

Raleigh-Durham, NC	1109	9:48p	On Time
Rochester, NY	32	1:20p	Now 5:50p
Rochester, NY	38	7:36p	Cancelled
Rochester, NY	30	10:35p	On Time
Sacramento, CA	171	7:08p	Cancelled
San Diego, CA	185	4:30p	Cancelled
San Francisco, CA	647	6:55p	Now 7:40p
San Jose, CA	173	5:57p	On Time
San Juan, PR	709	3:30p	Now 5:15p
San Juan, PR	715	8:56p	On Time
San Juan, PR	717	11:59p	On Time
Santiago, DO	837	10:05p	On Time
Santiago, DO	839	11:59p	On Time
San Domingo, DO	839	11:59p	On Time

The Unfriendly Skies

Five Years of Airline Passenger Complaints
to the Department of Transportation

MASSPIRG
Education Fund

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Laura Murray,
U.S. PIRG Education Fund

April 2014

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Kendall Creighton and Paul Hudson of FlyersRights.org for their expert review of this report.

Additionally, thank you to Ed Mierzwinski, U.S. PIRG Education Fund Federal Consumer Program Director, for his expertise and guidance in developing this report, and to my intern Julia Christensen for her research assistance.

MASSPIRG Education Fund thanks the Colston Warne Program of Consumers Union for making this report possible.

The authors bear responsibility for any factual errors. The recommendations are those of MASSPIRG Education Fund. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders or those who provided review.

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Executive Summary

Consolidation in the airline industry, pressures created by new security rules, and the recent high cost of aviation gasoline have changed the way we fly. It seems as if every consumer has an airline problem story—how they were trapped on the tarmac, tricked by fees, missed their connection, or lost their bag.

What many consumers don't know is that they have a number of new rights as well as a right to complain, both to the airline and to the government.

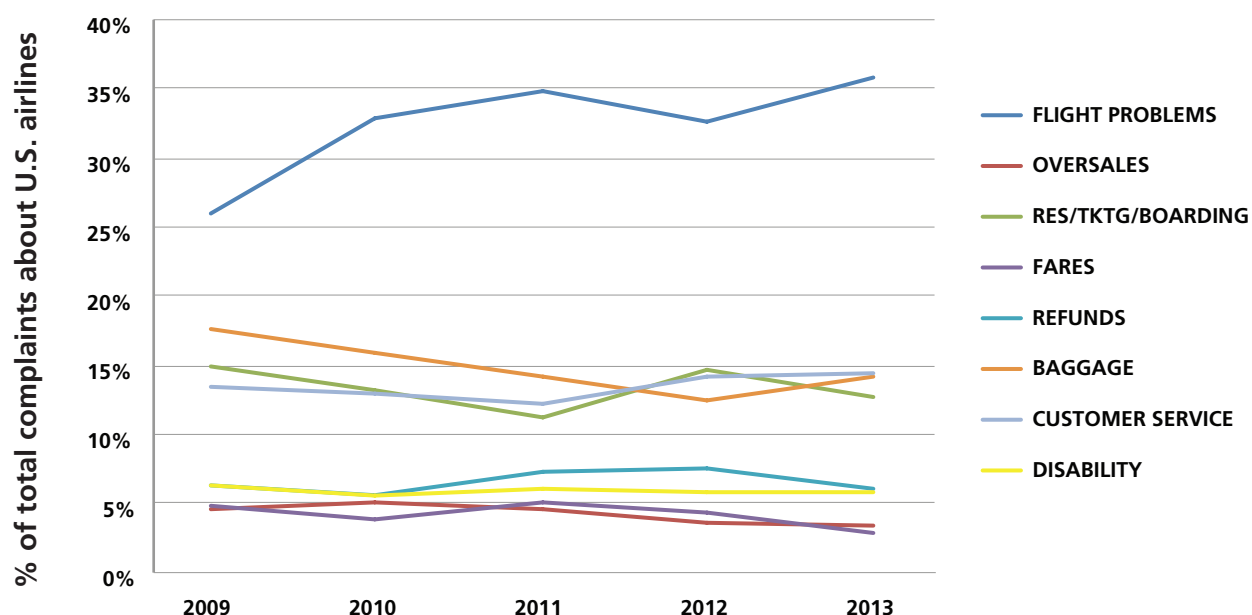
For over a decade, the Department of Transportation (DOT) has collected data on consumer complaints about air travel. This report analyzes

these consumer complaints about U.S. air carriers for the five year period from 2009-2013, evaluates the effectiveness of new regulations and compares airlines' performance.

This report tracks trends in tens of thousands of consumer complaints over time, finding how some airlines have improved their rankings and others have worsened. We also compare consumer complaint data with other DOT data that tracks airlines' on-time performance and baggage handling.

The report finds that consumers' greatest numbers of complaints were about Flight Problems, such as delays and cancellations. Other top

Complaints by Category



problems were about baggage, customer service, and issues with reservations, bookings, and boarding. Over time, Flight Problems account for an increasing portion of the total complaints.

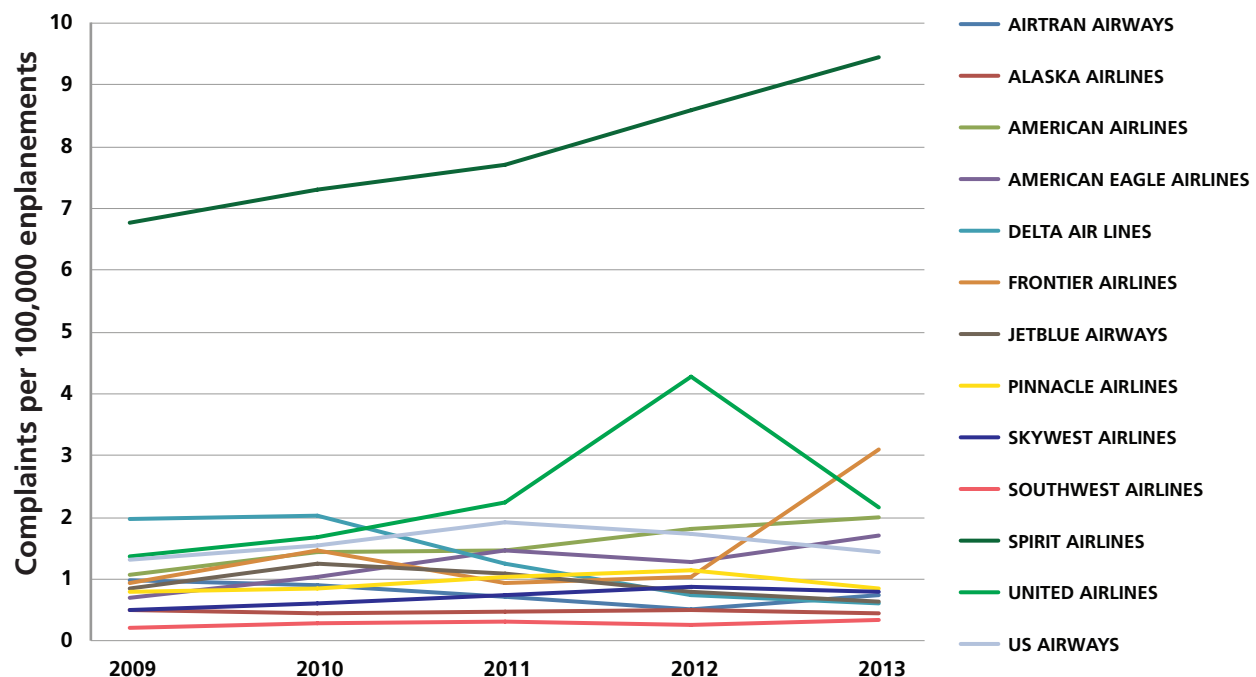
The airline that generated the most complaints relative to number of passengers was Spirit Airlines. Each year, Spirit's passengers were about three times as likely to file a complaint as the second-place airline, and its complaints volume is trending upward over time. Southwest Airlines generated the lowest number of complaints relative to number of passengers each year.

U.S. PIRG Education Fund's experience with other government agencies and their consumer complaint processes is that greater transparency and public education—including the establishment of a searchable public database of complaints—leads to greater compliance by regulated firms and improved customer service.

Among other recommendations, the report recommends the following:

- That the Department of Transportation (DOT) establish a searchable public database of consumer airline complaints to supplement its monthly summary reports.
- That the DOT move more of its air travel databases onto the machine-readable data.gov platform.
- That policymakers provide funding for the unfunded air passenger consumer complaint hotline established in 2012.
- That the DOT require airlines to report complaint data about frequent flyer programs separately so that it can be added to the data that are available in DOT reports and in the future searchable public consumer complaint database.

