTS IN 2020-DECEMBER 2023. SINCE INAUGURATION: 21,896 TOTAL FLIGHTS.
- 4,956 REMOVAL FLIGHTS IN 2020-DECEMBER 2023. SINCE INAUGURATION: 3,889 REMOVAL FLIGHTS.
- LATERAL FLIGHTS WERE UP SLIGHTLY TO 25 FROM 23 IN NOVEMBER, CONTINUING THE LOWER RELIANCE ON LATERALS POST T42.

TRANSITION FROM T42 TO T8

Removal flights, on a per weekday basis, were 6.4 in December after peaking in August and November at 6.7, and they have remained in a relatively close range of 6.0 to 6.7 over the last 5 months. However, total flights per weekday have drifted down from the peak of 37 in August to 28 in both November and December. This may be the result of more return flights departing from cities

proximate to large CBP processing centers and/or less shuffling of people through lateral flights to different CBP processing centers with center expansion.

Both removal flights and total flights per weekday are not unlike late-2021 and most of 2022 (pages 11,13).

The monthly progression of total flights per weekday from March through December is 33, 37, 32, 31, 28, 37, 33, 30, 28, and 28, respectively.

Removal flights seems to have settled in between an average of 6-7 flights per weekday. The monthly progression of removal flights per weekday from March through December is 6.3, 5.9, 4.8, 5.5, 5.0, 6.7, 6.0, 6.1, 6.7, and 6.4, respectively. The May low of 4.8 reflects the transition from T42 to T8 and the low level of 5.0 in July reflects the contract expiration one week pause (pages 11,13).

LAST 12 MONTHS

Over the last 12 months, all under President Biden, there have been a likely 8,052 ICE Air flight legs as compared to 4,845 in 2020, a startling, unexpected, and disappointing increase of 3,208 (66%) over 2020 and up 1,929 (31%) over 2021 (pages 24,35,38,41).

Of these flights, 1,482 were removal flights, an increase of 473 (47%) over the 1,009 in 2020, and 433 (41%) over 2021.

Shuffle flights, including lateral flights and those just moving people in the US to and between detention/deportation centers, were 4,436 over the last 12 months, a staggering increase of 2,211 (99%) over the 2,225 in 2020, and up 777 (21%) over 2021.

Total Flights of 563 in December, utilizing 32 different planes operated by 6 different charter carriers (IAero aka Swift, World Atlantic, OMNI, GlobalX, Gryphon-ATS, and National Cargo) were down 31 (5%) from November, and were below the prior 6 months (673) by 110 (16%). Moreover, total flights were down 166 (23%) from December 2022 driven in great part by a drop in lateral flights described below (pages 24-26).

In November Border Patrol encounters (between ports) at the southern border were up slightly by 1% from 188,780 in October to 191,113 in November. It appears that December will be up, primarily driven by the Del Rio and Tucson Sectors.

Removal Flights decreased by 12 (9%) from 140 to 128 which was 33 (35%) over December 2022, and down 1 (1%) from the prior 6-month average (pages 24-26).

The Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala (50), Honduras (40), and El Salvador (9) continued at an elevated proportion of removal flights with 77% of all removal flights in December, down slightly from 79% in November, but compared to only 57% in May. Conversely, the proportion of removal flights to South America remained low post-T42 at only 12%, almost a third of May at 32%.

We don't know December encounters, but based on October, encounters of people from Northern Triangle countries were only 75% those of people from South America, while removal flights to Northern Triangle Countries were 6.6x those from South America.

Strikingly, in December, the estimated number of people returned to Northern Triangle countries represented 20% of November encounters from those countries. To return the same percentage (currently estimated at 2.5%) of November encounters from South American countries would require

about 112 more deportation flights to South America, 57 more to Venezuela alone. Moreover, it would require those countries to accept over 12,000 more people.

