



### International passenger traffic at PIT in 2019 compared to 2018

**Summary:** After a significant delay, Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) released passenger data for 2019. While the overall results were not good as the total passenger count rose only 1.2 percent over 2018, the number of international passengers was down substantially despite the much heralded, and subsidized, return of British Airways.

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Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) posted a very meager gain in passenger traffic in 2019 following two years of significant increases. Data from the airport's website shows 2019 total domestic and international passengers (enplanements and deplanements) were up just 1.2 percent from 2018 compared to 7.5 percent from 2017 to 2018 and 8.2 percent 2017 over 2016. Domestic passenger enplanements and deplanements rose 1.8 percent in 2019, a sharp slide from the 7.3 percent gain in 2018. Meanwhile, international traffic fell by 16.3 percent compared to 2018 and was also lower than the 2017 reading.

The U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) provides detailed passenger data for the nation's airports on its TranStats Data Elements website. The data are delayed in being reported because of the enormous numbers of items reported for hundreds of airports. As of this *Policy Brief* date the website includes information for international traffic only through August 2019 but that will be adequate to estimate the impact of the loss of Delta's summer flights to Paris (the critical period for international travel) through a comparison with summer of 2018 international passenger counts.

Note that TranStats provides passenger counts for origination and destination passengers separately, that is, those that begin or end their trip at PIT. These counts differ from the passenger totals reported by PIT because PIT and other airports report both enplanements and deplanements regardless of airport of origination or destination and therefore include connecting travelers. Bear in mind, too, that TranStats data are compiled from airline reports rather than airport reports. This *Brief* will use origination passenger counts for comparison purposes and they will be referred to simply as *boardings*.

Using TranStats data this *Brief* examines the initial impact on international passenger counts at PIT with the coming of British Airways service in April 2019 and the 2019 cessation of Delta's summer flights to Paris beginning with September 2018 although it

continued minimal seasonal international flights in January through April 2019. The ending of WOW's international flights in January 2019 will also have an impact on the summer numbers.

After WOW's departure, international service—according to the PIT website—is now offered by Condor, twice a week to Frankfurt; Air Canada Express, three daily to Toronto and one daily to Montreal; Delta, Southwest, Apple Vacations and Vacation Express, all providing mostly seasonal flights to Mexico and the Caribbean.

The WOW loss could be the principal reason that the January through March international boardings on foreign carriers fell from 15,025 in 2018 to 9,599 in 2019. Total international boardings (U.S. and foreign carriers) dropped from 17,661 in the three-month period in 2018 to 12,224 in the same period in 2019.

TranStats statistics for international passengers are available only through August but that gives enough information to see how international boardings fared during the critical period May through August, the period when Delta was no longer providing service to Paris.

In the May through August period of 2018 there were 74,446 boardings of international passengers on U.S. and foreign carriers. Of that number, 20,734 were on U.S. carriers and 53,712 on foreign carriers. In the same four months in 2019 there were 48,036 international boardings—26,410 fewer than 2018—all on foreign carriers and none were reported by U.S. carriers. The 26,410 cumulative decline for the four peak-summer months represents a 35 percent drop from the 2018 figure. In contrast to the BTS statistics, PIT's website data for the four summer months show international passenger traffic was down 28.7 percent. It should be pointed out that the TranStats August 2018 passenger count figure is anomalously large. Remember too that PIT data includes all passengers, inbound and outbound regardless of origination or destination airports.

Note as well that foreign carrier boardings were down 5,676 for the four months compared to 2018. The absence of WOW could account for some of the foreign carrier decline.

Delta boarded 18,130 international passengers in the May-August period of 2018 and thus accounted for almost 90 percent of the decline in U.S. carrier boardings. American reported 1,413 international boardings and Southwest 1,140 to account for most of the non-Delta international passengers in 2018. Delta did carry a few passengers in September of 2018 before stopping the summer service altogether. In 2016 it had cut the October flights.

This all means that British Airways, whose numbers are not reported separately in the TranStats database, fell far short of replacing WOW and Delta passenger counts in the critical summer travel-to-Europe period. How much cannot be determined exactly without airline-specific data. Some of the shortfall could be due to Air Canada or Condor declines in boardings. But it would seem reasonable to assign a large percentage of the

summer international boardings doldrums to the failure of British Airways' four flights per week to make up the Delta losses.

TranStats data show that in the first eight months of 2018, 98,454 passengers boarded international flights; in the first eight months of 2019, 67,040 passengers boarded international flights. The year-to-date decline for 2019 compared to 2018 was 31.9 percent. The PIT website puts the year-to-date decline for the same period at 21.9 percent.

For comparison purposes note that over the four-month summer periods in 2018 and 2019, total international boardings at U.S. airports rose 2.3 percent with domestic carriers posting an increase of 3.9 percent. PIT unfortunately had no international passengers boarding domestic carriers in the summer of 2019, a 100 percent drop from 2018.

The significant differences in percentage changes in international passenger traffic between PIT's self-reported statistics and the TranStats data are likely explainable in large part to the fact that the PIT data does not distinguish between passengers whose origin or destination is PIT and connecting passengers. Generally, PIT passenger numbers for each month and year-to-date are more than twice as large as the TranStats numbers for originating passengers boarding at PIT.

Looking ahead to the reports for first quarter 2020 traffic, PIT's international numbers should improve compared to 2019. British Airways was not flying in the first quarter of 2019 and neither was WOW. With the presence of British Airways this year, that change should make the 2020 numbers look more favorable in comparison to a year earlier.

However, in light of the chilling effect of the Coronavirus problem, foreign travel could be down substantially for several months, even to Europe and certainly to Asia. Thus, we might not have a clear picture of British Airways' longer-term effect on PIT for at least another year.

One thing can be said: At a cost of \$1.5 million per year in airport subsidy to the carrier and the cessation of Delta summer flights to Europe, 2019 international travel at PIT was a huge disappointment.

An analysis of the domestic passenger traffic at PIT for 2019 by carrier will be forthcoming as soon as the December 2019 numbers are available.

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**Jake Haulk, Ph.D., President-emeritus**

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Allegheny Institute for Public Policy  
305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.\* Suite 208\* Pittsburgh PA 15234  
Phone (412) 440-0079  
E-mail: [aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org](mailto:aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org)  
Website: [www.alleghenyinstitute.org](http://www.alleghenyinstitute.org)  
Twitter: [AlleghenyInsti1](https://twitter.com/AlleghenyInsti1)