



Pittsburgh International's slide in passengers and ranking since 2000

Background: Notwithstanding publicity efforts proclaiming the importance and performance of Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT), the real story of the last two decades is dismal at best. And, in hopes the recent two-decade-long slide in passenger count and national airport ranking is over and about to turn around, PIT is constructing a new terminal at a projected cost of \$1.4 billion, a figure that will most likely prove too low as cost overruns are common in such complex construction projects. The construction is made complex by having to work around existing facilities and maintain traffic movement.

History of PIT in the 2000s

In 2001, in the midst of financial woes of PIT's hub carrier (USAirways), PIT ranked 23rd in the nation with 9.94 million enplanements, the highest count this century. Enplanements are defined as revenue passenger boardings that receive scheduled or nonscheduled passenger service. The reading was slightly higher than the 2000 posting of 9.87 million that gave PIT a rank of 24th. In 2002, boardings fell to 8.98 million followed by a sharp decline to 7.11 million in 2003 as USAirways' bankruptcy led to massive cuts in service and employment at the airport. *All passenger and ranking data from the Federal Aviation Administration ([FAA](#)).*

By 2004, the passenger count at PIT had dropped 33 percent from 2001's 9.94 million to 6.61 million causing the airport to drop from the 23rd ranking in 2001 to the 32nd-busiest U.S. airport in terms of passengers boarded. Unfortunately, PIT continued to suffer lower passenger traffic over the next 15 years with enplanements falling to, or below, 4 million from 2009 through 2016.

There was an upturn in enplanements from 2016 to 2019 as the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) enjoyed its highest level of jobs of the 2000-to-2023 period and the largest gain of private jobs for any three-year period going back to 2000, except for the deep recession recovery in 2012 and 2013.

Along with much better job growth in the 2016-to-2019 period, the enplanements in 2019 (pre-pandemic) rose to 4.72 million, the highest level since 2007. However, notwithstanding the rise in enplanements in 2019, it remained far below the levels of the 2000-to-2004 period and, as result, the PIT ranking fell to 46th.

Recovery from the pandemic through 2022 was also disappointing as enplanements climbed to only 3.92 million and were still well below (16.9 percent) the 2019 figure and 40 percent below the 2004 number. The slow recovery resulted in a drop in the national rank of airports to 49th in 2022, a decline of 26 places since the 23rd rank in 2001 and 17 places since the 2004 dehubbing of USAirways.

In short, PIT's history since the beginning of the 21st century has been woeful. And while progress toward the pre-pandemic reading is continuing as of May 2023, total passengers were still 69,396 or 7.8 percent below May 2019 and in the just released June data, passengers remained 5.3 percent below the June 2019 reading with international passengers down 30 percent from 2019 and 53 percent from the 2018 level.

Comparison to other airports

How does the performance at PIT over the last 18 years compare to other airports during the period?

The table contains data on activity measures at five airports, PIT and four others: Salt Lake City, Cleveland, Nashville and Raleigh-Durham. Others could be selected but these cover the range of very fast growth, moderate growth and declines in enplanements.

Of these four, Cleveland's Hopkins airport more closely followed PIT's declining trend. Nashville has been the superstar with Salt Lake City and Raleigh-Durham posting solid but much smaller percentage gains over the 2004-to-2022 period than Nashville. The table below shows the pertinent data for each of the three years 2004, 2019 and 2022. Ranking is among U.S. commercial or primary airports.

Airport	2004		2019		2022	
	Enplanements (millions)	Rank	Enplanements (millions)	Rank	Enplanements (millions)	Rank
PIT	6.61	32	4.72	46	3.92	49
Cleveland	5.90	35	4.89	45	4.24	46
Raleigh-Durham	4.37	43	6.92	37	5.85	38
Salt Lake City	8.88	27	12.84	23	12.38	22
Nashville	4.30	44	8.94	31	9.83	29

The percentage change in enplanements at the five airports from 2004 (after USAirways began to eliminate the PIT hub) to 2022—the last full year of data—is very instructive as is the change in ranking during the period. PIT is worst with a drop of 40 percent

resulting in a decrease in national rank from 32nd to 49th. Cleveland had the second-worst performance, with enplanements falling 28 percent and rank slipping from 35th to 46th.