Of the decrease in removal flights of 12, Guatemala was down from a 4-year record by 7 (57 to 50), El Salvador down 5 (14 to 9), Ecuador down 1 (4 to 3), Colombia down 1 (5 to 4), and Peru down 1 (3 to 2). Offsetting these decreases Venezuela was up 2 (3 to 5) and there was a flight to Uzbekistan departing 120.

Please see Country Detail Section below for more details

Lateral Flights increased slightly from 23 in November to 25 in December (page 16). It does appear that laterals are operated much less post T42. In December of 2022 laterals were at a record high of 134. It could be because of the end of “laterals for expulsions,” or it could be more rapid deportations directly from the border, especially to Northern Triangle countries (page 15), or an expansion of CBP processing on the border, or a combination of all these factors.

In the 4th quarter of 2023 lateral flights averaged only 23 compared to 126 in the 4th quarter of 2022, driving a big part of the drop in shuffle flights described below, and consequently the drop in total flights. Lateral flights in December 2023 were down 109 (81%) from December 2022.

Tucson, not surprisingly, originated the most laterals with 18 (up from 15 in November) to McAllen (12), Laredo (3), and El Paso (3). To be honest, given the reporting of encounters in that sector I was surprised at only 18. San Diego originated 7 (same as November) laterals to McAllen (3) and Laredo (4).

McAllen received 15 laterals, Laredo 7 and El Paso 3.

In addition to these lateral flights there are lateral buses into which there is no visibility, however we understand many buses were used for “decompression” as well, especially in the Del Rio and Tucson sectors.

Shuffle flights of 279 decreased slightly by 4 (1%) and were 85 (23%) below the prior 6-month average (page 24). It is difficult to identify the reason for the decrease, although it could be related to the earlier removal directly from the border to Northern Triangle countries reducing the need to jockey between ICE detention center locations, as well as an expansion in El Paso of CBP processing and its importance as a return flight originator with 20 return flight departures in December 2023 compared to 0 in December 2022.

The detention population dropped slightly over the month from 39,013 on 24 November, to 36,263 on 17 December (down 2,750; 7%).

Country Detail

Venezuela – flights increased from 3 each in October and November to 5 in December, and now seem to be scheduled 1x per week, recently on Wednesday. Based on various reporting in Venezuela, about 1,304 people have been deported on 11 flights, just about 120 per flight. Venezuela considers all the flights under their “Vuelta a la Patria” (Return to the Homeland) program, at first touting their welcome back of those who they say were forced to leave by US policies against Venezuela. But curiously, since the 3rd flight there has been not a word mentioned by the GoV or in any State media about the flights, and it is not a stretch to assume that it is connected in some way to additional negotiations as the silence followed a 2 week pause in flights between 30 October and 16 November. In

a recent statement about the restart of returns from Mexico (see Mexico) they did confirm the same 11 flights I have observed.

Although 1,304 is a low number so far, to put it in perspective, ICE returns of Venezuelans in FY 2018-2023 were 336, 326, 193, 176, 176, and 834, respectively, most if not all through commercial flights, however it is not known if some of 2023 returns were actually to Mexico under title 8, which seems possible.

Over the last 3 months the number of people (1,304) returned is about 1% of encounters of Venezuelans over the last 3 months (141,509). However, even assuming 12 flights per month (the several per week the US first forecasted), the monthly returns would still only represent 3% of the average monthly encounters over the last 3 months, only 1/7th the return rate of Northern Triangle countries. Venezuelan encounters did fall from September to November from 66,584 to 34,063 and entries to the Darién also fell from 62,700 in August to 1/3 of that to 22,547 in November.

Additionally, irregular Venezuelan entries recorded by the government of Honduras dropped from September at 42,550 to 34,547 in October and to 13,803 in December.

The important question is, if the return rate remains as low as 3% and conditions in Venezuela remain desperate, will this just be a temporary lull.

It is concerning that there are no independent press or international humanitarian groups allowed to observe and follow-up with those deported for transparency because of the risk involved in returning people who fled Maduro's dictatorship to his dictatorship. Initially the [Venezuelan Government reports tout](#) the safe return and [careful integration](#) of those returned with photos and now we see nothing. We do not know.

