
Commuting migration and labor conditions in border regions: a literature review

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Abstract

This article presents a literature review on commuting migration and labor conditions in border regions. The study aims to gather and analyze academic contributions that address the dynamics of daily cross-border mobility and its intersections with precarious employment, informality, and social vulnerability. By mapping theoretical and empirical approaches on the subject, the review seeks to provide a conceptual and analytical framework to support future research and public policy development related to work and mobility in border territories. The article includes studies with examples of commuting migration from various countries around the world, with particular emphasis on cases from Brazil.

Keywords: Commuting Migration, Border Regions, Labor Conditions, Informality, Social Vulnerability

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Migración pendular y condiciones laborales en regiones fronterizas: una revisión de la literatura

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una revisión de la literatura sobre la migración pendular y las condiciones laborales en regiones fronterizas. El estudio tiene como objetivo recopilar y analizar aportaciones académicas que abordan las dinámicas de la movilidad transfronteriza cotidiana y sus intersecciones con el empleo precario, la informalidad y la vulnerabilidad social. A partir del mapeo de enfoques teóricos y empíricos sobre el tema, la revisión busca ofrecer un marco conceptual y analítico que sirva de apoyo para futuras investigaciones y para el desarrollo de políticas públicas relacionadas con el trabajo y la movilidad en territorios fronterizos. El artículo incluye estudios con ejemplos de migración pendular en diversos países del mundo, con especial énfasis en casos de Brasil.

Palabras clave: migración pendular, regiones fronterizas, condiciones laborales, informalidad; vulnerabilidad social

1. Introduction

Frontier workers are defined by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as migrants who work in one country and maintain their habitual residence in a neighboring country, to which they return daily or at least once a week. In addition to work motivations, which involve better employment opportunities and insertion in more favorable markets, these individuals also cross borders in search of access to educational and health systems, tax benefits, among other reasons (International Organization for Migration, 2019; 2020).

In theoretical terms, cross-border work is also often approached from the perspective of migration. In the fields of geography and sociology, this phenomenon is analyzed from the perspective of commuting, which refers to regular and repetitive movements between the place of residence and the place of work or study. In other words, commuting analyses cross-border work movements, but also movements related to study. These movements generally occur in short intervals of time and can happen within the same city, between states or even between different countries (Moura et al., 2005).

The phenomenon of commuting with an emphasis on work is present in several regions of the world, with the border between Mexico and the United States being one of the most emblematic examples. It is estimated that 87,675 border workers residing in Mexico are part of the North American workforce, commuting daily to carry out their activities, which highlights the magnitude and relevance of this type of labor mobility in contemporary times (Romano, 2023). Another notable example is the movement of border workers between the Windsor region in Canada and Detroit in the United States, where, in 2011, around 6,120 Canadian residents commuted daily to work in sectors such as the automotive industry, technology and services, returning to their homes on the same day, a phenomenon made possible, above all, by their geographical proximity, since they are bordering cities (Canada, 2011).

In addition to these cases, commuting is also widely observed in Europe, where EU legislation recognizes and regulates cross-border work. According to European legislation, a cross-border worker is one who works in one European Union (EU) country but resides in another, to which he or she returns daily or at least once

a week, a dynamic facilitated by the short distances between European countries, which allow for rapid and frequent commutes, with a hybrid applicable legislation, in which the country where the work is carried out regulates employment issues, income taxes and most social security rights, while the country of residence is responsible for property taxes, other taxes and formalities related to residence (European Union, 2024).

In Brazil, commuting migration with neighboring countries is also common, especially because the country has a large strip of land border, totaling 16,885.7 km and covering 10 of the 12 South American countries. In this region, there are the so-called twin cities, municipalities located side by side in different countries and with more than two thousand inhabitants. Brazil has 33 municipalities classified as twin cities, with the state of Rio Grande do Sul having the largest number of these locations, on its borders with Argentina and Uruguay (Brazil, 2022).