Complaints by Airline



Introduction: Airlines Then and Now

In recent years, consumer frustration about airlines has grown. Airlines are merging, leaving passengers with fewer quality options for air travel and crowding air traffic at unavoidable hubs. This report examines air travel complaints filed with the Department of Transportation.

Congress deregulated the airline industry in 1978. That action democratized air travel and opened competition to new entrants but disrupted a system that had been characterized for years by ever-greater reliability. The government approved flight schedules, air fares, conditions and standards of service. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) controlled the number of flights at major airports which prevented congestion. Aircraft were placed in service each decade that were faster and more reliable, flight crews were better paid and had arguably higher standards of training and experience. Finally, airport capacity increases and additions in the 1950s through the 1960s kept up with increased air traffic.

For a period, deregulation resulted in lower prices and offered reasonably-priced air travel to new, smaller cities. But since 1978, there has been no net increase in major US airports, so the skies around major cities such as New York and Chicago have become more and more congested. Further, the deregulated airlines have discontinued the use of large jets in favor of more frequent flights with narrow bodied planes and regional jets, often flown by smaller “feeder” partners, carrying 20 to 140 passengers, thereby negating the principal strategy for increasing airport capacity. More recently, regular service to many of those smaller cities has been limited or even discontinued.

Regulations requiring minimum reserve ca-

capacity of equipment and flight crews have been allowed to lapse. Rules that allowed passengers on significantly delayed or canceled flights to use their ticket on another airline’s flight at no additional cost are gone¹, as are regulations requiring other airlines to honor a bankrupt airline’s tickets.

Increases in flight delays of over one hour also grew dramatically following deregulation. This situation not only inconveniences, stresses and results in hardship for airline passengers, but also burdens airlines and the entire economy. The U.S. economy depends upon safe, convenient, relatively low cost air travel, as this is the primary and often only means of long distance transportation.

With the latest wave of consolidation, airfares declined about 50% from 1980 to 2009, but have increased rapidly since 2010 especially when fees and taxes are included.²

In the past decade, the landscape has shifted in U.S. air travel:

Security risks, the price of aviation gasoline and reduced competition due to mergers between major airlines have led to airlines hitting consumers with heavy fees on top of rising fares. Two checked bags, basic meals and snacks, carry-ons, and, often, in-flight entertainment were formerly included in the price of your ticket, but now add-on fees for each of these newly a la carte items can easily add \$100 or more to the cost of a one-way ticket.³ Passengers seeking an aisle or front-of-the-economy-cabin seat, or even just a confirmed seat when booking their ticket, also now pay extra, as do passengers seeking to use entertainment offerings, on most carriers. This

shift has led to limited space for carry-ons and a slowed down boarding process as passengers attempt to avoid bag fees.

Further, while industry consolidation has reduced service to smaller cities,⁴ it has increased traffic at now over-crowded hub airports where those smaller (but much fuller) planes compete for limited gate space and to appear to be “on-time.” The practice of planes leaving gates without leaving the ground greatly increased tensions about flight delays in the last ten years.

The tarmac delay issue reached a critical juncture. Citizens and consumer advocates campaigned against egregious delays by airlines—often with no drinking water provided or inoperable toilets -- which resulted in new limits that took effect in 2009 in 3-Hour Tarmac Delay Rules promulgated by the Department of Transportation (DOT)⁵.

Increased consumer protections came into effect in 2011 through additional DOT rules. Major provisions of the 2009 and 2011 rules were then codified into law with the 2012 Congressional enactment of the Boxer-Snowe Airline Passenger Bill of Rights.⁶

Nonetheless, mergers continue, leaving just four major airlines currently: Delta Airlines, which acquired Northwest Airlines; United Airlines,

which merged with Continental Airlines; Southwest Airlines, which is absorbing AirTran Airways; and US Airways, which is merging with American Airlines. Ticket prices are expected to rise and add-on fees to grow in number and rise. Service to non-hub cities is expected to decline and responsiveness to service quality complaints for economy travelers is expected to worsen.

However, consumers can take advantage of their rights to complain (“How to Complain” information is required to be disclosed on e-ticket confirmations, websites and on request), and also to take advantage of their right to file a grievance with the government and to review statistics on complaints available on the Department of Transportation website, when choosing an airline.

Of course, where the airline flies, ticket prices and schedules will still be the main criteria consumers use, but factoring in information about complaints will help consumers make better choices.

For over a decade, the Department of Transportation has collected consumer complaints about air travel. This report analyzes these consumer complaints about U.S. air carriers for the five year period from 2009-2013, evaluates the effectiveness of new regulations, and compares airlines’ performance.

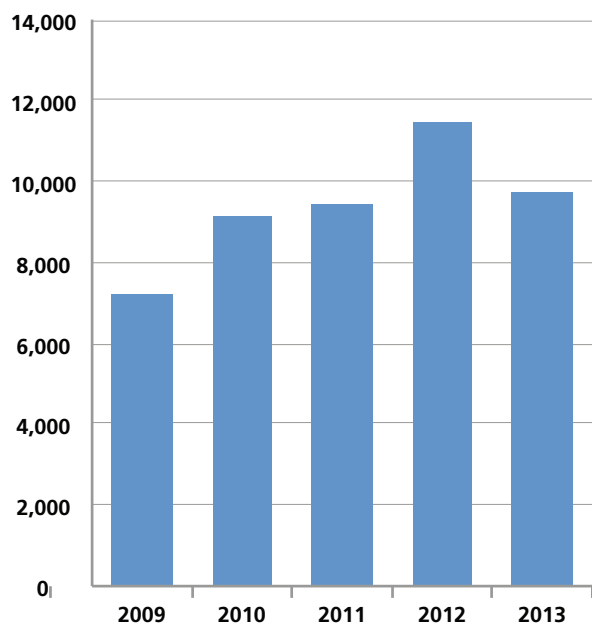
Five Years of Air Travel Complaints

Filing a complaint—what happens?

Each month, the Department of Transportation's Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings publishes an Air Travel Consumer Report, which details airline performance statistics and consumer complaint data about the airlines.

Consumers may file complaints with the DOT over the phone, online, or through regular mail. The DOT uses these data to spot trends in the industry and can follow up on potential regulatory violations, although most of the data is only used for statistical purposes.

Total complaints about U.S. carriers



Volume of complaints:

The Department of Transportation receives approximately 10,000 consumer complaints per year against U.S. airlines. Consumer complaints to the DOT have trended upward in volume over the last five years, although the number of complaints declined from 2012 to 2013. Complaints peaked in 2012, when consumers filed 11,447 complaints.

What people complain about:

When consumers file complaints, the DOT records them into the following categories: Flight Problems, Oversales (Over-booking), Reservations/Ticketing/Boarding, Fares, Refunds, Baggage, Customer Service, Disability, Advertising, Discrimination, Animals, or Other.

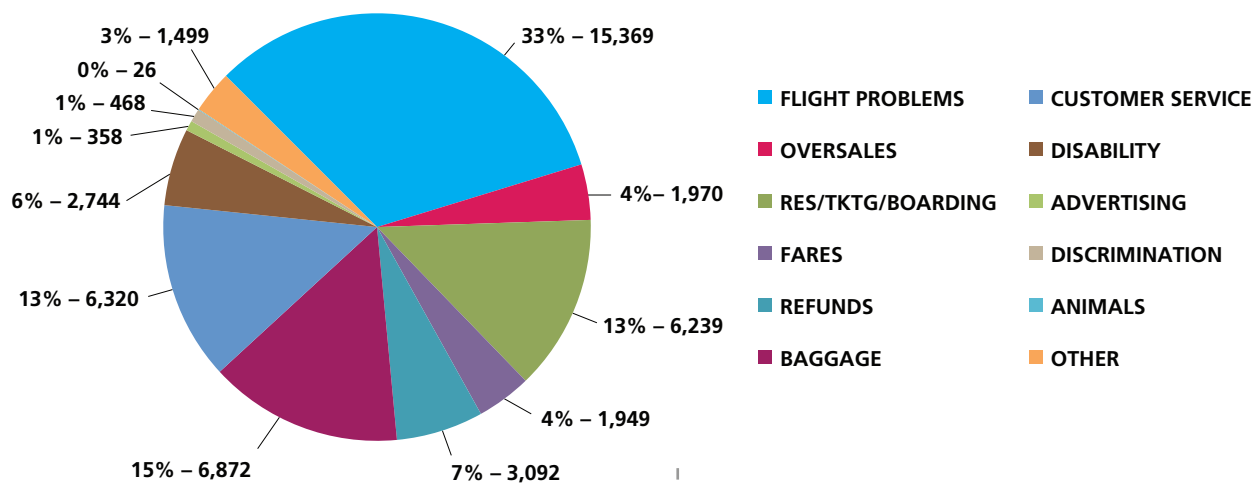
Over the past five years, the top source of complaints is the 'Flight Problems' category, which include "Cancellations, delays, or any other deviations from schedule, whether planned or unplanned."⁷ Other top complaint categories include Baggage, Customer Service, and Reservations/Ticketing/Boarding.