The first 3 flights departed from Harlingen, TX, but since then all flights have originated in Alexandria, LA.

Guatemala flights decreased from a 4-year record high of 57 to 50 (12%), still the 3rd highest month in 4 years. Flights were 6 (14%) over the prior 6-month average and up massively by 28 (127%) over December 2022 (pages 25,36,39,42).

ICE returned 6,153 Guatemalans by air in December, down commensurate with flights by 661 (10%), but still the third highest month in at least the past 6 years behind only November 2023 at 6,814 and August 2022 at 6,198.

Encounters of Guatemalans in November increased modestly by 2,447 (10%) after falling meaningfully by 10,865 (31%) in October. Based on November encounters, returns in December represented 23% of encounters, down slightly from November at 29%, and a more typical level.

In November, Mexico resumed deportations to Guatemala after a 5-month pause with 3 flights. However, in December Mexico dropped to 1 deportation on 22 December with reportedly 175 people (seems too high for the 1 flight) departing from Tapachula in addition to the estimated 350 returned by Mexico by land at Tecún Úman. The combination of these 3 return pathways was 6,678 (8% by Mexico), compared to 5,599 (57% by Mexico) in December 2022.

Honduras flights remained unchanged at 40, just 1 below the prior 6-month average of 41 but significantly above December of 2022 by 18 (82%) (pages 25,36,39,42).

Encounters of Hondurans fell slightly by 2,948 (14%) to 18,869, the lowest level since June at 15,093.

ICE returned 3,876 Hondurans by air in December, down slightly from 3,908 in November. December 2023 was, however, higher than December of 2022 by 1,295 (50%). Based on encounters in November, returns in December represented 21% of encounters, up slightly from 18% in November.

Based on Government of Honduras reporting, in December 2023 Mexico and the US returned about 3,650 Hondurans of which only 1% were returned by Mexico. Contrastingly, in December 2022 there were 5,094 Hondurans returned by Mexico and the US, of which 49% were returned from Mexico.

Mexico again paused deportation flights to Honduras (see Mexico section), after 5 in October and 4 in November. They indicated a funding issue for all deportations. **Honduras reports only about 50 returns by land in December by Mexico with none by air, compared to a total by air and land in December of 2022 of 2,513.**

El Salvador flights decreased by 5 (36%) from 14 to 9 which is 3 (25%) under the prior 6-month average and 1 (10%) under December 2022 (page 25). The estimated number of Salvadorans returned of 900 represents about 12% of November encounters, down from 19% in November, and about half the return rate of Guatemala.

My understanding is El Salvador does restrict the number of returns and it is difficult to find reporting on returns to El Salvador, but reviewing the IOM data **it appears to me that returns per month increased in from a range of 700-1,000 to a range of 1,100 to 1,400 per month for a while but have reverted to the prior range.**

Encounters of Salvadorans increased modestly in November by 139 (2%) from 7,250 in October to 7,389 in November but remained in a tight range of 6,080 to 7,550 over the past 4 months.

Ecuador flights decreased by 1 (25%) to 3 which was below the prior 6-month average by 3 (50%) and below December 2022 meaningfully by 10 (77%) (page 25). This is the 3rd month in a row flight declined and December is a dramatic change from 1Q 2023 with an average of 26 flights per month even though average encounters of Ecuadorians was quite similar the prior two months of each period around an average of 14,000 per month. It is very unclear to me why flights have decreased so much in light of similar encounter levels unless Ecuador is now more restrictive with deportation compared to T42 expulsion returns, or ICE is facing capacity/cost issues, or fewer Ecuadorians are being placed in expedited removal.

Encounters in November increased slightly by 1,329 (11%) from 12,156 in October to 13,485 in November. **Estimated returns in November represented only 2.4% of encounters in November, down from an already low 4% return rate in November.**

Peru flights decreased by 1 (33%) from 3 to 2, which is 3 (60%) under the prior 6-month average which is skewed by an outlier of 11 in the month of August (page 25). There was only 1 flight in December 2022.

