

LATIN AMERICA

In Brazil, People Illicitly Snag Vaccines and Brag About It

Some line-cutters post their Covid-19 vaccine success on Instagram; lawmakers make flouting the rules a crime

By [Samantha Pearson](#)

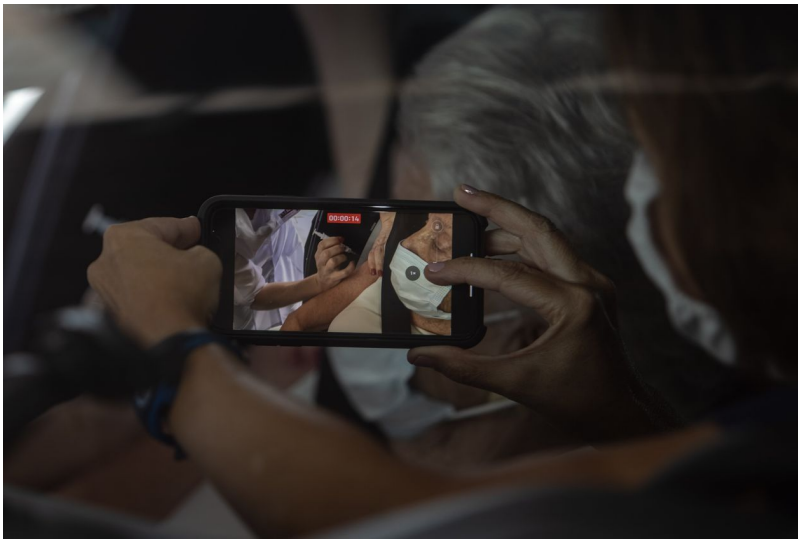
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SÃO PAULO—Soon after a Covid-19 vaccine became available in a farming town in Brazil’s central savanna, health secretary Assis Silva Filho ordered nurses to vaccinate his wife ahead of local hospital workers.

“She’s the love of my life!” said Mr. Silva Filho, who also moonlights as an evangelical pastor in Pires do Rio, a town of 32,000 people. He added, “I would die for her,” in a video he posted to [Facebook](#) last month.

After being reported by people who witnessed the vaccination, he was targeted by prosecutors for criminal charges for demanding advantage as a public official, resigned and agreed to pay a \$9,000 fine.

Brazil is only a month into its vaccination campaign against Covid-19, yet the country’s authorities have already been overwhelmed by several thousands of reports of people who circumvented the rules to get immunized before the most vulnerable.



Brazilians across the country have taken to videoing their arm while being vaccinated.

PHOTO: JONNE RORIZ/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Among those under investigation are politicians, influential business owners and lawyers, along with a host of other professionals, from veterinarians to fashion bloggers, most of whom incriminated themselves after posting vaccination selfies to social media, prosecutors said. Line jumpers have largely fallen into two groups, prosecutors say, the politically-connected or wealthy and those with friends in the medical community.

There are reports of the rich and well-connected flouting eligibility rules and using connections to get a coveted shot throughout the world, including in the U.S. In Rhode Island, board members of a medical system were invited to get vaccinated, regardless of their age or occupations, and judges and their staff received vaccines ahead of schedule at a Nevada medical center. In Canada, an executive and his wife were charged after flying to a remote, largely indigenous area of the country to get a vaccine. The health minister of Peru has resigned after a Lima newspaper revealed that last year then-President Martín Vizcarra and his wife were secretly inoculated—months before the country's immunization program began.

In Brazil, the problem is especially acute. Brazil's Congress passed a bill Thursday to make those who violate eligibility requirements for vaccines a crime, punishable by up to three years in jail, with longer sentences for those bribing government officials. The Senate must now approve.

The problem has dire consequences here, where two doses have been administered per 100 people compared with 16 per 100 in the U.S. In recent days, cities such as Rio de Janeiro have announced they will have to suspend their vaccination campaigns as vaccine stocks run out. A new coronavirus strain from the Amazon has also added to a surge in

cases here in recent months, overwhelming hospitals and pushing the country's death toll from the disease to more than 240,000.