In the context of relations between Brazil and Uruguay, Decree Number 5,105/2004 establishes guidelines for the movement of Brazilian and Uruguayan citizens in border areas, guaranteeing them the right to work, study and reside in the neighboring country. The decree applies only to the border regions between Chuí, Santa Vitória do Palmar and Barra do Chuí (Brazil) and Chuy, 18 de Julho, Barra de Chuy and La Coronilla (Uruguay); Jaguarão (Brazil) and Rio Branco (Uruguay); Aceguá (Brazil) and Aceguá (Uruguay); Santana do Livramento (Brazil) and Rivera (Uruguay); Quaraí (Brazil) and Artigas (Uruguay); Barra do Quaraí (Brazil) and Bella Unión (Uruguay), and may be extended to other locations within 20 kilometers of the border, subject to agreement between the two countries. This bilateral agreement, signed in 2002 and enacted in 2004, seeks to promote the mobility and integration of populations living in border areas, simplifying administrative processes and reducing bureaucratic barriers to obtaining residence, work and study permits (Brazil, 2004).

In addition, the Brazilian Migration Law Number 13,445/2017 defines a border resident as someone who lives in a border area between Brazil and a neighboring country, granting them specific rights, such as authorization to perform civil acts in Brazil, the issuance of Brazilian documents, including the Employment and Social Security Card (CTPS) and the Individual Taxpayer Registry (CPF), in addition to the right to work in the authorized municipality, ensuring the application of worker protection standards and compliance with legal and contractual labor obligations (Brazil, 2017).

In this context, the objective of this article is to conduct a literature review on commuting migration and labor conditions in border regions, with particular attention to the Brazilian context. The text is organized into two main sections: first, it discusses the concepts and theoretical approaches related to commuting migration, with emphasis on its social, economic, and symbolic dimensions; then, it analyzes labor conditions in border territories, focusing on issues such as informality, precariousness, and social vulnerability. Throughout the analysis, examples from different Brazilian border regions are used to illustrate the specificities and challenges faced by workers in these areas.

2. Mobility modalities: the issue of commuting

The notion of mobility refers to the set of movements made by individuals in the exercise of their daily activities — such as work, consumption and leisure — and is therefore a constitutive dimension of social life. Within the scope of disciplines such as Geography and Sociology, commuting stands out among the types of mobility, understood as a specific type of regular and systematic movement between territories, inscribed in specific spatial and temporal landmarks, notably between the place of residence and the place of work (Andan;

D'Arcier; Raux, 1994; Jardim, 2007).

Like commuting migration, other forms of displacement have been widely studied, such as internal or intranational migration, international migration, diaspora migration and forced migration. It is essential, however, to establish a distinction between commuting and other forms of population mobility. Internal or intranational migration, for example, is characterized by intranational movements, that is, within the same country, linked to processes of urbanization and spatial redistribution, especially migratory turnover – constant flows of entry and exit that redefine territories (Baeninger, 2012; Craide; Fischer, 2012). International migration occurs when individuals move to another country, also motivated by economic, political or social factors, but differs in that it is not as short-lived as commuting (Martine, 2005). International migration, which can also be understood through the lens of transnational migration, involves movements between countries with the maintenance of long-lasting ties in both territories, whether for economic or organizational reasons, requiring regular interactions across national borders (Kopinak; Miras, 2013). Another relevant form is diaspora migration, which is differentiated by religious, political or corporate loyalties, creating transnational networks based on collective identities and center-periphery relations (Kopinak; Miras, 2013). Finally, in contrast to voluntary migration, forced migration stands out for its involuntary nature, resulting from political crises, conflicts, wars or environmental disasters (Barcelos et al., 2023), as is the case with refugees and environmental migrants.

The following table proposes a systematization of the theoretical framework on types of migration.

Table 1. Systematization of the theoretical framework on types of migration

Features	Migration Type	Author
Regular and repetitive travel between place of residence and work or study, which may occur within the same city, between states or between countries; <u>generally</u> of short duration.	Commuting Migration	Moura et al. (2005), Francellino (2020), Nogueira; Rippel (2022)
It involves not only the daily movement of people to carry out everyday tasks, such as work, study and leisure, but also the experience of living and <u>interacting with the place</u> .		
Driven by the search for better opportunities, both personal and professional.		
Migratory movements that occur within the same country, associated with urbanization and spatial redistribution. They are marked by population turnover, with constant inflows and outflows that transform territories.	Internal or Intranational Migration	Baeninger (2012), Craide; Fischer (2012), Dota; Queiroz (2019)
They are generally driven by scenarios of economic crisis, with increased unemployment and informality.		