Encounters of Peruvians have been relatively consistent the last 4 months between a range of 3,145 in August to 4,414 in November. **Returns in December are estimated at 5% of November encounters, down from an already low 8% return rate in November.**

Colombia flights dropped by 1 (20%) from 5 to 4 after remaining steady at 5 for the prior 3 months. December was 3 (43%) below the prior 6-month average and 11 (73%) below December 2022 at 15 (page 25).

It is interesting to note that in **March with 24 flights** there were **17,055 encounters** of Colombians while there were only **4 flights** in **December** and **5** in **November** when encounters were **15,021** and **13,771**, respectively.

It is estimated that returns in **December** represented only about **3%** of **November** encounters, down from **4%** in **October** and around **19%** in **July**. Like for Ecuador, these declines in return flights are difficult to explain unless Ecuador is restricting deportations more than T42 expulsions, or it is a capacity issue, or fewer Ecuadorians are being placed in expedited removal, or a combination.

Dominican Republic flights remained steady at 2 for the last 4 months which is 1 below the prior 6-month average and the same as **December 2022** (page 25). For the 18 months prior to **March 2023** there were 2 flights per month and then flights were somewhat variable over the next 6 months ranging between 2 and 7 (record high) before returning to the historic 2 per month.

Brazil flights remained steady at 1 over the last 4 months, the same as the prior 6-month average and **December 2022**. (page 25). Encounters of Brazilians have been relatively consistent over the last 6 months ranging from 2,473 in October to 3,463 in August. Returns in December are estimated at about 4% of November encounters.

Cuba on April 24, 2023, experienced the first return flights since **December 2020**, followed by 1 in each of the following 8 months including **December** (page 25). It seems that the pattern now is for 1 flight per month, generally toward the last weeks of the month.

There have often been fewer than 50 people on a flight and in fact the **Government of Cuba** announced that **only 407 people have been returned on the 9 flights** this year, an average of only 45 people per flight. **Only 31 people were on the flight in December**. It should be noted that only 1,703 Cubans crossed between SW border ports in November, up from 1,213 in October.

Haiti received 1 flight in **December**, the same as every month since **December 2022** except for the cancelled flight in July (0) and the make-up flight in August (2) (pages 21,25). We do not know how many people were on this flight but generally there have only been less than 50 people returned per flight through the year, with an estimated 520 people returned in 2023.

Over the last 12 months, **only 1,083 Haitians have been encountered between southern ports**. The vast majority (estimating around 85%+) of encounters at ports of Haitians of 73,150 over the last 12 months have been related to T42 exemptions or CBP One appointments.

Since inauguration 290 flights have removed 27,248 Haitians, 1 in every 420 people in Haiti. Since the mass return beginning 19 September 2021, 25,149 Haitians have been returned on 253 flights.

Haiti to Nicaragua Flights Paused – Cuba to Nicaragua Curtailed made a massive difference in Haitians entering Honduras irregularly and a dramatic continuing change in Cubans entering Honduras irregularly. In July 2023, there were 1,558 Haitians who entered Honduras irregularly, rocketing to 35,529 in October before receding to around 3,001 in December. In July 2023 there were 6,721 Cubans who entered Honduras irregularly, jumping to 17,513 in October before dropping to around 8,997 in December.

It **was reported** that since August there were over 260 flights from Haiti to Nicaragua with seats priced in the \$3,000 - \$5,000 range. Nicaragua has no visa restrictions and is reported to help these passengers transit to the border of Honduras for a northbound journey.

I observed over 150 flights in just the two weeks between 11 and 25 October, with about 10 each of the last two weekend days. On 30 October the [Miami Herald reported](#) that all these flights would be halted, which they were except for 2 trailing flights. There were a smaller number of flights per day from Cuba to Nicaragua, perhaps 2-4.

