Alaska, Southwest, Delta have fewest complaints while Frontier, Spirit and JetBlue have the most as complaint volume hits new record high
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| CONTENTS |
|-----------------|---------------|
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY                                   | 1 |
| COMPLAINTS AGAINST U.S AIRLINES                  | 3 |
| THE BEST AND THE WORST                              | 5 |
| CANCELLATIONS AND DELAYS                            | 6 |
| RECOMMENDATIONS                                     | 7 |
| TIPS FOR TRAVELERS                                  | 9 |
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We’ve known since last fall that air travelers were complaining at record levels in 2023. Now we know how much. And we also know now which U.S. airlines had the lowest complaint levels, and which had the highest.

Complaints against U.S. airlines increased by nearly 29% in 2023, even though the number of passengers increased only 11%. Complaints hit a new record, estimated at 61,233; the previous record was 47,591 in 2022.

The Department of Transportation released complaint data on July 5 – five months after the numbers for a given year normally come out. An avalanche of complaints throughout 2023 caused the delay, coming in at such a fierce rate that DOT workers (even with help from artificial intelligence) couldn’t keep up.

It’s a phenomenon that started in 2020 and hasn’t subsided. Air travelers are mad as heck and they’re demonstrating not going to take it anymore.

We crunched the numbers and found:
- American Airlines had the most complaints, but it also had the most passengers and most flights.
- Frontier had the worst ratio of complaints to passengers, the benchmark DOT uses. Frontier’s complaint ratio was more than twice as high as the next airline, Spirit.
- Alaska had the best complaint ratio, followed by Southwest and Delta.
- The middle of the pack among the 10 largest airlines: American, Allegiant, Hawaiian and United.
Only three airlines had better complaints ratios last year than in 2022: Alaska, Southwest and Allegiant.

The 61,233 total complaints for U.S. airlines was expected to be higher because volume in the first part of the year was double the previous year. But the pace slowed during the second half of the year, especially during October, November and December.

One of the biggest problems and reasons for complaints in years past – cancellations – dropped in half compared with 2022. Delays, however, actually got worse compared with 2022. Meanwhile, incidents of lost or damaged bags and wheelchairs improved slightly. Those problems are tracked separately by DOT, without regard to complaints from passengers.

The lack of refunds is the other huge source of complaints from years past. But DOT didn’t release details on the categories of complaints for 2023 – only the topline numbers and totals for each airline and travel agents.

This all clearly shows the airline industry needs to do much more to quell the rage among travelers and get back to pre-pandemic norms. For now, though, we can celebrate the dozens of new passenger protections coming in the months ahead, dealing with refunds, banned fees, 24/7 live customer service and more. These were put into law in the FAA Reauthorization Bill passed by Congress last month, with additional new rules approved or planned by the DOT. This shows that lawmakers and regulators pay attention to our complaints.
COMPLAINTS AGAINST U.S. AIRLINES

Complaints against U.S. and foreign airlines started soaring in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and flights, vacations, weddings and just about all discretionary travel plans were canceled for months. The problem: Travelers are entitled to a refund for flights canceled by the airline, no matter the reason. But airlines frequently didn’t provide refunds; instead they steered customers to credits and vouchers that expired way too quickly.

Then later in 2021 and into 2022, when consumers wanted to travel again, the airlines weren’t ready with staffing and scheduling. Travelers complained at levels never seen before about lack of refunds, cancellations, delays, lost or damaged baggage and wheelchairs and getting bumped from flights.

DOT started getting buried in complaints in 2022, especially after the Christmastime meltdown that stranded millions, some until after the week after New Year’s. The 2022 complaints data was released two months late. The first five months of 2023 complaints data was released later in 2023.

After the May 2023 numbers, DOT stopped releasing complaints data for the last seven months of 2023 and said they’d release it all at one time. That’s what occurred July 5, 2024. But it doesn’t include the detail of years past, which broke down complaints by type.

The top three for years have been refunds, cancellations and delays, and baggage, comprising nearly three-fourths of all complaints.

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**Passenger Complaints by Year -- Total and Against U.S. Airlines**

2023 is a new high for US airlines. Total hit a record in 2020, but most were against foreign airlines.

