



A long-term review of PIT passenger counts

Introduction: In a recent media release, Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) reported that May's count of total passengers, enplanements and deplanements, was 877,300. As of July 7, the breakout of May 2025 data with details of domestic and international travelers and airport operations still had not been posted on the airport's website.

The released May figure was down from the May 2024 reading of 892,467. For the first five months of 2025, total passengers were essentially unchanged from 2024's first five-month total. In the coming five months (June to October) of 2025, it is likely passenger counts will compare very unfavorably to 2024 figures.

Bear in mind the large increases in the May to October 2024 period were largely the result of a sizable jump in passenger counts stemming largely from the subsidy of the extremely low-cost carrier Frontier Airlines. Then, too, the airline added four destinations from PIT (in addition to Denver and Orlando) including Philadelphia, Atlanta, Dallas (DFW) and Raleigh-Durham (RDU). Two, Dallas and Raleigh-Durham, were dropped completely in November and Atlanta trips were reduced to one per week.

Longer-term passenger growth comparisons

Airport passenger data taken from [Transtats](#), website of the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, show that compared to 20 years earlier (2004, the year USAirways eliminated its PIT hub) PIT's passenger count was down 26.4 percent from 6.56 million enplanements to 4.83 million in 2024. Indeed, *Transtats* data show that PIT's 2014 national ranking as 46th largest airport in term of enplanements had fallen to 48th in 2024 as its percentage growth trailed the national gain. Moreover, PIT failed to match national percentage gains over the five years 2019 to 2024.

Note for comparison that according to *Transtats*, Ft. Myers in 2004 had half the PIT passenger count but with growth of 65 percent over the 20 years through 2024, improved its national ranking from 51st in 2014 to 43rd in 2024. During the 2004 to 2024 period the passenger totals for all airports in the country climbed 45 percent with a 30 percent rise from 2014 to 2024.

Meanwhile, PIT enplanements fell by 42 percent from 2004 to 2014 but have increased by 21.4 percent since that low level through 2024. However, despite the 10-year gain since 2014, the passenger count in 2024 remained 26 percent below the 2004 reading. PIT's website statistics on passengers that include both enplanements and deplanements show a meager 1.7 percent increase in passengers from 2019 to 2024. This growth reflected sizeable gains in 2024 that were attributable in large part to the Frontier Airlines subsidy. In comparison, Raleigh-Durham saw enplanement growth of 9.5 percent over the last five years (2019 to 2024) and a 62 percent jump since 2014.

PIT was joined in its 2014 to 2024 ranking loss by Philadelphia, Cleveland, Cincinnati, St. Louis and Kansas City. Note, too, that Los Angeles (LAX), Chicago (O'Hare), Washington (Dulles), Baltimore, Detroit and San Francisco all lost ground in their rankings. Meanwhile, among the 50 largest airports, Florida's major airports showed ranking improvement as did North Carolina's two biggest airports.

Explanation of airport passenger growth differences

Obviously, hub airports have the possibility of growing passenger counts by being strategically located or, perhaps, the home base of a large airline. However, the local area economy will be an important factor—as will operating costs at an airport, which eventually must be borne by the airlines using the gates and services. Of course, federal and state governments can subsidize an airport. Local governments can and sometimes will, according to their financial situation, that will permit such use of funds. Bear in mind that a local subsidy for a non-hub airport is essentially subsidizing local travelers, whether for business or pleasure.

Population and employment are indirect measures of local income and purchasing power, with employment especially important. It is reasonable to expect that airports in faster employment growth areas will see passenger gains at a stronger pace than cities or regions with very slow growth or declining job counts.

In Florida for example, the Orlando airport saw its ranking improve as private-sector employment in the area rose 13 percent in the five years between 2019 and 2024 while Ft. Lauderdale jobs grew by 7.6 percent. Meanwhile, Raleigh-Durham experienced a job gain of 17.4 percent over the 2019 to 2024 period. Charlotte's jobs rose 10 percent in that five-year period.

Airports in cities and metro areas that saw their passenger rankings slide typically had weak job gains over the last five years or, in some cases, there were actual job losses. During the period 2019 to 2024, Pittsburgh experienced a 1.6 percent drop in its private-jobs count; Cleveland employment fell 1.4 percent in the same five years; D.C. saw a 3.4 percent loss in jobs; San Francisco jobs were down 2.4 percent; Baltimore's employment was nearly flat with a gain of just 0.4 percent; Oakland's five-year growth to employment was very weak at 0.1 percent and, lastly, Detroit saw a meager 0.3 percent rise in jobs.

In all likelihood, these highlighted changes in airport ranking, as measured by relative growth in enplaned passengers, are connected to the employment strength in the metro area where they serve.

Clearly, other factors could play a role at hub airports such as having a strategic location, the level of airport operations costs and the willingness of airports to subsidize flights as PIT's management has a long and extensive record of doing. Unfortunately, subsidies are mostly for the benefit of local travelers who might not fly without them. Thus, the subsidy amounts to a benefit to the airline and the area to which the subsidized passenger is traveling.

2025 and beyond

The outlook for major passenger gains at PIT is not very bright as long as the local economy is languishing with very slow growth. Prospects for attracting a major hub carrier do not appear favorable in light of the [high operating costs at PIT](#) and little growth in the economy. Moreover, the long history of subsidizing locals to fly to other cities is not economically sound. There are still no publicly available figures on how many foreigners are arriving on the British Airways' flights to PIT. That was a crucial selling point of the subsidies—foreign travelers spending their money in Pittsburgh. Surely, if the corroborating numbers of foreign travelers arriving at PIT were available, they would be touted as a brag item.

Pittsburgh has financial difficulties; Allegheny County has financial difficulties. Most of the Pittsburgh Public Schools, with a few magnet school exceptions, are an outrageously expensive academic disaster requiring heavy taxation and huge state financial support.

Bells and whistles at the airport are not enough to drive a major increase in airport passenger use. Steps to make the region more economically competitive and business-friendly would be a much better strategy. The same old, same old will not get it done.

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