Over the past five years, most categories have maintained a consistent level of complaints to the DOT.⁸

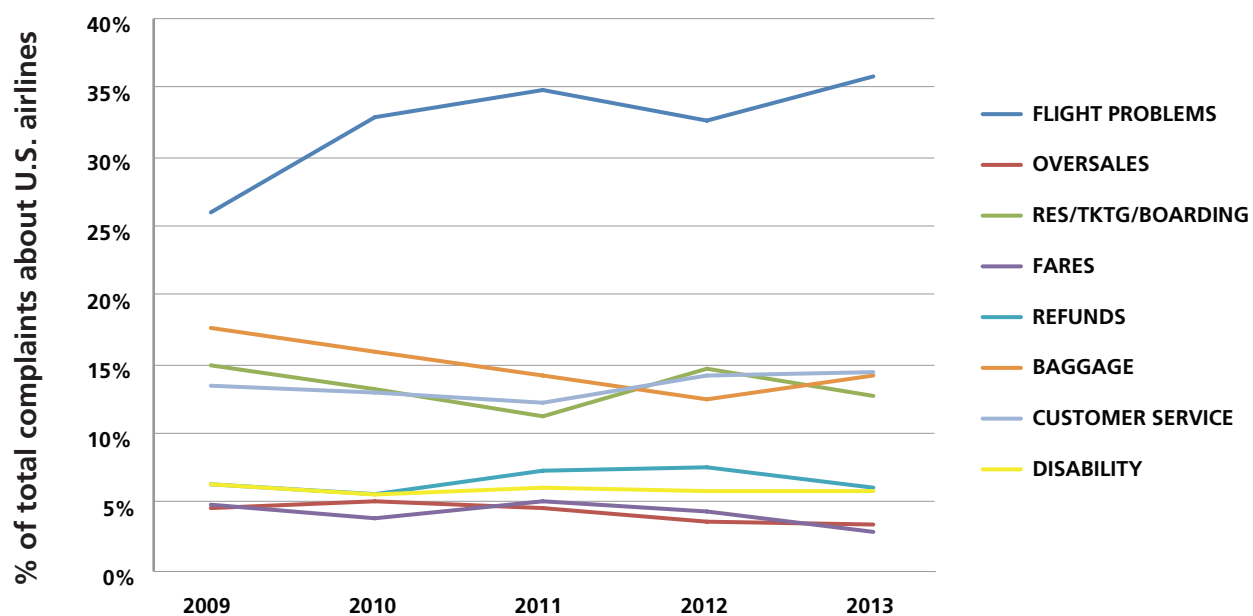
The one noticable exception to this trend is Flight Problems. The category accounts for a growing portion of complaints.

The DOT breaks these complaints down by three subcategories—Cancellations, Delays, and Missed Connections, although these subcategories are not broken down by airline. The largest subcategory is Cancellations. Complaints about Missed Connections have remained relatively

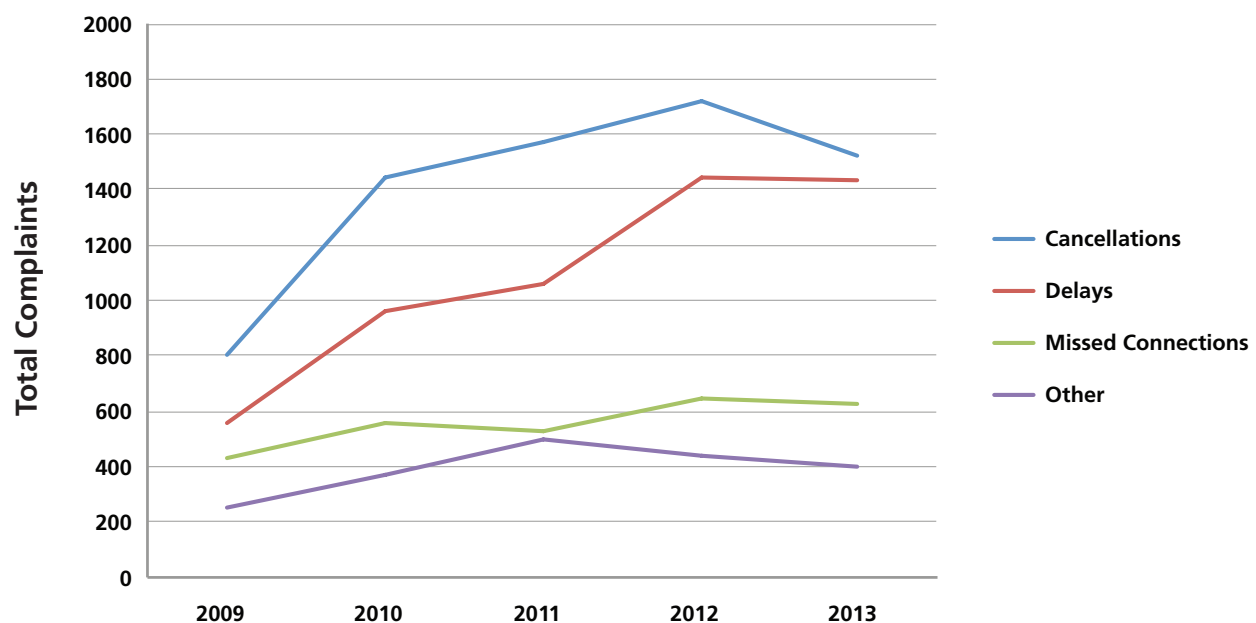
Total Complaints about Domestic Carriers (2009-2013)



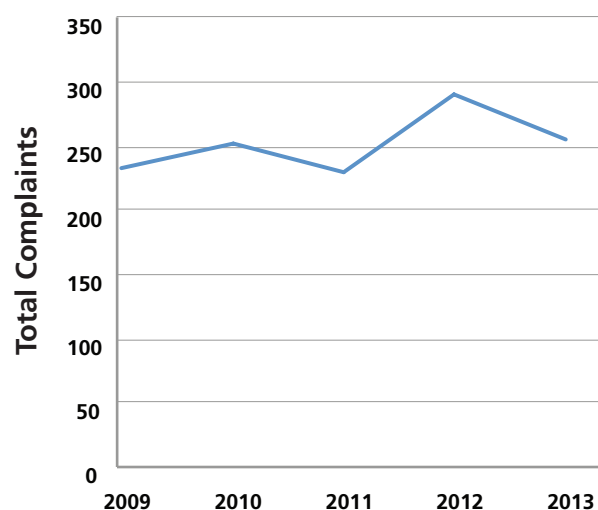
Complaints by Category



Flight Problems (Subcategories)



Frequent Flyer Miles



constant while complaints about Cancellations and Delays have doubled in the past five years, contributing to the category's overall growth.

Meanwhile, complaints about baggage have dropped as a portion of complaints. New DOT rules increase consumer compensation for lost or delayed baggage.

However, the decline may be because more airlines are imposing fees for checking even a single bag; the fees have also increased in the past few years. In 2008, most airlines began charging passengers to check their first two bags.⁹ As of 2013, Southwest Airlines is the only remaining major carrier that allows passengers to check two bags for free, while JetBlue is the only other major carrier that allows passengers to check the first bag for free.¹⁰ Facing higher fees, passengers attempt to avoid checking bags altogether, meaning fewer bags are lost or mishandled.¹¹

The DOT also includes complaints about frequent flyer programs within the 'Other' category, although these complaints are not broken down by airline.

Comparing Complaints to On-Time Performance

When the overall volume of complaints spiked in 2012, Flight Problems actually dropped as a portion of complaints, while the Reservations/Ticketing/Boarding category spiked and Customer Service complaints rose as a portion of complaints.

The Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) tracks on-time performance for the entire domestic system, and mishandled baggage reports for all airlines with over 1% market share by revenue-miles.

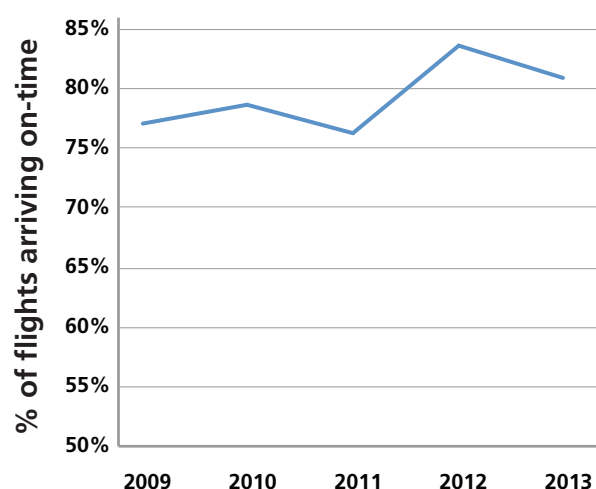
On-time arrivals peaked in 2012 and then dropped in 2013. Correspondingly, complaints about Flight Problems dipped as a proportion of overall complaints before rising again in 2013.