- **Total complaints by year**
- **Total against US airlines**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Complaints</th>
<th>Total Against US Airlines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>125,000</td>
<td>75,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>75,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>1,250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PIRG Analysis of DOT ATCR Reports
Other issues complained about most: reservations, fares, customer service and problems faced by those with disabilities.

With the data released July 5, DOT said it tallied only total submissions and didn’t break out complaints, opinions, compliments and information requests. It did, however, point out that complaints comprised 91% of submissions the last three years. However, the percentage has been trending down; in 2022, it was 90%. We split the difference and used 90.5% for all 2023 calculations.

That amounted to 61,233 complaints for U.S. airlines, 24,991 for foreign airlines and 3,162 for travel companies such as third-party online ticket agents. While the total for U.S. airlines increased significantly compared with 2022, the volume for foreign airlines and travel companies declined.

**TO FILE A COMPLAINT ABOUT AN AIRLINE, TICKET SITE, TRAVEL AGENT OR SOMEONE ELSE**
THE BEST AND THE WORST AIRLINES

The DOT traditionally uses complaints per 100,000 boarded passengers to compare levels of dissatisfaction with individual airlines.

Once again, Frontier fared worst among the 10 largest airlines, with a complaint ratio of 32.99, more than double that of the next airline, Spirit, which had 14.76. JetBlue also had a double-digit ratio, at 13.32.

Alaska fared best, at 2.34, followed by Southwest and Delta, at 3.61 and 3.64 respectively.

The middle four were American, Allegiant, Hawaiian and United, which had ratios ranging from 5.97 to 7.47. Only three of the airlines saw an improvement in complaints from 2022 to 2023: Alaska, Southwest and Allegiant. Frontier has garnered the worst complaints ratio for four of the last five years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Complaints per 100,000 passengers 2023</th>
<th>Complaints per 100,000 passengers 2022</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Alaska</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>2.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Southwest</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>6.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Delta</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>2.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 American</td>
<td>5.97</td>
<td>5.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Allegiant</td>
<td>7.02</td>
<td>7.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Hawaiian</td>
<td>7.15</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 United</td>
<td>7.47</td>
<td>5.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 JetBlue</td>
<td>13.32</td>
<td>8.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Spirit</td>
<td>14.76</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Frontier</td>
<td>32.99</td>
<td>20.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CANCELLATIONS, DELAYS AND BAGGAGE

Cancellations declined significantly in 2023 compared with 2022, with the percentage of flights canceled dropping in half, to 1.29% of all scheduled flights in 2023. That compares to 2.71% canceled in 2022. But the cancellation figures include only flights canceled within seven days before the planned departure date.

Flights that get scrubbed more than seven days ahead of time are considered “discontinued flights.” So while a flight that gets canned eight or 10 days before your trip might be a hassle to rebook – possibly facing higher prices or no available seats – it doesn’t count against the airline. This little-known fact about “discontinued” flights had been kept largely under wraps until cancellations started becoming such an enormous problem in 2022.

The 10 largest airlines and their codeshare marketing partners canceled 93,897 flights in 2023, down from 190,038 in 2022.

Delays, however, got worse. Of the 7.28 million flights scheduled in 2023 for the top 10 airlines, only 78.3% arrived on time. That’s slightly worse than the 76.7% on-time figure for 2022. A flight is considered delayed if it’s at least 15 minutes late. A significant delay is at least three hours.

For baggage, of the 485.9 million checked bags, about 2.8 million were mishandled, meaning lost or damaged. The mishandled baggage rate for 2023 – 0.58% – is an improvement over the 0.64% rate in 2022.

Likewise, of the 834,327 wheelchairs and scooters checked, 11,527 were mishandled in 2023. The mishandled rate was 1.38%, down from 1.41% in 2022.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Four years after the pandemic brought much of the world to a halt and Congress gave the airlines $54 billion to keep them in business, some aspects of air travel have improved. Cancellations dropped in half in 2023 compared with 2022, to the extent we know how many flights are truly being canceled, because DOT tallies only those canceled within one week before departure.

With checked baggage, about 2.8 million were mishandled, meaning lost or damaged. With checked wheelchairs and scooters, 11,527 were mishandled in 2023. The lost or damaged rates did improve slightly from 2022.