Moving to another country, motivated by economic, political or social factors; it differs from commuting migration due to its longer duration and involvement with new social contexts.	International Migration	Martine (2005), Brzozowski (2012)
As for economic development, it can represent a strategy for increasing income and strengthening the economic stability of the family unit.		
It involves travel between countries while maintaining lasting ties in both territories.	Transnational Migration	Kopinak; Miras (2013), Sobrinho; Sirianni; Piffer (2014)
It requires regular interactions and can be motivated by economic or organizational reasons.		
It is analyzed from the perspective of transnationality, as it involves the formation of links and networks that simultaneously connect the country of origin and the country of destination.		
Based on religious, political or cultural loyalties, with transnational networks formed by collective identities and relations between center and periphery.	Diaspora Migration	Kopinak; Miras (2013), Safran (1991)
They preserve collective memories and symbolic representations of their homeland.		
Caused by political crises, armed conflicts or environmental disasters; it is characterized by its involuntary nature, lack of periodicity and stable bilateral ties.	Forced Migration	Barcelos et al. (2023), Monjar, (2018)
They are marked by the worsening of vulnerabilities and the attempt to rebuild life in more dignified and safe contexts.		

Source: Own elaboration.

Francellino (2020) argues that commuting goes beyond the simple act of moving from one point to another. The concept involves not only the daily movement of people to carry out everyday tasks, such as work, study and leisure, but also the experience of living and interacting with the place. Furthermore, the author highlights that this repetitive movement creates a symbolic bond between individuals and the space, generating memories, sharing experiences and a feeling of belonging to the urban environment.

Commuting for schooling purposes is more frequent in isolated and inland areas, generally associated with poor transportation conditions, which tends to provide a negative experience for the individuals who undertake it, in addition to being marked by setbacks such as long journeys on foot or with inadequate

transportation, exposure to adverse weather conditions and the lack of adequate infrastructure, factors that aggravate the difficulties faced by those seeking qualifications (Francellino, 2020; Peixoto et al ., 2021).

In terms of demographic, economic and social dimensions, commuting is not only a phenomenon of daily commuting between locations, but also a reflection of the social and economic dynamics that structure these relationships. In the context of work, commuting has been a common practice in border regions in Brazil. In addition to representing a sign of regional integration, this practice plays an important role in population growth, although this growth remains concentrated in large cities (Passareli-Araujo; Souza; Terra, 2015). Cunha and Pessini (2008), when investigating commuting in the Metropolitan Region of Campinas (RMC), in the state of São Paulo (Brazil), observed a significant growth in this type of commuting, with a significant increase in the number of individuals involved, which went from approximately 180,000 to over 200,000 between the 2000 and 2010 censuses. This intensification is closely linked to processes of metropolitan integration, functional specialization and reorganization of productive activities. However, in addition to evidencing territorial reorganization, commuting also exposes social inequalities, since longer commutes are predominantly undertaken by low-income individuals, reflecting a scenario in which the costs of commuting fall more heavily on the less favored social classes.

The predominance of men among commuters is also noteworthy, as observed in the metropolises of Ceará (Brazil) by Correia (2020), indicating an important gender difference. Furthermore, it is demonstrated that commuting contributes to the maximization of income, corroborating economic theories that associate this phenomenon with the search for better income. It is also observed that the probability of engaging in commuting increases among older age groups, suggesting an interaction between the life cycle, the labor market, and mobility (Correia, 2020).

Regarding the characterization of commuting migrants, Silva (2020), in his analysis of metropolitan regions in southeastern Brazil, points out that the absence of stable marital ties can favor mobility, given that most commuting migrants do not have spouses. Regarding the racial dimension, a greater representation of white individuals among migrants is identified. In addition, urbanity presents itself as a facilitating factor for commuting migration, showing that residences in urban areas are associated with greater mobility.

Regarding the subjective dimension of commuting, Mendes et al . (2023) highlight that precarious working conditions in border regions promote a scenario of high vulnerability. In this context, workers face health risks and limited access to basic services. Furthermore, the characterization of migrants as a "transient population" reflects the precariousness and instability experienced by these individuals, often aggravated by the social and economic contexts in which they are inserted.

Studies such as those by Nogueira and Rippel (2022) also stand out, arguing that this phenomenon is driven by the search for better opportunities, both personal and professional. The authors interpret commuting as part of a logic in which individuals invest in their skills, seeking returns that justify the costs associated with commuting, which, in turn, underscores the economic and strategic dimension that permeates commuting decisions.

The following table proposes a systematization of the theoretical framework on commuting migration.

