



PIT compares poorly to similar-sized airports

Introduction: This *Policy Brief* looks at the passenger recovery at Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) as measured from the just-released October and November 2023 data to the 2019 pre-COVID postings for the same months. It also reviews the passenger recovery at four other airports with nearly the same national rank as PIT in 2022—the latest available Bureau of Transportation Statistics annual ranking.

PIT passengers

Compared to October 2019, PIT's October 2023 total passenger count of 835,295 was down 4.3 percent. Domestic travel was off by 4.1 percent over the period and international passengers, at 16,299, were 12.7 percent lower than four years earlier. Meanwhile, airport operations, at 11,229, fell 14.3 percent short of the 2019 reading. In November, activity showed a narrowing shortfall from the November 2019 readings in total (-1.3 percent) and domestic (-1.0 percent). However, the international count fell 17.2 percent below the 2019 number. Operations were off by 12.6 percent from November 2019 to November 2023. Operations are a fairly strong indicator of all activity including passengers, mail and cargo being handled at the airport.

Pittsburgh metro-area jobs

Note that during the same two four-year periods, private payroll jobs in the seven-county Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) were down 23,900 (-2.2 percent) from October 2019 to October 2023 and 18,200 (-1.7 percent) November 2019 to November 2023. The losses were led by a lack of employment recovery in mining, construction, health and social services (especially hospitals) along with a substantial shortfall of 7,300 jobs in the leisure and hospitality industry.

Meanwhile, on a modestly brighter note, manufacturing employment, following a decade of decline, was only 600 jobs below November 2018. Professional and business services employment, led by significant gains in the management of companies category, rose by 7,000.

Interestingly, government jobs fell by 4,100 over the four-year span as a 1,000 rise in federal employees was offset by state and local government decreases.

The pertinent point is that the lack of a strong bounce back in the Pittsburgh MSA's payroll employment is almost certainly one important factor in the absence of complete recovery in passengers and operations at PIT.

Other similar-sized airports

In the 2022 Bureau of Transportation Statistics ranking of airports, PIT placed as the 49th busiest in terms of enplaned passengers with 3.888 million and down from 48th in 2021. PIT had fallen to 44th busiest in 2008 with 4.259 million enplanements. Even when the airport had its highest level of passengers, it ranked only 24th.

Four similar-sized airports are used to compare the passenger count performance at PIT. Using 2022 data—the latest annual ranking data available—the following four comparison airports were selected: San Antonio (45th), Cleveland (46th), Columbus (51st) and Palm Beach (52nd).

In order of ranking, San Antonio was highest in 2022. Total passengers at the airport stood at 854,152 in November 2019 and climbed 10.5 percent to 943,426 in November 2023. Over the same period, private employment rose by 8.8 percent to reach 997,100.

Cleveland's airport saw the passenger count increase from 776,449 in November 2019 to 834,503 in November 2023 or 7.5 percent. Cleveland metro's private employment fell by 1.1 percent—almost 10,000 jobs during the period. Thus, unlike Pittsburgh, air travel rose despite the weak job market. Cleveland's domestic passenger count rose 54,193 or 7.5 percent over the 48 months to reach 822,871 and exceeded the PIT count by 50,881. Over the same period, Cleveland international passengers climbed by 50 percent to reach 11,632 while PIT's international count fell by 17 percent to stand at 12,127—still higher than Cleveland but the gap has closed considerably over the last four years.

In Columbus, the passenger count rose 1.2 percent from November 2019 (702,070) to November 2023 (710,325). Meanwhile, private-sector jobs climbed 1.9 percent from 950,600 to 969,000 over the same period. Monthly data for international passengers in Columbus was not available.

Finally, at Palm Beach airport, passengers jumped from 582,868 in November 2019 to 684,932 in November 2023, a huge 17.5 percent increase. The rise in passengers was accompanied by metropolitan area private-job increase from 585,200 to 625,100 (6.8 percent) during the same period.

All four comparison airports had increases in passengers from November 2019 to November 2023, ranging from just 1.2 percent in Columbus to 17.5 percent at Palm Beach. The unweighted average gain for the airports was 9.2 percent. Interestingly, San

Antonio and Cleveland had very large jumps in international travel while Palm Beach and PIT had declines.

The largest percentage passenger gains at Palm Beach and San Antonio were accompanied by sizable employment increases. Columbus had small gains in both private employment and passengers while Cleveland posted an outlier result of healthy passenger growth while area employment was down from 2019. PIT had poor results in all measures. Passengers, domestic and international were still trailing 2019 levels and metro area private jobs had failed to recover to pre-pandemic levels.

Conclusion

In short, Pittsburgh International's passenger count and the Pittsburgh metro area's jobs after four years remain below the pre-COVID readings, the only airport of the five reviewed to be that unfortunate.

The region's employment growth has been very weak compared to the nation and other regions for many years. Growth-stifling policies that have been in place for decades are not being replaced by more business-friendly government attitudes.

In several counties, one-party rule, heavy pro-union bias, a backwards approach to property assessment updates and declines in education quality in many school districts do not bode well for solid economic and employment growth.

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