But flight delays got worse compared with 2022. And complaints jumped by 29% compared with 2022. This means that even when problems are brought to the airlines’ attention, they’re not resolving them.

Here are some of the things that need to happen to improve air travel:

1. Airlines should focus on realistic scheduling, fast refunds for canceled flights even before the new law takes effect, transparent pricing upfront instead of add-on gotcha fees, and quick resolution of problems so consumers don’t need to file a complaint.

2. DOT should focus more on accountability from the airlines, particularly regarding scheduling, excessive cancellations and delays, slow-rolled refunds and disproportionately high complaint volume for some airlines.

The complaint volume paints a clear picture of where change is needed most, both in terms of the airlines with the most unresolved problems and the practices at various airlines that generate the most complaints. Frontier, Spirit and JetBlue have double-digit complaint ratios – far higher than the other seven major airlines.

In February 2023, the DOT said it launched “a rigorous and comprehensive investigation” into possible “unrealistic scheduling” by four airlines, including Southwest, which had a meltdown over the Christmas holidays in 2022. Unrealistic scheduling is regarded as “an unfair and deceptive practice” under federal law, DOT said. We haven’t learned about any findings or actions. It’s irresponsible and harmful if airlines sell tickets to flights in bad faith, because last-minute cancellations can wreak havoc on travelers’ lives and wallets.

3. At the same time, DOT should revise its definition of a canceled flight to include more than just those canceled within seven days of the departure date. Right now, those are considered “discontinued flights” and DOT doesn’t even tally them nor are airlines.

4. Congress should allow state attorneys general to enforce federal consumer protection laws involving the airlines. Most states want to and should be able to do this,
but they can’t. Airlines are just about the only industry that is protected from state enforcement of consumer protection laws. And a bipartisan group of 35 state attorneys general signed a letter to Congress on this issue in August 2022.

5. The DOT has done a great job the last two years of pushing the major carriers to adopt new passenger-friendly policies, such as family seating so young children can sit next to an adult companion at no additional charge. Other policies deal with the airlines’ commitments in cases of cancellations and delays under the airlines’ control.

The DOT’s flightrights.gov dashboard clearly displays each airline’s policy on various issues. Further, once the airlines have made a promise like this to the DOT, it becomes part of their contract and, while they can change their policy, they can’t go back on it for tickets purchased while that policy was in effect.

We know now from the law passed by Congress in May that the dashboards aren’t going away. They currently include airlines’ commitments for:

- Rebooking and covering hotel and meal expenses when the airline is responsible for a canceled flight or one delayed by at least three hours.
- Fee-free seating for a child traveling with a parent or other adult companion.
- Policies for military members who change flights because of military orders.

Over time, more travelers will discover which airline offers what, thanks to the rights spelled out on these dashboards. The hope is that pressure from travelers pushes more airlines to adopt passenger-friendly practices – ones that everyone knows are just common sense.
Airline travel tips you shouldn’t fly without

We likely are past the worst of the continuous travel woes, but it’s still best to plan for possible problems, such as when storms or massive crowds lead to chaos. Here are some suggestions to help save you grief on your next trip.

If you’ve already booked a flight, you should do four easy but important things:

1. **Download your airline’s app.** This will help you get real-time notifications and communicate directly with customer service, especially if you need to rebook your flight and the phone lines are jammed. If you need to call your airline, do not just do an online search for your airline; you could end up on a scam website or calling a scam “customer service” number. This has actually happened!

2. **Put trackers in your bags.** Some of the biggest frustrations for passengers whose flights are canceled or rebooked stem from the airline not knowing where your bag is. It’s helpful if you do.

3. **Bookmark the Department of Transportation’s passenger dashboard** that shows the binding commitments from the 10 largest airlines on various issues, including cancellations and delays caused by the airline (because of staffing, equipment, etc.) Six of the 10 will rebook you on another airline at no charge. Some will pay for hotels, meals, etc. You can’t count on the airline offering this to you unless you ask. Some guarantee fee-free seating next to your child; some don’t.

4. **Know that you have legal rights.** If any airline cancels your flight for any reason, you’re entitled by law to a full refund of your ticket price, taxes, baggage fees, any extra charges and ancillary fees. Refunds must be issued promptly — if that’s what you want. You have other rights such as if you’re bumped from a flight or you bag is lost.

