



PIT passengers reach May 2019 level, still lag the national upturn

Introduction: Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) has struggled to restore its passenger count to pre-pandemic levels. This *Policy Brief* discusses PIT's longer term passenger statistics back to 2016 and compares PIT to the national trends and other regional airports around the country. All PIT data are taken from PIT's website.

2016 to 2019 growth

From 2016 to 2019 (before COVID), total passenger counts (enplaned and deplaned) grew each year from May to May rising a total of 19.5 percent over the period to reach 875,447. All of this was accounted for by domestic passengers as international travelers fell 6.5 percent over the three years to stand at 23,380 in 2019. Solid domestic gains were posted each of the three years from 2016 to 2019. However, only 2018 saw a year-to-year rise in international passengers that could not offset the two drop-offs in 2017 and 2019.

Aircraft operations were up 7.3 percent over the period but most of that occurred between 2016 and 2017 and only a small net change was recorded from 2017 to 2019.

2019 to 2024 changes at PIT

In March 2020, COVID-19 came to the U.S. in full force, and, by April, airline travel had virtually disappeared as PIT managed only 92,500 total passengers in May 2020. Recovery was slow and by 2023, the May passenger count remained 73,000 or 8.3 percent below the 2019 reading. However, May 2024 has seen the passenger count slightly surpass the May 2019 level, standing at 892,467, a pickup of 72,000 or 1.9 percent compared to the 2019 level.

On the other hand, May 2024 international passengers were down 5.5 percent from 2019's total and 11.7 percent from the 2016 reading, notwithstanding all the subsidies being handed out to British Airways.

Performance in the U.S. and other airports for 2019 to 2024

Nationally, the latest data for air travel are provided by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for persons passing through security check points. This is a good measure of originating passengers, but of course, does not capture passengers making connections. Thus, it is not a perfect measure to compare with all airports including those with large numbers of connecting flights and passengers. It is a fairly good comparative gauge for airports with relatively few connecting passengers such as PIT. And to the extent the checkpoint numbers at specific airports track reasonably closely to all passengers boarding and deplaning, it can be used as a national comparison indicator.

In any case, the TSA had a daily average of 2.59 million passengers pass through security in May 2024 compared to an average of 2.40 million in May 2019—an increase of 7.8 percent. Obviously, this was much stronger than the 1.9 percent rise in passengers recorded for the same period at PIT.

Other airports 2019 to 2024 performance

It is useful for gauging PIT's performance to examine the growth in passengers at several airports across the country. For this purpose, the analysis looks at the metro areas of Nashville; Raleigh-Durham; Milwaukee; Kansas City, Mo; Louisville; Austin and Oklahoma City. Note that several airports such as Cleveland that would be good comparisons had not published May figures as of the date of this analysis. Changes in private employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics data) over the period are also shown.

Total passenger counts along with employment change are tabulated below.

Metro Area/Airport	May 2019	May 2024	Percent Change to passenger count	Percent Change to private employment
Austin	1,543,108	2,068,304	34.0	24.7
Kansas City, MO	1,066,555	1,107,092	3.8	5.5
Louisville	394,002	473,851	20.2	4.6
Milwaukee	588,442	543,219	-7.7	-2.1
Nashville	1,663,780	2,295,580	38.0	12.3
Oklahoma City	418,810	427,489	2.1	9.2
<i>Pittsburgh</i>	<i>875,447</i>	<i>892,467</i>	<i>1.9</i>	<i>-1.2</i>
Raliegh-Durham	1,309,173	1,408,755	7.6	15.4

This group of sampled airports clearly illustrates the wide range of passenger levels and growth since May 2019. Moreover, while the correlations are not perfect, it is readily discernible that markets with significant job growth are more likely to have moderate to strong passenger count gains. Austin and Nashville, with strong job gains, had enormous passenger increases. Nashville could have enjoyed large gains as a result of additional hubbing activity and more connecting passengers. Raleigh-Durham job gains were not proportionally reflected in air passenger growth, although the area did match the national gain in air passengers.

Changes in carrier offerings could have played a part as well. Nonetheless there is no escaping the fact that the strength of local economies is an important driver of air travel demand.

Conclusion

PIT passenger counts fell sharply after the loss of USAirways in the early 2000s. There has been some recovery. But passenger demand has never come close to the level reached in the early 2000s. Still, on a positive note and based on Bureau of Transportation air travel statistics, May 2019 enplanements at PIT were the highest May reading since 2007—although the count remained 27,000 lower than the 445,000 posted for May 2007. Indeed, it was not until 2018 that May enplanements returned to the 400,000 monthly May level after dropping below that figure in 2008.

And, after five years, total passengers—enplaned and deplaned—have edged slightly higher than the May 2019 reading. However, given the softness in the region's job gains and the apparent lack of increasing response to the subsidized British Airways flights, any passenger gains beyond the bounce back from COVID are likely to be muted.

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