

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

ANNUAL REPORT

ON

DISABILITY-RELATED

AIR TRAVEL COMPLAINTS

RECEIVED DURING

CALENDAR YEAR 2021

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U.S. Department of Transportation Annual Report on Disability-Related Air Travel Complaints Received During Calendar Year 2021

The Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA), 49 U.S.C. 41705, prohibits discriminatory treatment of persons with disabilities in air transportation. The ACAA also requires the U.S. Department of Transportation (Department) to “regularly review all complaints received by air carriers alleging discrimination on the basis of disability” and “report annually to Congress on the results of such review.”¹ This annual report to Congress covers disability-related complaints received in calendar year 2021² by U.S. and foreign air carriers operating to, from, and within the U.S., conducting passenger operations with at least one aircraft having a designed seating capacity of more than 60 passengers,³ and complies with this requirement.

Summary of Findings

For the period of January 1, 2021, through December 31, 2021, 31 U.S. carriers and 149 foreign carriers reported disability-related complaint data to the Department. The total number of reporting carriers for 2021 was unchanged from the total number of reporting carriers for 2020. During 2020 and 2021, a number of U.S. and foreign carriers ceased operations or discontinued passenger service to the U.S., while other carriers began or resumed service to, from, or within the U.S. during the same time period.⁴ Overall, the Department estimates there was a 75% percent increase in the number of passengers with disabilities enplaned in 2021 over 2020. However, the Department estimates 33% fewer passengers with disabilities were enplaned in 2021 than in 2019, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵

The Department estimates that approximately 18.1 million Americans with disabilities traveled by air in 2021, an increase from the 10.2 million the Department estimates travelled in 2020 and a decrease from the 27 million the Department estimates traveled pre-pandemic in 2019.⁶ This is

¹ 49 U.S.C. 41705(c)(3).

² All references in this report to the year “2019,” “2020,” and “2021” refer to calendar year, unless otherwise specified.

³ See 14 CFR 382.157(b) (requiring a covered carrier, conducting passenger operations with at least one aircraft having a designed seating capacity of more than 60 passengers, to report information to the Department describing the disability-related complaints received by the carrier annually).

⁴ Covered U.S. and foreign air carriers were required to report data on disability-related complaints received in calendar year 2021 by January 31, 2022. This report reflects this data provided to the Department by air carriers as of April 2022. The Department continuously informs new carriers of their reporting obligations and makes efforts to identify carriers to which the reporting rule applies and might not have filed reports.

⁵ These estimates are based on the assumption that the number of passengers with disabilities enplaned by airlines changes at a similar rate as the number of passengers that are enplaned by airlines in general. Domestic and international on-market revenue passengers enplaned by U.S. and foreign carriers decreased from 1,056,823,849 in 2019 to 400,901,178 in 2020, and increased to 703,127,373 in 2021. These totals are the sum of field F Scheduled Passenger/Cargo and field L Nonscheduled Civilian Passenger on T-100 Traffic Reports filed with DOT’s Bureau of Transportation Statistics by U.S. and foreign air carriers as of April 26, 2022.

⁶ According to data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2019, 67.2 million American adults (roughly 1 in 4) had a disability. See *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Disability and Health Data*

more than the 10.2 million the Department estimated traveled by air in 2020, but less than the 27 million the Department estimated traveled by air in 2019.⁷ The 31 U.S. carriers that submitted data for 2021 reported receiving 32,047 disability-related air travel complaints, and the 149 foreign air carriers reported receiving 1,584 reportable disability-related air travel complaints⁸ during the same time period, for a total of 33,631 complaints received by these 180 carriers. More than half (51% or 17,241) of the complaints concerned the carriers' failure to provide adequate assistance to persons using wheelchairs. Notably, the number of complaints air carriers reported receiving in this category in 2021 increased 180% over the number of complaints air carriers reported receiving in that category in 2020. The overall total number of disability-related complaints reported by carriers in 2021 increased by 124% over the number reported in 2020. Though, the overall total number of complaints reported in 2021 was 21% below the total number of complaints reported in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The increase in the overall number of complaints reported in 2021 over the number reported in 2020 is mostly attributable to the increase in the number of complaints received by U.S. air carriers. Foreign air carriers, as a whole, reported receiving in total 4 more complaints in 2021 than in 2020. Passengers enplaned by U.S. air carriers increased 80% in 2021 over 2020, while passengers enplaned by foreign carriers increased by 17% for the same period.⁹

A summary of the 2019, the 2020, and the 2021 disability complaint data is set forth in the table on the next page.