A cemetery in the city of Manaus for people who have died of Covid-19.

PHOTO: SANDRO PEREIRA/FOTOARENA/ZUMA PRESS



A makeshift field hospital being set up in the indigenous neighborhood in Manaus.

PHOTO: RAPHAEL ALVES/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

“Siphoning off vaccines is extremely serious, in some cases you are basically denying someone the chance of survival,” said Aylton Flávio Vechi, attorney general for the state of Goiás who dealt with Mr. Silva Filho’s case and is investigating others across a dozen nearby towns. “It’s inhumane.”

While Mr. Silva Filho and his wife are both in their 70s, they were not eligible to receive the scarce vaccines initially reserved for front-line healthcare workers and nursing home residents. Mr. Silva Filho didn’t respond to requests for comment.

In the Amazonian city of Manaus, where Covid-19 patients have suffocated after hospitals ran out of oxygen, vaccinations were suspended for two days less than a week after they began over concerns about fraud.

Prosecutors opened an investigation after two young doctors, daughters of one of the city's richest families, were vaccinated despite not being eligible. "Vaccinated, YES!" and "never so happy to get a vaccine!," the sisters, Gabrielle and Isabelle Lins, wrote alongside photos of themselves getting the shots that they posted to social media, which were then published by the local press. They didn't return a request for comment through their father's company.

Some cases of line-jumping likely happened by accident amid confusion over who is eligible. In Goiás state in the center of the country, about 20 teenage healthcare workers erroneously received Covid-19 shots after nurses failed to check their date of birth.

Other cases are sinister. Last month, a video went viral of a nurse in the northeastern city of Maceió sticking a syringe into a 97-year-old woman's arm but failing to inject the vaccine, raising fears that nurses could be enacting "fake vaccinations" while passing the shots to others. Brazilians across the country have now taken to videoing their arm while being vaccinated.



A man received a Covid-19 vaccine last week in the Pupuri community in the Labrea municipality in the state of Amazonas.

PHOTO: EDMAR BARROS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Paulo Henrique Prado, a prosecutor in Alagoas state where Maceió is located, said his colleagues were so concerned about vaccines ending up in the wrong hands that they

stationed themselves at the airport when the first batch arrived to oversee their transport.

“The pandemic could have served as an important moral lesson for all of us,” said Mr. Prado. “But, unfortunately, it seems we weren’t willing to learn.”

In interviews, prosecutors across Brazil said they weren’t surprised by cases of people skirting eligibility rules given the scarcity of vaccines and the public’s desperation to take them.

Brazil began its vaccine rollout on Jan. 17, but there are only enough shots for fewer than 5% of the country’s 210 million people, mostly the CoronaVac vaccine from the Chinese firm Sinovac. At best, all Brazilians can expect to get vaccinated by the middle of next year, say public health researchers, who blame President Jair Bolsonaro for playing down the pandemic and bungling a vaccine supply deal with Pfizer Inc. last year. The health ministry said in a statement that it opposed several of Pfizer’s demands, such as getting patients to sign liability waivers before taking the vaccine.

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In the third version of its immunization plan released on Jan. 29, Mr. Bolsonaro’s administration estimated that by the end of this year the country would secure 212 million doses of the Oxford- AstraZeneca vaccine and another 100 million doses of CoronaVac via imports and local production.

Brazil has one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world, second only to a handful of African nations, according to recent World Bank data. A culture of elitism that can be traced back to Brazil’s colonial history and a widespread sense of impunity afforded by a weak justice system are also largely to blame, prosecutors say.

As Brazil’s private clinics struggle to secure their own vaccines among a global shortage, the country’s rich are being forced to wait their turn for the first time, said Renato Meirelles, head of Locomotiva, a research firm here.

Some, however, have done their bit to help, donating to poor families and supplying medical equipment to public hospitals. A group of Brazil’s largest companies—including

banks, beer and steel companies—have also funded the construction of a Covid-19 vaccine factory in São Paulo.



Cars lining up at a drive-through Covid-19 vaccination station at Pacaembu stadium in São Paulo.

PHOTO: AMANDA PEROBELLI/REUTERS

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