

PIT passenger count weakness persists

Introduction: A year ago, Allegheny Institute *Policy Brief Vol. 25, No. 22*, noted the decline in passengers at Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) from May 2024 to May 2025. It also suggested that the passenger count in the following months of 2025 would likely reflect a slowing for the same period of 2024 because of the heavy subsidy to Frontier Airlines during those 2024 months. That *Brief* also noted that extreme weakness in private-sector job gains in the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) was, and would likely continue to be, a contributing factor to the very slow growth in passengers at PIT.

Indeed, monthly passenger counts in 2026 have struggled to match 2025 levels. For example, April's 799,967 total fell behind the April 2025 tally of 818,558. And the May 2026 preliminary reading of 874,000 trailed the May 2025 posting of 887,304.

Inbound & outbound flight counts

Another indicator of airport activity is the monthly number of inbound and outbound flights.

Data are taken from the [AmericanAirportGuide.com](https://www.AmericanAirportGuide.com). The January readings were not included because of the suspiciously low reported level in the January 2026 count.

In 2025, during the period February through May, there were 38,830 total flights into and out of PIT. In 2026 during the same months there were 34,710 flights, a drop of 10.6 percent. Indeed, the April and May flight totals in 2026 were lower than 2024 and 2022 readings for the same months.

In short, the weaker passenger counts are likely to coincide, at least partially, with the decline in total flights. In any case, a large decline in flights does not bode well for PIT's overall level of passenger counts.

National air travel passengers

It should be noted as well that across all U.S. commercial airports there was a modest May decline in passengers boarding flights as measured by Transportation Security Administration (TSA) checkpoint data. In May 2026, the 31-day total was 1.6 percent below the May 2025 total. No doubt some airports were up over the year. But, in total, the national passenger count was down 1.6 percent, very close to the 1.5 percent drop at PIT for the same period.

PIT passengers & the local economy

As earlier *Policy Briefs* have mentioned, the Pittsburgh MSA, the primary source of originating passengers, has been in a decades-long period of very slow job gains. For example, from May 2000 to May 2026 private sector employment rose only 3.5 percent with the bulk of that coming by 2019.

Nationally, jobs climbed 22.2 percent over the 26 years. Of course, many states and metro areas grew even faster than the overall national rate as areas such as the so-called Rust Belt areas lagged well behind.

Then, too, and compounding the problem for Pittsburgh, during the last seven years—from May 2019 (1.108 million) to May 2026 (1.090 million)—private employment slipped by 18,000 jobs or 1.6 percent. Thus, through May 2026 the Pittsburgh MSA had still not yet fully recovered to pre-COVID readings.

Moreover, since job growth is generally associated with income growth, the Pittsburgh MSA has not seen anything like national income gains or likely much inflation-adjusted real personal income gain. Thus, the principal driver of airline travel and the economic fundamentals of demand for air travel have been relatively weak for PIT over at least the last 10 years.

Unfortunately, the scant 3.5 percent gain over the last 26 years and the net decline over the last seven years stand in sharp contrast to the region's 11.6 percent gain in jobs between May 1990 and May 2000.

In 2006, PIT ranked as the 40th busiest airport in the country with 4,946,256 enplanements. By 2024, PIT ranked as 48th busiest with 4,862,376 enplanements. The latest 2025 rankings have PIT occupying that same spot—far lower than the 24th busiest airport PIT was in 2000 as a hub for USAirways.

Between 2011 and 2024, PIT ranked steadily in the range of 46th to 49th.

To reiterate the conclusions of earlier *Policy Briefs*, the local economy and its ability to grow population, jobs, wealth and income are crucial to sustainable gains in air travel at PIT, absent a return to major hub status. New terminals and hype will not produce

sustained passenger gains without real sustained faster employment, income and population in the region.

Subsidies to airlines are not good practice

Finally, the use of promotional subsidies to airlines aimed at increasing the number of flights and passengers at PIT is not a winning strategy. Indeed, as noted in previous *Briefs*, handouts to airlines could easily be counterproductive to the local economy to the extent that they primarily subsidize locals to fly as they take advantage of lowered fares.

They travel to London or wherever and spend money they might not have otherwise, *out of the region*. There are few, if any, studies published that discuss how many inbound passengers, that are not Pittsburgh-area residents, are on the subsidized flights who could boost the Pittsburgh economy by spending locally. The Allegheny County Airport Authority should be required to show with real data that the incoming non-Pittsburgh residents are offsetting the revenues flowing to other regions or countries as result of airline subsidies at PIT.

Conclusion

Pittsburgh International Airport struggles to grow passengers. Even with a new terminal and subsidies to carriers, it cannot sustain increased passenger counts. Its primary source of passenger demand, the area's economy, is not growing or is growing very slowly in terms of population and income. Using public dollars to temporarily subsidize flights to certain countries or cities has not accomplished any perceptible long-term gains relative to what airports in a growing region with significant employment and population gains are seeing.

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