Table 2. Systematization of the theoretical framework on commuting migration

Contributions	Reference Focus	Author
Commuting involves more than functional displacements, creating symbolic links with urban spaces, through experiences, memories and feelings of belonging.	Symbolic relationship and experience of space	Francellino (2020)
Male predominance among commuting migrants; phenomenon associated with the search for income; higher incidence among older adults, revealing a relationship between mobility, work and life cycle.	Gender, life cycle and economic aspects	Correia (2020)
Commuting to study is common in rural areas, marked by difficulties such as poor transport, long journeys and lack of infrastructure, which compromises the educational experience.	School commuting in isolated areas	Francellino (2020); Peixoto et al. (2021)
Commuting is motivated by opportunities and returns on investments in human capital. Commuting is a strategic choice, based on expectations of gain.	Economic strategy and personal investment	Nogueira; Rippel (2022)
In border regions, commuting exposes workers to precarious conditions, health risks and exclusion from services. They are seen as a "transient population", which increases their vulnerability.	Subjective dimension and social vulnerability	Mendes et al. (2023)

Source: Own elaboration

It is worth noting that the definition of commuting refers exclusively to daily movement between different spatial units, without this implying a permanent change of residence or establishing rigid geographic limits. Therefore, commuting can occur on different scales, including movements within the same city, between states, countries, non-border municipalities or in border regions (Pereira; Herrero, 2009), as will be explored below.

3. Working conditions in border regions

Border territories represent areas marked by complex social and economic dynamics, where migratory flows, commercial exchanges and cultural interactions are intensified (Cardin; Albuquerque, 2022). However, these regions are not limited to being points of convergence and integration; they also reveal particularities that expose inequalities and vulnerabilities, especially in the field of working conditions.

Working conditions on the border reveal a scenario marked by precariousness and exclusion, particularly in the case of immigrant workers working in border contexts. These workers, often coming from vulnerable regions, face multiple forms of economic and social exploitation (Helfenstein; Ferrari, 2020).

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For example, the study by Helfenstein and Ferrari (2020) shows that, in the context of the border between Paraná (Brazil), Argentina and Paraguay, Haitian, African and Asian workers are largely incorporated into agribusinesses, where they live with labor relations that perpetuate vulnerabilities and systematic exclusions. Additionally, Paraguayan immigrants engaged in seasonal activities, such as construction and agriculture, are also subject to precarious working conditions, often close to slavery-like labor. Documented cases of recruitment of Paraguayan workers in recent years exemplify these practices, which often result in forced deportation or abandonment of these individuals to their fate.

The historical roots of these exploitative dynamics are deep. In the border region between Paraná, Paraguay and Argentina, labor practices analogous to slavery date back to the end of the 19th century and continue to be present in areas such as western Santa Catarina and Paraná, states located in the southern region of Brazil. These degrading conditions predominantly affect national and Paraguayan workers from the border area itself. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge about labor rights in international legislation contributes to perpetuating cycles of exploitation and social invisibility, creating a scenario in which vulnerabilities are systematically reproduced (Ferrari, 2010).

Structural informality is another striking feature of the labor market in the border region. In many municipalities in the Northern Arc – encompassing the northern Brazilian states of Amapá, Pará, Amazonas, Acre, and Roraima, with the latter two entirely located in the border region with countries such as Peru, Bolivia and Venezuela – more than 80% of workers are engaged in informal employment relationships, with weak and sectorally undiversified ties. Although denser urban areas are expected to offer greater stability, this correlation does not automatically translate into better working conditions. On the contrary, urbanization often reinforces informality, exposing the complexity of the dynamics that structure the labor market in these regions (Amaral, 2014).

In the case of the border between Brazil and Bolivia, the predominance of informality in the labor market insertion of Bolivian immigrant workers reflects not only an economic issue, but also an epistemological erasure. These workers, despite being registered in the census, remain invisible in official databases, which reinforces their exclusion and social invisibility. This scenario highlights the need for an approach that recognizes and addresses the multiple layers of exclusion faced by these individuals (Aguiar, 2018).

Lack of social protection and precariousness also directly affect the health of workers in border areas. The lack of information and training on worker health policies contributes to an invisibility that naturalizes subordinate conditions. In this context, the precariousness of work is intensified by a regime of fear, where the threat of job loss acts as a disciplinary element, limiting resistance and reinforcing tacit consensus. This dynamic, often associated with survival, perpetuates structural inequalities and subjectivities conformed to precarious conditions (Almeida, 2011).