On 21 November, the [US State Department announced](#) new visa *restrictions* “against owners, executives, and/or senior officials of companies providing charter flights into Nicaragua designed for use primarily by irregular migrants to the United States.” No flights from Haiti to Nicaragua have resumed and there appears to be only around 1 flight per day from Cuba to Nicaragua, most on the Venezuelan state airline Conviasa.

Africa, Uzbekistan, and Other Long Range Countries received 7 deportations on 2 small jet (14-16 passenger) routes, 1 to South Korea and 1 to Cape Verde. There were 2 large jet routes, one to [Uzbekistan departing 120](#) and 1 with deportations to Senegal, Mauritania, Guinea, and Angola. (pages 25,26).

Other Removal Destinations were Nicaragua (2), and Jamaica (1), both within generally normal patterns (page 25).

Mexico Operated Removal flights paused on 22 November after 10 deportations in November because of a lack of funding which was [announced 1 December](#). That pause lasted a month until 22 Dec when there was a deportation flight to Guatemala (page 20) and when a significant number of [longitudinal flights](#) from border cities in Mexico, most [notably Piedras Negras](#), were instituted.

These flights resumed the exact same day that [Mexico announced](#) that they invited Secretaries Blinken and Mayorkas to Mexico for talks on migration.

Between 22 Dec and 31 December, I observed at least 22 longitudinal flights with 15 originating in Piedras Negras, 3 in Tampico (Matamoros/Reynosa), 2 in Monterrey, 1 in Tijuana, and 1 in Ciudad Juarez. However, I have had informal reports of 3 flights per day from Piedras Negras (total 30) which would move actual longitudinal flights to at least 35, but I can't confirm those, but it is possible. The destination for 3 flights was Tapachula with the remaining Villahermosa/Monterrey.

I should note that Magnicharters often operates without flight plans and plane XA-VDD, one of the planes they are using, has problematic transponder reception in Mexico so tracking is more difficult. In fact, it disappears for days at a time even from a real time system ADS-B, even when I knew it operated.

Notably, Mexico also reinstated deportation flights to Venezuela with a 2 flights, one departing on 29 December and another on the 30th, the day [Mexico announced](#) the flights. [The 1st flight](#) was operated by the Venezuelan state airline, Conviasa, and included 207 returns. The Government of [Venezuela reported that it was under their Plan Vuelta a la Patria](#) (Return to the Homeland) program of voluntary returns. They also reported the [2nd flight](#), with 122 returns, under that program, however it was highly likely operated by Magnicharters, the contractor the Government of Mexico employs. Venezuela went on to report 15 flights under The Patria program, including the 11 flights from the US, 1 from Iceland and 1 from Chile returning an estimated (based on various news reports) 1,304, 329, 189 and 115, respectively, per country.

DECEMBER FLIGHT SUMMARY

In December, there were 563 likely ICE Air flights, down 31 (5%) from November, and down 166 (23%) from the same month of 2022. Removal flights of 128 were down 12 (9%) from November while domestic shuffle flights decreased by 4 (1%).

- - 128 removal flights, with 125 return flights, to 20 different countries in Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, and Central Asia.
- - 31 domestic flights connecting directly to removal flights.
- - 279 domestic shuffle flights between deportation locations.
- - 310 domestic flights (connections and shuffle flights).
- - **Since President Biden's inauguration there have been 21,896 likely ICE Air flights** including 3,889 removal flights. Including just the 264 lateral flights before October 2021 and 50 for October - December 2022 as expulsion flights would yield 4,203 removal flights.

Last 12 Months – 8,053 likely total flights

- - 1,482 removal flights, with 1,439 return flights, to at least 35 countries in Latin America, Europe, the Caribbean, Africa, Southeast Asia, Asia, India, Central Asia, and the Caucasus.
- - 696 domestic flights connecting directly to removal flights.
- - 4,436 domestic shuffle flights between removal locations.
- - 5,132 domestic flights (connections and shuffle flights).
- - 45% of flights were return related (removal, return and connections) and 55% were domestic shuffle flights.