While on-time performance increased overall from 2009 to 2013, complaints about Flight Problems were the fastest-growing category, accounting for an increasing proportion of complaints to the DOT.

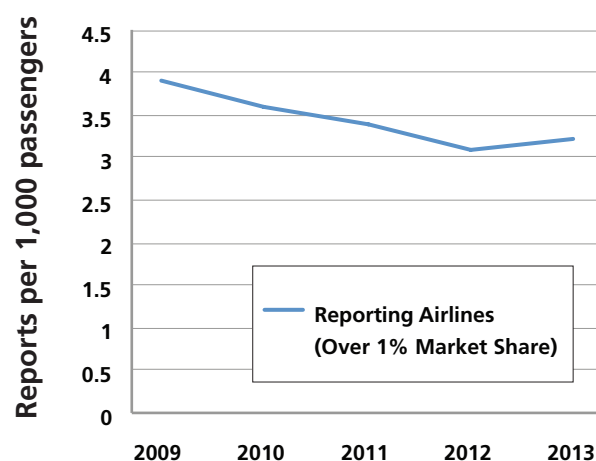
Mishandled baggage reports filed with the airlines that must report to the DOT have been dropping since 2009, except for an increase in 2013. This lines up exactly with consumer complaints, which were declining steadily as a proportion of all complaints until 2013, when they increased.

In February 2011, after pressure from consumer advocates including Flyersrights.org and U.S. PIRG, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood announced new and stronger protections for airline passengers.¹² These included more protections, such as greater compensation for consumers whose bags are lost by the airline.¹³ Complaints had declined with passengers checking fewer bags, and they continued to decline in 2011 and 2012, before increasing in 2013.

On-Time Performance (All airlines)



Mishandled Baggage Reports



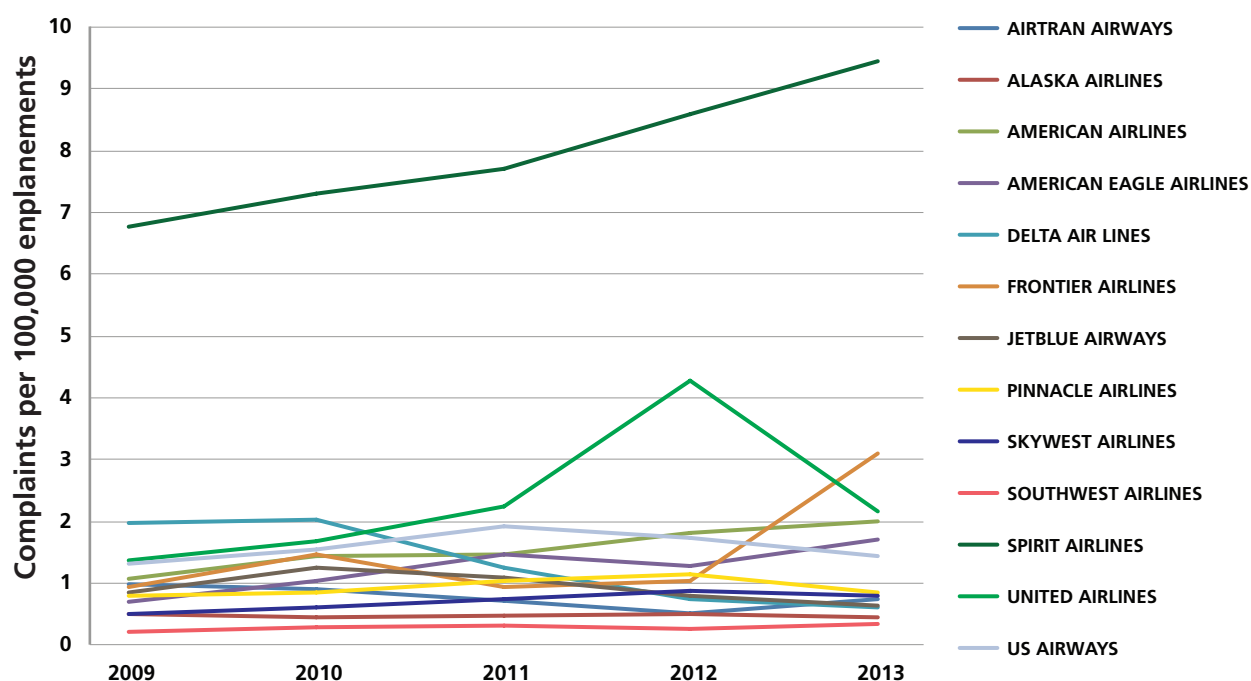
Which Airlines Consumers Complain About

Consumers can file complaints about U.S. airlines, foreign airlines, travel agents, tour operators, and ‘other.’ For this report, we researched only complaints about domestic airlines, for which the DOT tracks on-time performance and enplanement data. Most complaints (approximately three-quarters) are about U.S. airlines. In this section, we focus on domestic airlines with over 10,000,000 enplanements (passengers) in 2013 for airlines with data available for the full five years back to 2009.¹⁴

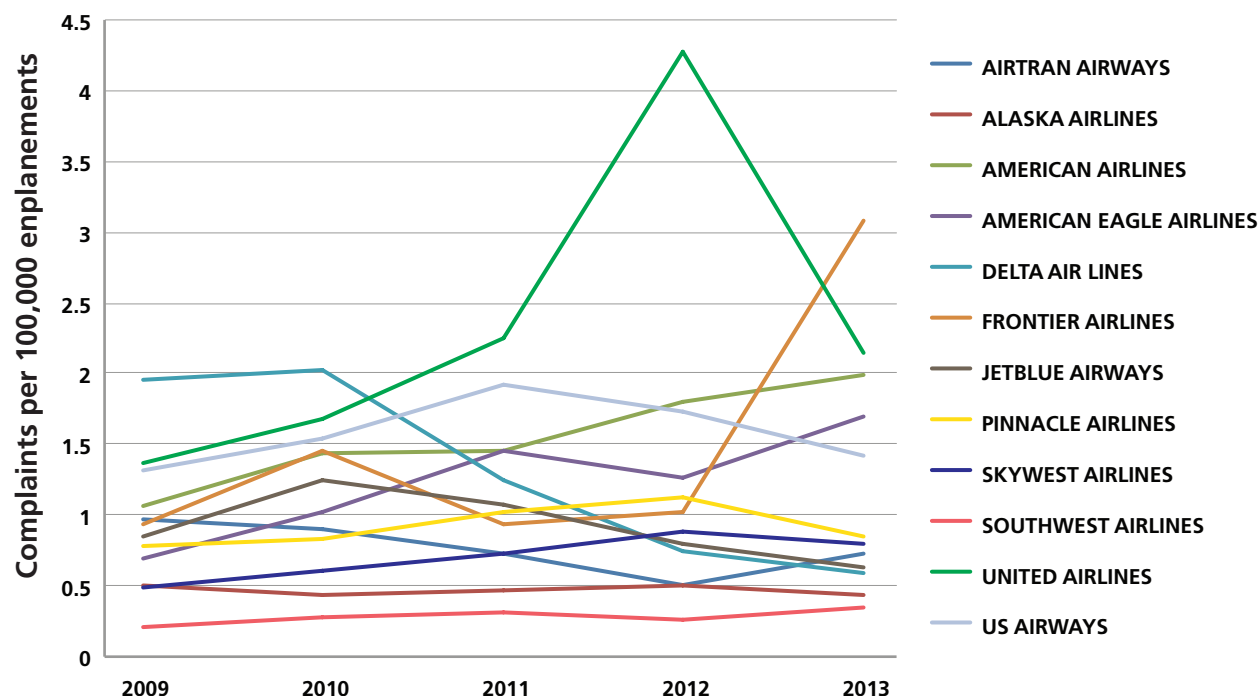
We normalized complaints by calculating the number of complaints per 100,000 passengers (‘systemwide enplanements’) on the airline each year.¹⁵

Spirit Airlines, which markets itself as a low-cost, no-frills airline, generated the most complaints per 100,000 passengers every single year in the study, by a large margin. It was nearly three times as likely to generate complaints as the second-place airline each year. As the airline has grown in the past several years, complaints against the airline have skyrocketed.

Complaints by Airline



Complaints by Airline (excluding Spirit)



Since 2008, the DOT has hit Spirit with five different fines totaling \$565,000 for violating various consumer protection laws concerning oversales, baggage, and multiple cases of deceptive advertising.¹⁶

If Spirit Airlines is removed from the graph, trends in the other airlines' performances become clearer.