The issue of social guarantees for cross-border and seasonal workers is also highlighted in international contexts. Although regulations, such as the Seasonal Workers Directive in Europe, propose guidelines for equal treatment, structural limitations continue to generate inequalities. The absence of effective integration mechanisms and the mismatch between formal equality and material conditions highlight how discriminatory practices remain entrenched, perpetuating dynamics of exclusion in cross-border employment relationships (Yaroshenko et al., 2023).

On the border between Santana do Livramento, in Brazil, and Rivera, in Uruguay, cross-border workers

face a scenario of social and institutional discrimination associated with the region's economic precariousness. Factors such as low education, low professional qualifications, gender, and age intensify the vulnerabilities faced by these workers, who often lack information about their labor rights. This lack of knowledge limits their ability to demand rights and reinforces unequal labor relations, characterized by both economic exploitation and symbolic and social violence. Furthermore, institutional practices and discriminatory attitudes of employers perpetuate class contempt, creating additional barriers to the emancipation of these individuals (Barboza, 2024).

The following table proposes a systematization of the characteristics of work in border regions, as analyzed in the theoretical framework.

Table 3. Systematization of work characteristics in border regions

Characteristics of Border Work	Border Region Studied	Author
Haitian, African, Asian and Paraguayan workers face precarious conditions in agribusiness and construction, often bordering on slavery-like labor, with frequent deportations and abandonment. Labor practices analogous to slavery date back to the 19th century, affecting national and Paraguayan workers, with a lack of knowledge about rights, perpetuating cycles of exploitation and social invisibility.	Border between Paraná (Brazil), Argentina and Paraguay	Helfenstein; Ferrari (2010)
The precariousness of work is intensified by a regime of fear, with the absence of worker health policies, perpetuating inequalities and subjectivities conformed to precariousness.	Border between Paraná (Brazil), Paraguay and Argentina	Ferrari (2010)
More than 80% of workers are in the informal sector, with weak ties and little diversification across sectors, reinforcing precariousness even in urban areas.	Border areas (unspecified)	Almeida (2011)
Bolivian workers face informality and invisibility in official databases, reflecting social and economic exclusion, with epistemological erasure that reinforces their marginalization.	Northern Arc (Amapá, Pará, Amazonas, Acre, Roraima) with borders with Peru, Bolivia and Venezuela	Amaral (2014)
Regulations such as the Seasonal Workers Directive do not guarantee material equality, perpetuating inequalities and discriminatory practices in cross-border employment relationships.	Border between Brazil and Bolivia (states not specified)	Aguar (2018)
Workers face social and institutional discrimination, with low education and qualifications, in addition to lack of knowledge about labor rights, reinforcing economic exploitation and symbolic violence.	European context (cross-border seasonal workers)	Yaroshenko et al. (2023)
	Border between Santana do Livramento (Brazil) and Rivera (Uruguay)	Barboza (2024)

Source: Own elaboration

4. Conclusion

The literature review made it possible to understand that commuting migration is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond the mere daily movement between locations. Although it does not involve a permanent change of residence, this form of mobility produces significant effects on individuals' lives, both in their practical organization and in their symbolic experiences. The studies analyzed show that daily travel motivated by work, education, or other activities is embedded in multiple dimensions — social, economic, and subjective. Beyond the physical movement, this everyday mobility creates emotional bonds with the territory, generates memories, and fosters a sense of belonging.

Complementarily, labor conditions in border regions reveal a scenario marked by informality, precariousness, and social exclusion. Workers — especially immigrants — are often engaged in fragile employment relationships, with limited social protection and, in many cases, without full awareness of their rights. In several Brazilian border areas, such as those with Paraguay, Bolivia, and Uruguay, degrading labor conditions have been documented, sometimes akin to slavery, whose persistence is linked to historical factors, the absence of effective public policies, and institutional practices that reinforce marginalization and hinder the autonomy of these individuals.

It is also noted that urbanization, often associated with the expectation of greater stability, does not guarantee better labor conditions. On the contrary, in many cases, informality intensifies in urban centers of border regions. Furthermore, the constant fear of job loss imposes a regime of control that inhibits resistance and naturalizes asymmetrical and exploitative labor relations.

In summary, the reviewed studies demonstrate that commuting migration and labor conditions in border areas are deeply interconnected, revealing a reality marked by multiple vulnerabilities. This context calls for increased attention from public authorities, civil society, and the academic community, in order to recognize the specificities of these territories and to promote actions aimed at expanding rights, valuing labor, and ensuring the dignity of the populations who live and circulate within them.

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