   You have additional rights if your flight is canceled or significantly delayed for reasons within the airline’s control, such as staffing or equipment issues. Many airlines rebook you free, and pay for hotels, meals, ground transportation, etc. Even if it’s not the airline’s fault, you can ask an airline to rebook you on their airline or a competitor’s. They often will.

In addition, tons of new consumer protections are rolling out as part of the FAA bill signed into law in May and part of new rules approved by the DOT in April. They cover everything from delayed flights to baggage fees to mandatory 24/7 live customer service.

If you have not yet booked your flight, here are important tips to consider:

**Tread carefully if using third-party ticket websites**

If your flight is canceled or delayed or you need to rebook or get a refund, it may be much more difficult to do so than if you purchased tickets directly from an airline. And you don’t have as many rights with a third-party ticket site as you do with an airline.
Fly in the morning
Schedule your flight as early in the day as possible. The DOT says you’re more likely to get where you’re going. The later in the day you fly, the more chances there are for the airline to get off schedule. And if you have a late-night flight that’s cancelled, there may not be another one until the next morning.

Download the app
Get the airline’s app on your phone at least a few days before your flight. It can help you with last-minute notifications, rebooking and contacting customer service. Then you can delete the app when you return from your trip if you’d like.

Avoid connecting flights
This isn’t always possible, of course. But two flights mean two chances for a problem. And a delay on the first leg could mean you miss the second leg. The extra cost of a non-stop may save you a lot of stress and expense.

Give yourself a buffer
If possible, plan to fly out a day before you actually need to be somewhere, particularly if you’re attending a wedding or going on a cruise.

Hedge your ticket purchase
Many airlines will allow you to cancel your reservation and get a refund within 24 hours, so you can make sure you get the best deal.

Check the flight’s record
Major airlines must provide on-time performance data on their websites to help when you’re considering which flight to buy. Check the historic flight record for a specific flight to help avoid long delays. Note: Sometimes a flight number will show up under multiple routes. The results will show you each city-to-city route. On a flight I took recently, it showed 85% on time going one direction, and 77% going the other direction. Also, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics every month provides “chronically delayed” flights.

Pay with a credit card, not a debit card
If you buy your plane ticket with a credit card, you have far greater protection to dispute charges or fraud under the federal Fair Credit Billing Act.

Avoid checking a bag if possible
Having a carry-on reduces the chances of you getting separated from your bag.
Put a tracker in your bag
Today’s technology allows you to buy a small GPS tracker that you can put anywhere — in a suitcase, a carry-on in case it gets checked at the gate, or, when you’re at home, a set of keys or wallet. These generally connect to your smart phone to allow you to find your item anytime, anywhere.

Take a photo and document your property
If you are checking a bag, take a photo of your belongings in the suitcase in case you need to file a claim against the airline. You’re entitled to reimbursement up to $3,800 if your bag is lost. If you have expensive items, take photos of them and write down the model numbers, serial numbers, etc. Also, while checked wheelchairs and scooters are considered baggage, they’re not subject to the $3,800 liability limit, DOT says. Other “assistive devices” not subject to the $3,800 limit include walkers, CPAP machines, hearing aids and prescription medications.

Consider travel insurance
It won’t keep your flight from being canceled but should help with other expenses. (But read the terms and conditions on the limits.)

Check where your plane is
You can often get a heads-up on a problem, or reassurance that everything is on schedule, by checking the day before where your plane is coming from or where it is. Go to flightaware.com and search for the flight (don’t forget the airline abbreviation.) Find your time and route and go to the link “Where is my plane now?” You’ll see what city your plane is in currently and whether it’s on time.

Remember to be nice
If you have an issue, you should always be nice to whoever you’re dealing with. They probably didn’t cause your problem, but they may be able to help you fix it.

Know you have rights
You have certain legal rights in case of cancellations, lost or damaged baggage or wheelchairs and involuntary bumping. Here’s a complete list. Airlines are also contractually obligated to honor their commitments to the DOT on various consumer protections. Go to flightrights.gov.

How to handle airline woes, from cancellations to refunds to lost bags