System (DHDS) Data, <https://dhds.cdc.gov> (accessed October 6, 2021). The Department does not have data regarding the number of persons with disabilities who travel by air; however, we assume that 40% of Americans with disabilities travel by air. This assumption is based on research suggesting that nearly 50% of the U.S. population has traveled by air and the Department's Bureau of Transportation Statistics' finding that persons with disabilities travel less frequently than person without disabilities. See Chris Jackson, *Nearly Half of Americans Report Having Flown on an Airline in 2017*, Feb. 20, 2018, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/Nearly-Half-of-Americans-Report-Having-Flown-on-an-Airline-in-2017>; see also Stephen Brumbaugh, *Issue Brief: Travel Patterns of American Adults with Disabilities*, September 2018, <https://www.bts.gov/travel-patterns-with-disabilities>. Under this assumption, the number of passengers with a disability who traveled by air in 2019 was approximately 27 million. If we further assume that the number of enplanements for passengers with a disability decreased from 2019 at the same rate as enplanements for the general public (*i.e.*, a decrease of 33% between 2019 and 2021), the number of passengers with a disability traveling by air in 2021 was approximately 18.1 million.

⁷ See U.S. Department of Transportation Annual Report on Disability-Related Complaint Received During Calendar Year 2020.

⁸ 14 CFR 382.157(b) requires foreign airlines to report only with respect to disability-related complaints associated with any flight segment originating or terminating in the United States.

⁹ Domestic and international on-market revenue passengers enplaned by U.S. air carriers increased from 371,794,073 in 2020 to 669,035,077 in 2021, an increase of 80 %. International on-market passengers (to or from the U.S. only) enplaned by foreign air carriers increased from 29,107,105 in 2020 to 34,092,296 in 2021, an increase of 17%. These totals are the sum of field F Scheduled Passenger/Cargo and field L Nonscheduled Civilian Passenger on T-100 Traffic Reports filed with DOT's Bureau of Transportation Statistics by U.S. and foreign air carriers as of April 26, 2022.

Calendar Year	Total Number of Disability Complaints Received by U.S. Carriers	Total Number of Disability Complaints Received by Foreign Carriers	Total Number of Disability Complaints Received by All Carriers	Passengers Enplaned (U.S. and Foreign Carriers)
2019	35,510	6,908	42,418	1,056,823,849
2020	13,450	1,580	15,030	400,901,178
2021	32,047	1,584	33,631	703,127,373

The Department is focused on improving air travel for persons with disabilities, including those who use wheelchairs. The Department has initiated a rulemaking which, among other things, would require improved training for airline employees who handle wheelchairs and would make clear that damaging a wheelchair is a regulatory violation that may subject an airline to a fine.¹⁰

The complaint numbers in this report should not be interpreted as reflecting violations of law. The data were taken directly from reports submitted by carriers, and the Department has not reviewed the substance of each of the complaints filed with the carriers to determine whether the incidents constituted violations of the ACAA or the provisions of 14 CFR Part 382, the Department's regulations concerning nondiscrimination on the basis of disability. The Department's Office of Aviation Consumer Protection (OACP) does, however, investigate each complaint against carriers that it receives directly from passengers. In addition, OACP will contact carriers that experienced significant increases or variations in the number of disability-related complaints they report to the Department from year-to-year to ensure accurate reporting and determine whether further action is appropriate.

Four categories of information are being presented in this report: Appendix 2021-A contains summary totals for all carriers; Appendix 2021-B contains summary totals for U.S. air carriers; Appendix 2021-C contains summary totals for foreign air carriers; and Appendix 2021-D contains detailed data from each carrier.

¹⁰ Ensuring Safe Accommodations for Air Travelers With Disabilities Using Wheelchairs (RIN: 2105-AF14). Additional information on this rulemaking is available in the [Fall 2022 Unified Agenda of Regulatory and Deregulatory Actions](#).