



### **Pittsburgh International Airport domestic passenger count: 2008-2018**

**Summary:** Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) officials have been using subsidies to lure airlines in an effort to boost passenger counts. While passenger numbers are up at PIT, they are more likely the result of an improving national economy than subsidizing airlines. This *Brief* will look at how PIT fared with passenger counts and flights over the last decade when compared to similarly-sized airports.

---

Earlier *Policy Briefs* discussed efforts of PIT officials to increase airport usage in terms of their penchant to use subsidies to lure airlines that failed miserably (WOW Air, OneJet, Qatar cargo) and how the airport has fared with its efforts to increase passenger counts (it has not kept pace with similarly sized airports). With the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) releasing the 2018 data for domestic passengers, flights and load factors, this *Brief* will look at how PIT fared with these metrics over the last decade.

The data covers origination passengers—the starting point of a trip—and destination passengers—the farthest point of travel from the origin of a trip of 75 miles or more (as per DOT criteria). PIT lost its hub status well over a decade ago when USAirways (now American) greatly downsized operations at the facility. Now PIT is primarily an origination and destination (O&D) airport.

PIT is ranked 47<sup>th</sup> in the country based on enplanements. For comparison purposes in this *Policy Brief*, the data will include 14 other similarly-sized airports ranked from 37<sup>th</sup> to 52<sup>nd</sup> by enplanements. These international airports represent the following cities: Cincinnati; Cleveland; Columbus; Fort Myers, Fla.; Indianapolis; Kahului, Hawaii; Kansas City; Milwaukee; Raleigh; Sacramento; San Antonio; San Jose; San Juan, Puerto Rico and Santa Ana, Calif.

Since international activity has not yet been updated through the end of 2018, the data examined covers only domestic activity at the airports in the sample.

In 2008 total domestic O&D passenger count at PIT was just over 8.4 million. Ten years later, in 2018, the total had grown by 7 percent to 8.98 million. For all airports (1,229) across the country O&D passengers grew by 19.4 percent during same time. Within the

similar-sized airport sample O&D passenger growth ranged from a high of 39 percent in San Jose to a low of -35.38 percent at Cincinnati's international airport. PIT's growth ranked 11<sup>th</sup> among the 15 international airports in the sample with the bottom four—San Juan, Milwaukee, Cleveland and Cincinnati—suffering losses.

Of particular interest is that the number of O&D flights at all 1,229 airports across the nation declined by 10.4 percent over the decade. From 2008, just before the recession took hold, through 2015 there was a steady decline in the number of flights being offered nationwide (18.76 million to 16.12 million). Over the last three years there has been a slight rebound to reach 16.8 million in 2018.

Of the 15 airports examined only two had increases in the number of flights between 2008 and 2018: Kahului (up 13.4 percent) and San Jose (up 9.9 percent). The other 13 airports all suffered declines over the decade ranging from a drop of 4 percent (Santa Ana) to a loss of 60.6 percent (Cincinnati).

In 2008 the number of flights at PIT stood at 127,569 but fell to 99,680 in 2014. The number of flights began to climb afterwards, reaching 114,845 in 2018. It's an improvement but still shy of the pre-recession level. The net decade drop in flights at PIT was the seventh worse at 9.9 percent but still better than eight others that experienced declines over the 10-year period.

The final metric examined is the "load factor." Load factor is defined by the airline industry as the ratio of passenger miles flown to the number of seat miles available—a measure of how full the flights are in terms of percentages.

For originating flights, the load factor for all 1,229 airports across the country was 84.46 in 2018, up nearly 5.9 percent from the 2008 level of 79.74. This makes sense considering that the number of O&D passengers across the country has increased while the number of flights has decreased. In the 15-airport sample San Juan had the highest load factor in 2018 (87.13). However, its growth was the lowest at just 1.4 percent given that the load factor in 2008 was already high (85.95, also the highest in this sample for that year).

The smallest load factor in 2018 was posted by the flights from Kansas City at 80.29, up from 74.13 10 years earlier—a growth of 8.3 percent. PIT's load factor for originating flights in 2018 came in at 82.78. It was 78.97 in 2008, an increase of 4.8 percent—the 11<sup>th</sup> best increase in originating airport load factor and the 9<sup>th</sup> highest load factor in this sample of 15 airports.

As noted in a previous *Brief* (Vol. 18, No. 17) which looked at a shorter time frame, 2015-2017, PIT's gains in flights and passenger counts did not keep pace with the other 14 similarly-sized airports. Taking a longer-term view of 10 years (2008-2018) shows much the same pattern. The near 7 percent rise in PIT's domestic O&D ranked 11<sup>th</sup> while the change in number of flights was 7<sup>th</sup> best even though it represented a significant decline. PIT's 2018 load factor of 82.78 was 9<sup>th</sup> best but the increase was only 11<sup>th</sup> best.

Yet the cheerleaders for the airport and the authority that owns it continue to claim *major* successes—successes that are, in fact, very modest in the context of similarly sized airports. They continue to double down by subsidizing new carriers to come to PIT such as British Airways, WOW, OneJet, Via Airlines and Condor Airlines. WOW and OneJet have ceased operations altogether, not just at PIT. British Airways, Condor and Via are flying, although British Airways just recently started operations and its announcement of intentions to begin flights last year coincided with the elimination of Delta’s route to Paris (a formerly subsidized route, *Policy Brief Vol. 18, No. 31*). Via has already cut back service from four flights a week (to Birmingham, Ala.) to two after just two weeks of flying from PIT. The Airport Authority is embarking on a reconstruction at the terminal at a cost of at least \$1.1 billion (it will probably end up much higher) to accommodate a demand they project will materialize.

The demand for air travel depends far more on growth of the local population and the strength of the economy than on luring airlines with subsidies. As the national economy has picked up steam so has national air travel—including at PIT.

Still, if local officials want to boost demand for air travel, they need to concentrate on helping improve the regional economy rather than trying to artificially stimulate demand through subsidizing carriers so they can offer cheaper fares than they otherwise would need to cover costs.

---

**Frank Gamrat, Ph.D., Executive Director**

---

*Policy Briefs may be reprinted as long as proper attribution is given.  
For more information about this and other topics, please visit our website:*

[www.alleghenyinstitute.org](http://www.alleghenyinstitute.org)

Allegheny Institute for Public Policy 305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234 Phone (412) 440-0079 * Fax (412) 440-0085 E-mail: <a href="mailto:aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org">aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org</a>
---