Observations:

United Airlines, which completed its acquisition of Continental Airlines in 2012, saw a rising number of complaints in the time period, spiking in 2012. While the number of complaints per 100,000 passengers dropped in 2013, it is still one of the most complained-about airlines. In the final year it operated independently (2011), Continental generated 1.82 complaints per 100,000 passengers, placing it near the top of the rankings but still below United.

Delta Airlines, meanwhile, had the greatest number of complaints per 100,000 passengers in

2009 and 2010, excluding Spirit Airlines. Since it completed its merger with Northwest Airlines in 2010, the number of complaints it generated per 100,000 passengers has dropped every year. In the final year it operated independently (2009), Northwest generated 1.27 complaints per 100,000 passengers, placing it in the middle of the rankings and below Delta.

American Airlines has generated increasingly more complaints per 100,000 passengers every year since 2009. It was once in the middle of the pack and is now one of the most complained-about airlines.

American Eagle Airlines is a regional feeder airline owned by American Airlines, but American allows its brand to also be used by several other airlines. Complaints about American Eagle have increased steadily since 2009.

Southwest Airlines is consistently the least complained-about airline among airlines with over 10,000 passengers. While it saw its own highest number of complaints per 100,000 passengers in

2013, it is still the least complained-about airline in this set.

AirTran Airways, which was purchased by Southwest in 2010, was generating fewer and fewer complaints per 100,000 passengers until 2013, when it saw a jump, as did its parent company, Southwest Airlines.

Frontier Airlines has grown considerably in the last several years, and its complaint volume has grown as well. Frontier saw a large jump in 2013, becoming the most complained-about airline in the group besides Spirit Airlines.

After peaking in 2010, *JetBlue Airways* has dropped in complaints per 100,000 passengers for three straight years.

US Airways has remained in the worst several airlines by complaint ratio for several years, although it has seen improvement in the past two years and dropped out of the worst five for the first time in 2013.

Alaska Airlines remained one of the least complained-about airlines through 2009-2013, generating only about 0.5 complaints per 100,000 pas-

sengers each year.

Pinnacle Airlines was renamed Endeavor Air in 2013, and is owned by Delta Airlines.¹⁷ Its complaint volume was steadily increasing until 2013, when the volume improved slightly.

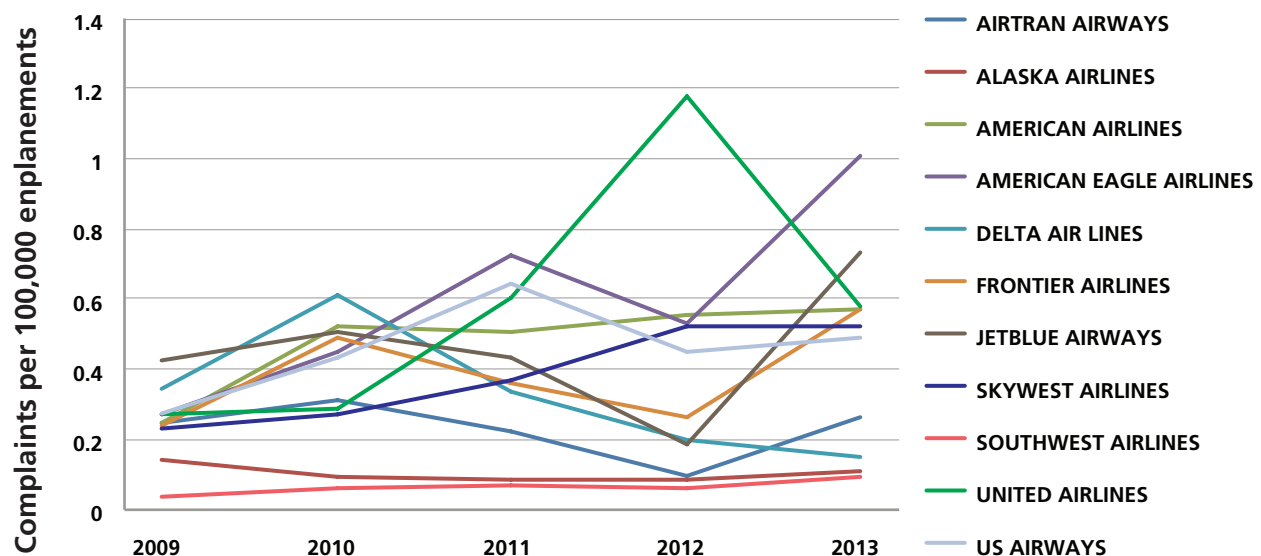
Comparing complaints about companies with their record in regards to flight problems.

Overall, complaints about flight problems have grown as a percentage of overall complaints to the DOT about airlines. At the same time, the percentage of flights arriving on time has increased overall since 2009, although on time performance dipped in 2013.

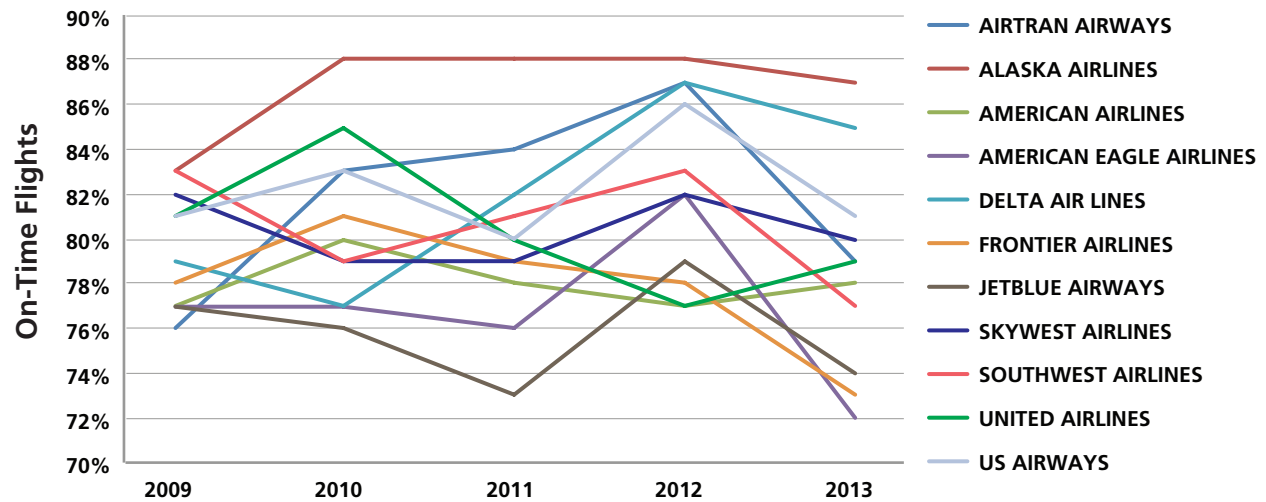
Among individual airlines, there are similar trends. Alaska Airlines, which is consistently one of the most on-time airlines, is also consistently one of the least likely airlines to generate complaints about Flight Problems.

While most airlines saw a decrease in on-time arrivals in 2013, United Airlines actually saw an increase. Correspondingly, most airlines saw an

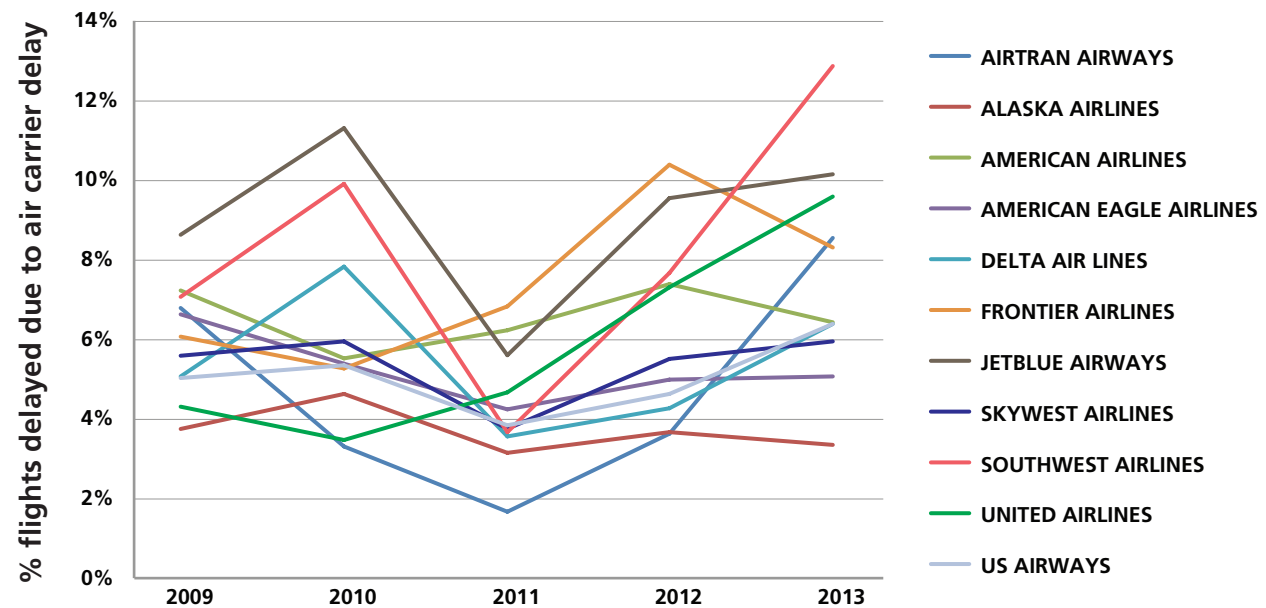
Flight Problem Complaints by Airline



Airline On-Time Performance



Flight Delays Under Airline Control



increase in complaints about Flight Problems, but United saw a major decrease.