Of the three positive performers, Raleigh-Durham was slowest with a 2004-to-2022 rise in boardings of 34 percent and an improvement in ranking from 43rd to 38th, which represented a modest dip from 37th in 2019. Salt Lake City (which is a Delta hub) saw a boarding increase over the 18 years of 40 percent and solid jump in rank from 27th to 22nd.

Finally, Nashville has seen tremendous gains during the 18 years from 2004 to 2022. Passenger enplanements rose from 4.3 million to 9.83 million, a massive increase of 128 percent that boosted the airport's ranking from 44th to 29th. The sterling record of the metro area in growing jobs (see *Policy Brief*, [Vol. 23, No.26](#)) and the increased service offerings have fueled the huge jump in enplanements.

As noted in that *Policy Brief*, a comparison of the Pittsburgh MSA and the Nashville MSA, among other MSAs, showed private job growth in the Pittsburgh region was only 3 percent between June 2000 and June 2023. Moreover, jobs had not recovered to the pre-pandemic levels as of June 2023.

Even worse, average hourly earnings in Nashville's MSA have risen 65 percent since 2007 through June this year to \$32.56. Over the same period, Pittsburgh's MSA average hourly earnings have climbed by just 50 percent to stand at \$30.25. Thus, for the population of full-time employees working 40 hours per week, and paid for 52 weeks, the hourly pay difference amounts to an average of \$4,800 per year. Obviously, some employees in both areas will be above or below that average difference. But the implications for total area income are important since the total private employment is now very close to the same in the two areas—just 2.8 percent higher in Pittsburgh.

Clearly, rapid job growth, accompanied by strong earnings gains, has played a significant role in Nashville's airport performance. Then, too, no doubt heavy concentrations of flights by Southwest and Allegiant have been a major boost to growth at the airport, although there are many other carriers offering service. The Nashville airport offers service to over 90 cities with several international destinations. PIT has weekly departures to over 50 destinations. In May 2023, Nashville's airport had 23,852 aircraft operations. PIT had 11,187. Nashville had 2 million passengers (boarding and deplaning) compared to PIT's 807,000. This represents a complete reversal of the ratio of passenger counts at the two airports in the early 2000s.

Estimate of 2023 total passengers

Based on data through May, PIT's total passenger count (enplanements and deplanements) is down a cumulative 7.5 percent for 2023 compared to the same five months of 2019. Late arriving data for June show cumulative year-to-date passengers still 7.1 percent below June 2019. Assuming ongoing increases in monthly passengers during the second half of this year that reduces the cumulative yearly total to just 5 percent under

the 2019 total is a reasonable hypothetical case. Finally, using the latest ratio of total passengers to enplaned passengers, the FAA reported enplanement count for PIT in 2023 will likely be in the neighborhood of 4.49 million.

Summary and conclusion

PIT has experienced a very weak 23 years since the turn of the century and the loss of its major hub carrier in the early 2000s. Even after the hub loss impact, enplanements at PIT continued to slide through 2010, remained below 4 million a year until a recovery, albeit modest, boosted passenger enplanements to 4.72 million in 2019, the highest count since 2007. And, of course, the pandemic wiped out those meager gains and passengers remain below the 2019 reading.

Moreover, the huge decline in passengers has resulted in PIT's national airport ranking dropping from 23rd at the start of the century to 49th in 2022. The airport's woes have run parallel to the very anemic private-sector job performance in the Pittsburgh region, which saw only a 3 percent rise over 23 years through June and the employee count remains below the pre-pandemic posting.

Efforts to increase the number of passengers using PIT absent a significant boost in jobs and income in the region will continue to be frustrated. Finally, using taxpayer dollars to subsidize travel to and from PIT does not benefit the region. It just helps pay for people to fly out of the area and spend money out of the region while boosting carrier revenue. And it looks bad for the region to be subsidizing air travel.

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