



Pittsburgh's weak economy hampers passenger growth at PIT

Introduction: The early 21st century headlines regarding the ailing fortunes of Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) are well known. The financial woes afflicting USAirways, at the time, PIT's major hub carrier, and its eventual bankruptcy led to an enormous drop in flights with an accompanying drop in passenger count as connecting travel plummeted.

In 2000, PIT was the 25th busiest U.S. airport with 8.65 million enplanements. Note that the [Bureau of Transportation Statistics](#) ranks airports by the number of enplanements. Passenger enplanements (all figures rounded to the nearest hundredth) began a steep slide over the next five years, falling to just 5.08 million enplanements in 2005, ranking PIT 40th in the nation.

The plunge continued through 2010, reaching 3.90 million enplanements, causing PIT's ranking to fall to the 46th busiest airport. Passenger decline continued, as did PIT's ranking, falling to 48th in 2015 (3.85 million). Since 2015, there has been some turnaround with enplanements reaching 4.83 million in 2024, the highest level since 2005. Unfortunately, just-released figures showed the count falling slightly in 2025 to 4.73 million.

Growth since 2015 appears to be strong. However, when viewed in terms of the airport's ranking compared to U.S. totals, it has not improved.

In short, from 2015 to 2024, PIT enplanement gains (25 percent) essentially kept pace with the national growth (24 percent). The ranking likely did not change in 2025 as enplanements at PIT and the U.S. total each fell by 1.25 percent. However, it is important to note that all the enplanement growth at PIT between 2015 and 2024 was largely accomplished by 2019 when enplanements totaled 4.67 million, up 21.6 percent from 2015.

Disappointingly, PIT's passenger growth from 2019 to 2024 was only 1.3 percent as COVID hit in 2020, leading to a massive decline in air travel nationwide that took several years to bounce back from with PIT managing only a small net increase. Nonetheless, the small 1.3 percent gain from 2019 to 2024 at PIT compares unfavorably with the 5.2 percent rise in enplanements nationally and the 6.3 percent growth at Dallas-Love Field over the same period.

Airport rankings 2010 and 2024

<i>City/Airport</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2024</i>
Cleveland/CLE	36	47
Raleigh-Durham/RDU	37	35
New Orleans/MSY	44	38
<i>Pittsburgh/PIT</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>48</i>
Cincinnati/CVG	48	49
Dallas-Love/DAL	49	32
Indianapolis/IND	50	46

This selection of six comparison airports was chosen because they were close in rank to PIT in either 2010 or 2024, except for Raleigh-Durham. Of the seven airports, four improved their ranking while three saw declines. At the time of the selection of the airports for this study, 2024 was the last year of completed and vetted annual data available.

As mentioned earlier, PIT fell in ranking from 2010 to 2024 from 46th to 48th. Joining PIT with a 14-year decline was Cincinnati, which fell 48th to 49th, not a large drop but a weakening relative to the nation, nonetheless. Cleveland had the biggest drop, falling from 36th to 47th, and was by far the weakest performer of the group.

On the increasing ranking side, Dallas-Love made the biggest upward move, rising 17 spots from 49th to 32nd. Meanwhile, New Orleans saw its ranking improve from 44th in 2010 to 38th in 2024. Finally, Indianapolis also enjoyed growth relative to the nation, moving up from 50th to 46th.

Bear in mind that over the 14 years the national total number of enplanements for all airports rose 39.2 percent. Therefore, most airports improving their national ranking had enplanement growth faster than that rate. Conversely, airports with declines in rank grew passengers more slowly than the national gain.

Thus, a falling national ranking does not necessarily mean a drop in passengers; it means the growth is likely slower than national. For example, PIT enplanements rose 22 percent over the period, well behind the national increase. On the other hand, Dallas-Love enplanements surged by 129 percent, lifting it to the 32nd-busiest airport. Moreover, a change in airport ranking over time will also be impacted by not only its rate of growth relative to the national rate but also by the growth rate of other airports and their change in ranking.

PIT's economic and demographic environment

PIT, as a non-hub airport, operates in economic and population environments that are not supportive of strong growth in passenger demand. Note that the population in the eight-county Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) fell by 3.7 percent or almost 94,000 people from 2.524 million to 2.430 million from 2000 to 2024. A large part of the drop occurred from 2000 to 2010, with a loss of 75,500 people (about 7,500 per year), followed by a small gain from 2010 to 2020 of 7,600 people with yet another large drop of 25,700 between 2020 and 2024 (6,400 per year). Note also that Allegheny County and Beaver County combined accounted for nearly 70 percent of the MSA population loss over the 2000-to-2024-time frame.

Bear in mind too, that the MSA's median age (eight-county weighted average) was 43.1 years in 2024, and, except for Allegheny, all counties have seen significant jumps in their median age so far in the 21st century. Allegheny County saw a small increase, from 40.6 to 40.7 years, and was the lowest median age among the counties in the MSA. Several counties have seen large jumps in the median age. For example, Westmoreland, the second-most-populous county in the MSA at over 352,000, experienced a jump from 41.3 to 47.2 in the years between 2000 and 2024. Note that in 2024, the U.S. median age was only 39.2, much younger than the Pittsburgh MSA.

Meanwhile, non-farm employment followed somewhat closely the population changes. From 2000 to 2010 jobs fell by 2.1 percent or 25,200 from the 1.18 million reading in 2000. During the following nine years through 2019, employment increased by 5.6 percent or 64,000 jobs. Unfortunately, following relatively good growth, there was a massive drop in 2020 in the employment of over 100,000 jobs owing to COVID. Despite four years of recovery of employment through 2024, it had not returned to the pre-COVID reading of 1.22 million jobs in 2019.

Overall, non-farm jobs in the Pittsburgh MSA managed a scant 1.8 percent gain (22,000) from 2000 to 2024. Over the same period, U.S. non-farm jobs climbed 19.5 percent. Many MSAs with faster enplanement growth than PIT no doubt had faster employment gains as well. The Dallas MSA, for example, saw a 52 percent jump in non-farm employment from 2000 to 2024 and the Indianapolis MSA jobs count rose 31 percent over the period.

Conclusion

Clearly, PIT is at a serious disadvantage in growing enplanements relative to the airports in faster growing MSAs that have substantially faster population and employment gains.

Thus, despite the generous subsidies bestowed to carriers at PIT over recent years, enplanement growth has been relatively weak in comparison to the other airports reviewed in this study.

This underscores the importance of economic growth, in areas such as population and employment, as a key driver of air travel.

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