However, even though passengers on Southwest were least likely to file complaints with the DOT, Southwest Airlines is far from the most on-time airline, ranking 8th of 11 in 2013.

Flights are delayed for a number of reasons. For airlines with over 1% market share, the DOT tracks on-time performance and reasons for delay. A number of flights are delayed due to weather that is too dangerous to fly in. This is more likely on the East Coast, where summer storms and winter blizzards are more likely to disrupt flights. Some flights can be delayed due to long security lines at an airport, delays in the national aviation system, and aircraft arriving late.

A number of flights are delayed by what the DOT refers to as “Air Carrier Delay,” or “circumstances within the airline’s control” such as maintenance or crew problems.

Many of the airlines move together on this graph. Most airlines, except Frontier and United, improved performance in 2011, with fewer delays

within the airlines’ control. Since 2011, most of these airlines have reversed these gains. Southwest spiked in 2013 with nearly 13% of all flights delayed due to the air carrier, even though Southwest generated the lowest number of complaints per passenger.

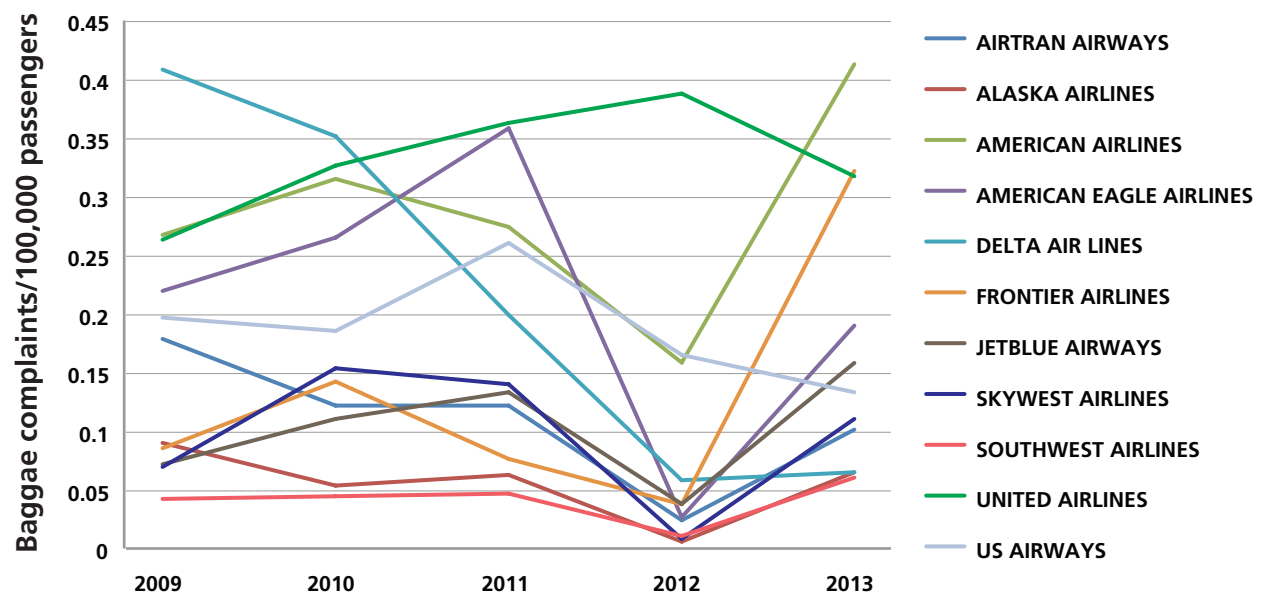
Other airlines that were most likely to have flights delayed due to factors within their control include JetBlue and Frontier, two airlines with consistently low on-time performance overall. United saw increases several years in a row and more than doubled flights delayed for these reasons from 2009-2013. AirTran was ranked well for several years but more than doubled their rate in 2013.

Only Alaska Airlines never had more than 5% of flights delayed to due factors within their control.

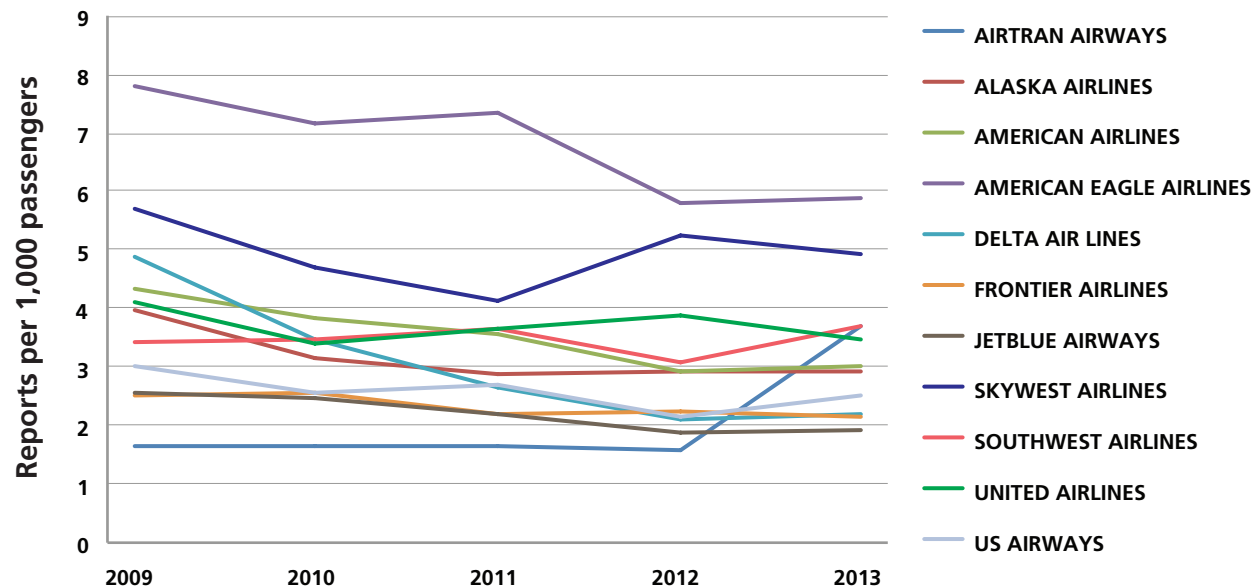
Comparing Airline Complaints about Baggage

Unlike total complaints by airline, baggage complaints by airline plunge in 2012. United was the only exception, but in 2013 its baggage complaints dropped somewhat while all other airlines saw a

Baggage complaints by airline



Mishandled Baggage Reports by Airline



spike, especially Frontier and American. Southwest and Alaska Airlines consistently had the fewest number of complaints per 100,000 passengers.

The DOT tracks mishandled baggage reports for all airlines with over 1% market share by revenue-miles. These are reports filed with the airlines rather than complaints filed with the DOT. The airlines then report this data to the DOT to include in the monthly Air Travel Consumer Reports.

Overall, reports of mishandled baggage have been declining. However, several airlines saw increases in 2013, just as complaints increased. The

biggest increases were for AirTran and its parent company, Southwest.

JetBlue, which does not charge for the first checked bag, and Frontier were consistently some of the least likely airlines to mishandle baggage. AirTran was the least likely overall until 2013, when reports of mishandled baggage doubled.

The decline may be because more airlines are imposing fees for checking even a single bag and fewer passengers are checking their bags, or because new DOT rules increase consumer compensation for lost or delayed baggage.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Department of Transportation's Air Travel Consumer Reports reveal important information about consumer frustrations with air travel.

