



PIT international passenger count: 2002 to 2023

Background: In short, notwithstanding efforts by Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) officials over the last few years to promote the international passenger count at the airport, passenger totals are far below the levels posted in 2002, 2003 and 2004.

U.S. Bureau of Transportation (BTS) official statistics report that international enplanements at PIT in 2002 were 287,566. Data for earlier years are not posted. Based on data at other airports, it is reasonable to assume that enplanements and deplanements over the course of a year will be very close to equal. In that case, 2002 international passengers at PIT would have totaled around 575,000. By 2004 the enplanements at PIT had fallen to 195,285 pointing to total international passengers of about 390,570. After 2004, USAirways ended its flights to Europe. In 2018, PIT enplanements were 126,729, the highest level reached in the period between 2004 and 2023.

Data issues

Note that the assumption that PIT's total international passengers—enplanements and deplanements—are presumably roughly twice the number of enplanements as reported by BTS does not closely match the figures reported by the airport since at least 2016, the oldest airport data readily available.

Thus, to ensure comparability with other airports and national figures, this *Policy Brief* will use only BTS data for international enplanements at PIT and in other places enplanement data are referenced.

Historical changes in international passengers at PIT

“US Air filed for bankruptcy again in September 2004. Two months later, the carrier ceased service to London-Gatwick and Frankfurt, leaving the airport without any flights to Europe.” (“US Air files Chapter 11”. *CNN Money*. Sept. 13, 2004.) As a result, after 2004, international passengers at PIT fell dramatically dipping further each year through the 2008 reading of 52,385 enplanements. Over the next six years through 2014, international enplanements rose or fell slightly year-to-year, averaging about 60,000, then dipped to 51,000 in 2015. In 2016, the number of international enplanements rose significantly to reach 74,009.

In 2009, Delta began offering seasonal flights to Paris with a subsidy from the Allegheny Conference on Community Development that no doubt boosted the annual total above the 2008

level but failed to raise them back to anywhere near the 2004 posting. In the summer of 2017, WOW and Condor airlines began service to Reykjavik and Frankfurt, Germany, respectively, with subsidies from the Allegheny County Airport Authority (ACAA). Thus, with the three subsidized carriers, the international enplanements climbed to 98,300 in 2017 and 126,730 in 2018—their highest annual postings since 2004.

However, the financial problems at WOW and Condor caused cancellation of their international service at PIT. Moreover, Delta elected not to continue seasonal service because of the ACAA's decision to offer British Airways (BA) a hefty subsidy to provide four weekly flights to Heathrow. With the three previously subsidized carriers gone, the international passenger enplanement count dropped substantially in 2019 to 86,785. Note also that BA subsequently received another subsidy to increase weekly flights to six.

With the advent of COVID in early 2020, international travel fell precipitously, plunging to just 9,000 in 2020 and 12,500 enplanements in 2021 as BA suspended its flights. By 2022, with resumption of BA flights, international passengers recovered somewhat at 50,500 enplanements but remained well below the 2016, 2017 and 2018 levels. The recovery continued in 2023 and produced a yearly total of 74,614 enplanements—about the same as 2016's total—and, sadly, still well below the 2005 reading of 88,545 and only 38 percent of the 2004 figure and 25 percent of the 2002 enplanement total. Of course, USAirways was still operating a fairly large hub at that time.

Factors affecting airline passenger counts

As earlier *Policy Briefs (Vol. 24, Nos. 4 and 14)* have pointed out, there is a fairly close connection between economic and employment gains and the ability of a region's airport to grow its passenger count. The presence of a major airline hub can also be an important factor. An earlier *Policy Brief (Vol. 24, No. 7)* also noted the importance of operating costs per enplaned passenger as a likely factor in the ability of an airport to grow passenger counts and noted that PIT's operating cost per enplaned passenger was very high compared to a sample of regional airports across the country.