- In many cases, the volume of consumer complaints corresponds with airlines' performance. Complaints about Flight Problems correspond to airlines' percentage of on-time arrivals and complaints about Baggage correspond with airlines' mishandled baggage reports. Consumers are responding to airlines' mistakes.
- Performance varies by airline, as do complaints. For some airlines, such as Alaska Airlines and Delta Airlines, good or improving service in on-time arrivals and baggage handling corresponds with lower complaint numbers. For other airlines, such as United Airlines, poor or worsening performance corresponds with high complaint numbers.
- Unlike several other government consumer complaint databases maintained at saferproducts.gov, safercar.gov and cfpb.gov, which can be downloaded and searched by individual complaint or category, the DOT's Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings of the Aviation Consumer Protection Division publishes only a monthly pdf summary of complaint statistics, not a searchable complaint database. The pdf reports include information on air travel problems including on-time arrivals, lost luggage disputes and involuntary bumping.
- Database files of raw aggregate data on total numbers of complaints and types by airline are downloadable from the DOT's Bureau of Transportation Statistics and serve as the source of data for this report.
- U.S. PIRG Education Fund has on several occasions urged the DOT to establish a search-

able consumer complaint database and make complaint data more user-friendly to consumers and researchers.

Recommendations to the DOT

- That the Department of Transportation (DOT) establish a searchable public database of consumer airline complaints to supplement its monthly summary reports.
- That the DOT move more of its air travel databases onto the data.gov platform, using machine-readable formats (such as xml or rdf).
- That the DOT require airlines to report complaint data about frequent flyer programs separately so that it can be added to the data that are available in DOT reports and in the future searchable public consumer complaint database.¹⁸ In addition, the DOT should include airline-by-airline complaint data about frequent flyer programs as a discrete category.
- That the DOT provide airline-by-airline complaint data for all subcategories of Flight Problems (Cancellations, Delays, and Missed Connections).

Recommendations to Policymakers:

- Policymakers should consider providing funding for the unfunded air passenger consumer complaint hotline established in 2012.
- Policymakers should consider additional funding to the DOT for evaluation and adjudication of consumer complaints.

Recommendations to Airlines:

- Airlines should pay close attention to complaint data that the DOT publishes and work to correct major lapses.

Methodology

Air Travel Consumer Reports: The Department of Transportation publishes reports that detail complaint data for U.S. and foreign airlines on a monthly basis through the Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings. Reports published in February include total complaint information for the calendar year prior (January-December). These reports also include data for on-time performance and mishandled baggage for airlines with over 1% market share in revenue-miles.

Enplanement data: The Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statis-

tics publishes charts that list how many passengers travel on each airline each year, or enplanements. For determining the number of enplanements, we used the T-100 Market (U.S. Carriers Only) chart available at <http://www.transtats.bts.gov>.

Because T-100 charts are not available through December 2013, for 2013 enplanement numbers we used data listed in the complaints section of the February 2014 Air Travel Consumer Report for all airlines with over 1% market share by revenue-miles. For Spirit Airlines, we estimated annual enplanements using the BTS tool at <http://www.transtats.bts.gov/carriers.asp>.

Appendix: Complaints and Enplanements by Airline, 2009-2013

2009

Airline	Flight Problems	Oversales	RES/TKTG/ BOARDING	Fares	Refunds	Baggage	Customer Service	Disability	Advertising	Discrimination	Animals	Other	TOTAL	Enplanements	Complaints/ 100,000 enplanements	Rank (worst to best)
AirTran Airways	60	20	27	11	8	43	39	15	1	8	0	2	234	23,982,685	0.97570393	6
Alaska Airlines	22	2	15	4	5	14	10	5	1	0	0	0	78	15,550,486	0.50159204	11
American Airlines	211	21	119	46	62	230	127	49	3	15	1	29	913	85,732,004	1.064946528	5
American Eagle Airlines	43	1	8	0	2	35	13	4	0	1	0	4	111	16,012,944	0.69318921	10
Delta Air Lines	231	66	236	79	90	277	159	67	6	15	2	99	1,327	67,779,358	1.957823206	2
Frontier Airlines	28	4	15	4	5	8	13	7	2	1	0	1	88	9,408,203	0.935353967	7
JetBlue Airways	53	5	27	8	15	16	31	21	0	4	0	9	189	22,392,322	0.84403931	8
Pinnacle Airlines	46	8	7	0	0	8	6	9	0	0	0	0	84	10,744,356	0.781805815	9
SkyWest Airlines	49	4	11	0	0	15	9	15	0	0	0	1	104	21,246,406	0.489494553	12
Southwest Airlines	35	11	22	3	16	43	35	30	0	11	0	4	210	101,374,390	0.207152911	13
Spirit Airlines	73	23	116	20	52	49	48	10	8	2	0	10	411	6,088,588	6.750333575	1
United Airlines	150	28	119	41	43	145	117	46	5	13	0	44	751	55,093,092	1.363147307	3
US Airways	140	46	116	47	42	100	107	40	1	4	0	25	668	51,013,688	1.309452475	4

2010

Airline	Flight Problems	Oversales	RES/TKTG/ BOARDING	Fares	Refunds	Baggage	Customer Service	Disability	Advertising	Discrimination	Animals	Other	TOTAL	Enplanements	Complaints/ 100,000 enplanements	Rank (worst to best)
AirTran Airways	77	19	37	4	7	30	28	11	1	4	0	3	221	24,710,989	0.894338952	9
Alaska Airlines	16	2	14	2	5	9	11	13	0	1	0	0	73	16,511,424	0.442118136	12
American Airlines	450	28	125	49	74	272	139	47	8	10	0	38	1,240	86,157,637	1.439222387	6
American Eagle Airlines	73	12	10	1	1	43	15	9	0	1	0	1	166	16,246,194	1.021777778	8
Delta Air Lines	673	110	312	107	116	385	271	114	8	29	3	100	2,228	109,531,909	2.034110444	2
Frontier Airlines	48	15	18	2	11	14	21	14	0	0	0	1	144	9,847,388	1.462316708	5
JetBlue Airways	123	10	33	12	27	27	43	20	2	1	0	6	304	24,215,068	1.255416669	7
Pinnacle Airlines	54	13	2	0	0	6	6	9	0	0	0	1	91	10,874,852	0.836792997	10
SkyWest Airlines	66	12	7	0	1	37	14	11	0	0	0	1	149	24,218,092	0.615242522	11
Southwest Airlines	64	15	37	8	9	48	53	35	4	9	0	9	291	106,270,433	0.273829693	13
Spirit Airlines	167	22	109	14	54	48	51	7	7	2	0	11	492	6,750,835	7.287987338	1
United Airlines	151	45	145	57	69	173	136	46	4	10	0	52	888	53,049,734	1.673900947	3
US Airways	224	69	117	40	49	96	106	47	8	15	0	24	795	51,849,940	1.53327082	4

2011

Airline	Flight Problems	Oversales	RES/TKTG/ BOARDING	Fares	Refunds	Baggage	Customer Service	Disability	Advertising	Discrimination	Animals	Other	TOTAL	Enplanements	Complaints/ 100,000 enplanements	Rank (worst to best)
AirTran Airways	56	15	18	3	5	30	21	23	1	3	0	3	178	24,699,230	0.72067024	11
Alaska Airlines	15	5	10	4	8	11	19	7	0	2	0	4	85	17,809,881	0.477263155	12
American Airlines	438	41	124	84	103	236	132	58	5	14	1	24	1260	86,140,230	1.462731177	4
American Eagle Airlines	126	13	11	1	10	62	17	7	0	2	1	1	251	17,347,644	1.446882355	5
Delta Air Lines	377	62	181	98	95	224	188	79	17	21	4	60	1,406	112,209,102	1.253017781	6
Frontier Airlines	38	3	14	2	4	8	20	6	0	0	0	4	99	10,621,657	0.932057964	9
JetBlue Airways	115	1	21	16	17	35	39	30	3	4	0	4	285	26,372,555	1.0806689	7
Pinnacle Airlines	68	11	4	0	0	10	7	6	0	1	0	1	108	10,523,780	1.026247223	8
SkyWest Airlines	90	10	11	1	1	34	19	10	0	1	0	1	178	24,407,881	0.729272648	10
Southwest Airlines	78	8	29	39	24	51	55	41	6	5	0	18	354	110,624,339	0.320001912	13
Spirit Airlines	184	38	120	29	69	83	71	11	12	5	0	16	638	8,296,297	7.690177919	1
United Airlines	298	54	141	56	106	180	158	49	5	9	0	60	1,116	49,642,059	2.248093698	2
US Airways	341	53	131	66	83	138	104	59	1	13	0	25	1,014	52,957,653	1.914737422	3

2012

Airline	Flight Problems	Oversales	RES/TKTG/ BOARDING	Fares	Refunds	Baggage	Customer Service	Disability	Advertising	Discrimination	Animals	Other	TOTAL	Enplanements	Complaints/ 100,000 enplanements	Rank (worst to best)
AirTran Airways	21	11	18	2	5	19	23	7	2	2	0	0	110	21,754,741	0.505636909	12
Alaska Airlines	16	2	20	4	1	12	24	8	3	2	0	2	94	18,525,730	0.507402407	11
American Airlines	477	44	181	59	137	252	227	100	14	18	0	47	1,556	86,456,762	1.799743553	3
American Eagle Airlines	99	13	20	1	5	42	39	14	0	1	0	3	237	18,730,932	1.265286746	5
Delta Air Lines	233	39	123	43	66	80	148	56	18	10	1	41	858	115,208,631	0.74473587	10
Frontier Airlines	28	2	14	6	4	20	17	7	0	1	0	11	110	10,701,833	1.027861302	7
JetBlue Airways	54	0	27	9	11	50	34	29	7	1	0	7	229	28,966,068	0.790580206	9
Pinnacle Airlines	89	11	11	0	1	21	20	13	0	0	0	0	166	14,638,513	1.133994962	6
SkyWest Airlines	136	9	7	0	2	43	20	14	0	0	0	0	231	26,153,130	0.88325948	8
Southwest Airlines	66	6	31	15	12	36	64	41	3	1	0	10	285	112,276,766	0.253837023	13
Spirit Airlines	263	43	171	49	94	107	85	18	21	6	0	16	873	10,176,191	8.578848412	1
United Airlines	1,082	124	774	209	356	407	617	144	26	25	3	152	3,919	91,626,796	4.277133078	2
US Airways	244	34	141	72	90	121	123	70	20	6	0	23	944	54,275,781	1.739265622	4

2013

Airline	Flight Problems	Oversales	RES/TKTG/ BOARDING	Fares	Refunds	Baggage	Customer Service	Disability	Advertising	Discrimination	Animals	Other	TOTAL	Enplanements	Complaints/ 100,000 enplanements	Rank (worst to best)
AirTran Airways	47	10	10	2	3	18	22	14	0	2	0	2	130	17,854,253	0.728117833	9
Alaska Airlines	22	2	17	2	4	13	17	6	1	0	0	2	86	19,737,293	0.435723379	12
American Airlines	495	33	241	43	133	358	275	94	9	11	1	37	1,730	86,822,555	1.992569788	4
American Eagle Airlines	180	7	30	1	1	34	34	12	0	1	0	3	303	17,825,933	1.699770778	5
Delta Air Lines	178	41	100	48	8	79	137	68	5	6	0	43	713	120,718,462	0.590630454	11
Frontier Airlines	75	11	47	5	13	33	42	9	1	1	0	79	316	10,237,264	3.086762244	2
JetBlue Airways	47	3	30	5	8	48	28	18	0	0	0	5	192	30,427,058	0.6310173	10
Endeavor Air*	75	1	3	0	1	20	9	2	0	0	0	2	113	13,195,141	0.856375843	7
SkyWest Airlines	142	7	10	0	0	30	18	5	0	2	0	3	217	27,279,016	0.795483239	8
Southwest Airlines	104	9	47	12	22	70	76	42	5	7	0	3	397	115,402,708	0.344012725	13
Spirit Airlines	318	45	199	29	104	148	109	19	18	4	1	25	1,019	10,796,000	9.438680993	1
United Airlines	521	93	265	68	157	287	337	110	7	14	3	73	1,935	90,239,851	2.144285455	3
US Airways	277	35	105	31	59	75	99	94	3	3	0	25	806	56,745,432	1.420378648	6

Total Airline Complaints per 100,000 enplanements, 2009-2013

Airline	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Airtran Airways	0.976	0.894	0.721	0.506	0.728
Alaska Airlines	0.502	0.442	0.477	0.507	0.436
American Airlines	1.065	1.439	1.463	1.800	1.993
American Eagle Airlines	0.693	1.022	1.447	1.265	1.700
Delta Air Lines	1.958	2.034	1.253	0.745	0.591
Frontier Airlines	0.935	1.462	0.932	1.028	3.087
Jetblue Airways	0.844	1.255	1.081	0.791	0.631
Pinnacle Airlines	0.782	0.837	1.026	1.134	0.856
Skywest Airlines	0.489	0.615	0.729	0.883	0.795
Southwest Airlines	0.207	0.274	0.320	0.254	0.344
Spirit Airlines	6.750	7.288	7.690	8.579	9.440
United Airlines	1.363	1.674	2.248	4.277	2.144
Us Airways	1.309	1.533	1.915	1.739	1.420

Total Category Complaints, 2009-2013

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total
Flight Problems	1,870	2,996	3,290	3,740	3,473	15,369
Oversales	332	472	435	402	329	1,970
Reservations/Ticketing/Boarding	1,085	1,192	1,058	1,668	1,236	6,239
Fares	348	359	467	501	274	1,949
Refunds	460	509	677	857	589	3,092
Baggage	1,281	1,453	1,350	1,416	1,372	6,872
Customer Service	974	1,178	1,138	1,634	1,396	6,320
Disability	465	499	564	665	551	2,744
Advertising	38	60	60	134	66	358
Discrimination	107	115	105	81	60	468
Animals	5	4	8	4	5	26
Other	268	282	273	343	333	1,499
TOTAL	7,233	9,119	9,425	11,445	9,684	46,906

Airline Rank by Year (Worst to Best)

Airline	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
AirTran Airways	6	9	11	12	9
Alaska Airlines	11	12	12	11	12
American Airlines	5	6	4	3	4
American Eagle Airlines	10	8	5	5	5
Delta Air Lines	2	2	6	10	11
Frontier Airlines	7	5	9	7	2
JetBlue Airways	8	7	7	9	10
Pinnacle Airlines	9	10	8	6	7
SkyWest Airlines	12	11	10	8	8
Southwest Airlines	13	13	13	13	13
Spirit Airlines	1	1	1	1	1
United Airlines	3	3	2	2	3
US Airways	4	4	3	4	6

Notes

- 1 This was known as Rule 240 or reciprocity rule.
- 2 These previous 4 paragraphs are adapted from unpublished material from flyersrights.org, on file with the author, used by permission of Flyersrights.org.
- 3 <http://www.smartertravel.com/blogs/today-in-travel/airline-fees-the-ultimate-guide.html?id=2623262>
- 4 Sharkey, Joe, "Smaller Airports Are Being Left Behind," 25 March 2014, page B6, the New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/25/business/smaller-airports-are-being-left-behind.html>
- 5 New DOT Consumer Rule Limits Airline Tarmac Delays, Provides Other Passenger Protections <http://www.dot.gov/briefing-room/new-dot-consumer-rule-limits-airline-tarmac-delays-provides-other-passenger>
- 6 As incorporated into Public Law No: 112-95, The FAA Modernization and Safety Improvement Act of 2012. See also Hanni, Kate, "FAA Bill Codifies Airline Passenger Bill Of Rights," 8 Feb 2012, Huffington Post, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kate-hanni/faa-bill-codifies-airline_b_1261438.html
- 7 February 2014 Air Travel Consumer Report, pg 49 http://www.dot.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/docs/2014_February_ATCR.pdf
- 8 Excluding Advertising, Discrimination, Animals, which each garnered fewer than 2% of total complaints, and Other, which garnered fewer than 4% of complaints against U.S. airlines from 2009-2013.
- 9 http://money.cnn.com/2009/05/12/news/companies/airline_baggage_fees/
- 10 <http://www.farecompare.com/about/worldwide-baggage-fee-chart/>
- 11 http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/07/business/07bags.html?_r=0
- 12 U.S. Department of Transportation Expands Airline Passenger Protections <http://www.dot.gov/briefing-room/us-department-transportation-expands-airline-passenger-protections>
- 13 News release, "U.S. Department of Transportation Expands Airline Passenger Protections", 20 April 2011, <http://www.dot.gov/briefing-room/us-department-transportation-expands-airline-passenger-protections>
- 14 ExpressJet Airlines, another regional carrier, received a number of complaints but only operates in conjunction with other airlines. They did not have enplanement data in T-100 charts and were not included in this study.
- 15 Systemwide enplanements for 2009-2012 determined using the T-100 Market (U.S. Carriers Only) chart available at <http://www.transtats.bts.gov>. Systemwide enplanements for 2013 estimated using the February 2014 Air Travel Consumer Report and the BTS tool at <http://www.transtats.bts.gov/carriers.asp>. ExpressJet Airlines
- 16 <http://www.dot.gov/tags/spirit-airlines>
- 17 For 2009-2012, we used complaints and enplanements data for Pinnacle Airlines. For 2013 we used complaints and enplanements data for Endeavor Air.
- 18 These datasets should be added to those that DOT already provides through <https://www.data.gov/open-gov/> See e.g. <http://catalog.data.gov/dataset?q=organization:faa-dot-gov>