A general measure of underlying demographic, economic and employment vitality in a region is the pace of growth in the labor force. Of course, employment and incomes are key as well. But labor force numbers reflect population changes including growth in the 16-and-over age group and age distribution of the population, in and out migration, and natural increase or decrease. It does not reflect directly worker productivity or incomes. But it is a good proxy for many variables affecting a region's overall economic attractiveness and job opportunities.

Looking at changes over the last 30 years, the last 20 years, the last 10 years and since 2019 before the COVID pandemic, this analysis compares the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) labor force to national and Nashville MSA labor force growth. It also compares the growth in enplaned passengers at PIT and the Nashville airport (BNA) to show the correlation of labor force growth to enplanements.

Labor force comparisons

The table shows the percent changes in labor force for the U.S., Nashville and Pittsburgh MSAs for the last 10, 20 and 30 years.

Percent Changes	U.S.	Pittsburgh MSA	Nashville MSA
1993-2023	29.3	-1.1	82.5
2003-2023	14.1	-2.1	50.1
2013-2023	7.5	-3.3	25.9

While, as expected, the labor force gains for the U.S. and the Nashville MSA show big gains for the longer time periods, Pittsburgh’s labor force is in decline and markedly so over the last 10 years. That happened as a result of the slow but positive gains from 1990 to 2008 when the labor force reached its 33-year high point of 1,226,500. After 2008, the labor force fell slightly and averaged 1,214,479 (ranging from 1,197,578 to 1,224,863) in the 10 years until 2019 when it had a meaningful gain to reach essentially the same 1,226,500 posted 11 years earlier. Since 2019 the labor force fell by 47,880 through 2023 (just under 4 percent) to stand at 1,178,629, its second-lowest level since 1991. Pittsburgh’s 2023 reading was only slightly higher than the 2022 posting, which was the lowest level since 1991.

*Enplanement Comparisons Domestic and International—BTS Data: PIT and BNA:
Selected Years during the past decade*

Year	BNA		PIT		Ratio: BNA/PIT	
	Domestic	International	Domestic	International	Domestic	International
2013	5,010,069	24,555	3,729,620	58,883	1.34	0.42
2016	6,236,181	57,202	3,870,150	74,005	1.61	0.77
2018	7,667,124	127,531	4,495,041	126,729	1.71	1.00
2023	11,003,112	190,185	4,386,653	74,614	2.51	2.55
% Change 2013-2023	119.6	674.5	17.6	26.7		

It is readily apparent that the very rapid growth in the labor force (and, by extension, jobs and population) in the Nashville MSA over the past 30 years, and the continued gains of nearly 3 percent per year since 2013, have been powerful drivers of passengers at the airport. Indeed, BNA’s 2013 to 2023 percentage increase in both domestic (119.6) and international enplanements (674.5) dwarf the U.S. total gains of 26.9 percent domestic and 30 percent international. Meanwhile, PIT lagged the U.S. in both categories and trailed BNA massively.

The presence of the Southwest hub and several international carriers that are also providing service to Canadian and Mexican destinations have boosted international travel in Nashville. British Airways (with a subsidy of \$1.5 million from BNA) and U.S. carriers also provide service to Europe. Up until 2018, PIT had a significant edge over BNA in international passengers. However, PIT has not been able to regain its 2018 international enplanement level.

Indeed, the 2023 reading was 41 percent below the 2018 count. And the subsidy of BA passengers is almost certainly accounting for a large percentage of PIT’s international enplanements. Bear in mind that prior to the departure of Delta, domestic airlines accounted for 25 percent of international enplanements. In 2023, the domestic carrier percentage of international enplanements was down to 5 percent.

Conclusion

PIT is fighting an uphill battle to grow its passenger counts, including international. The region is not growing in terms of labor force, jobs and is losing population. That is a tough environment for any service provider that depends on the size of the local population and its economic vitality.

And subsidizing overseas carriers that lower fares to induce local residents to fly to another country is clearly not an unalloyed benefit to the region unless substantial numbers of foreigners are using the returning flights to come to the region and spend money.

The obvious question: Where are the PIT data on foreigners arriving at PIT using the subsidized carrier?

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