



Airborne:

Grounding the Next Pandemic Before it Takes Off

Frontline airport
workers' union calls
for solutions to
create safer and
healthier airports



Executive Summary

Air travel connects us, bringing loved ones together all across the world. Essential airport workers—primarily people of color who clean cabins, handle baggage, and help passengers with disabilities and more—want people to connect through an aviation system that is healthy and safe for working people, passengers, and our communities.

But nearly a year after the Coronavirus first hit the aviation system in January 2020, airlines, which have received billions in public Coronavirus resources, continue to put essential workers and passengers at risk.ⁱ Airport workers, often denied paid sick leave and health care, say little has changed since the outbreak. A recent survey of nearly 900 frontline airport workers in 42 airports finds health and safety measures fall shortⁱⁱ:

- A super majority—80 percent—of surveyed essential airport workers feel that working at the airport puts them at increased risk for COVID-19;
- One in five workers say they have not been given PPE by their employer, airport authority or airline;
- 69 percent say their employer has not trained them how to protect themselves and passengers from the virus;
- 67 percent say they have experienced pressure to work too quickly or do more work than they believe is safe because of short-staffing;
- More than half say they have no paid sick leave; while fewer than half say they can raise concerns about workplace issues without fear of retaliation.

“According to the survey, many airport employers fail to provide their workers with adequate personal protective equipment (“PPE”). Covid-related training is non-existent or inadequate.”

Such apparent lack of adequate safety measures may have played a role in how the air transportation system acted as a COVID-19 spreader in the early stages of the pandemic.ⁱⁱⁱ A recent analysis by the RAND Corporation found that COVID-19 spread quickly with the help of aviation, even before a pandemic was declared.^{iv}

Unfortunately, COVID-19 is not the first disease to impact air travel. In the wake of the SARS (2003) and Ebola (2014) threats, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conducted an investigation of the aviation sector and found there was no coordinated national preparedness plan, even despite commitments made to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to have one.^v Now, even after COVID-19 has decimated the industry, the sector has *still* utterly failed to develop a plan that would protect airport workers, the travelling public, and the country during this crisis or the next.^{vi}

Why is there no comprehensive plan to limit the transmission of disease through our aviation system? Workforce fragmentation—with a patchwork of subcontracting companies competing in every airport—blocks coordinated action.^{vii} Even if workers received the training they need, high turnover spurred by low wages would continue to drive experienced workers off the job.^{viii} In short, airport operations run by airlines have resulted in a dysfunctional system not up to the task of properly safeguarding public health and safety.

That's why airport workers—88 percent of whom come from racialized communities ravaged by COVID-19—^{ix} are calling on elected officials at the federal, state, and local levels to take action to respond to COVID-19, mitigate or prevent all future pandemics, and fully restore consumer confidence in the sector. Airports, the world's daily gathering places, should be a place where we can stop future pandemics before they start.





Introduction

In 2019, the U.S. air travel network hosted 1.1 billion scheduled passengers who depended on the coordinated efforts of hundreds of thousands of ground handling workers to get to their destinations.^x Before aircraft can safely, securely, and healthfully take to America's skies, skillful preparation is required from many workers—including those who process passengers, assist persons with disabilities, clean passenger terminal facilities and aircraft cabins, maintain airport security, handle baggage, load air cargo, marshal aircraft into gates, and push airliners back from gates to taxi away from the terminal.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, these essential workers—a majority of whom come from communities of color—have continued to show up to work, still caring for the travelling public.^{xi} Fewer people are flying but no matter how many passengers there are, essential airport workers want our nation's aviation system to be as healthy and safe as possible for everyone, no exceptions.



"Our employer doesn't want to be responsible for taking care of workers' safety. I believe that my employer has failed to tell my co-workers and me when workers have tested positive for COVID-19. They give briefings every shift but don't give information about COVID to cabin cleaners. It took airport workers, through our union, to bring in the county health officials. Our actions made workers and passengers safer but our employers need to step up and take their responsibility seriously."

Luisa Cancio

Process Center worker, San Francisco International Airport

Airport worker survey:

Little has changed during pandemic

Through a survey of nearly 900 airport terminal and cabin cleaners, security officers, skycaps, baggage handlers, wheelchair attendants, and others conducted in summer and fall of 2020 in 42 airports, essential workers report that the current aviation system, however, is neither adequately healthy nor safe.

“As the survey indicates, when it comes to disease prevention in airports, little has changed since March 2020.”

According to the survey, many airport employers fail to provide their workers with adequate personal protective equipment (“PPE”). Covid-related training is non-existent or inadequate. Airport workers feel at risk from Covid at work and a majority of workers do not have any paid sick leave. A majority feel pressure to work too quickly or do more work than they feel is safe. Perhaps most disconcerting, workers feel like they cannot raise workplace issues for fear of retaliation. Below are specific findings:

- 1 in 5 airport workers report receiving no PPE whatsoever.^{xii}
- Only half report their employer, an airline or the airport provide them with masks to cover their mouth and nose.^{xiii}
- 69% report their employer failed to train them on how to protect themselves and passengers from the virus.^{xiv}
- 66% report their employer failed to train them to properly put on and take-off gloves, masks and other PPE in order to limit exposure to infection.^{xv}
- 64% report their employer failed to train them how to respond if they find a dangerous or contaminated item in the cabin or the terminal.^{xvi}
- 64% report their employer failed to train them to protect themselves from blood-borne pathogens and infectious diseases as they perform their job duties.^{xvii}
- 80% agree or strongly agree with the statement, “Working at the airport puts me at increased risk for contracting COVID-19.”^{xviii}
- More than 50% report they are not given paid sick days.^{xix}
- 67% report experiencing pressure to work too quickly or do more work than they believe is safe because there aren’t enough staff.^{xx}
- Fewer than half agree with the statement “I can raise concerns about workplace issues (i.e. safety and health, cleaning, security, passenger service standards) without fear of retaliation.”^{xxi}

These COVID-related workplace injustices are also racial injustices. They impact hundreds of thousands of workers of color and white workers too. The lack of workplace protection revealed by the survey and the fact that essential workers cannot work from home are most likely a factor in why communities of color have been the most impacted by Covid illnesses and deaths. Here are the demographic results of the survey:

- Ethnicity^{xxii}
 - Latinx/Hispanic: 37%
 - Black/African American: 32%
 - White/Caucasian: 12%
 - Multiple: 10%
 - Asian/Pacific Islander: 8%
 - American Indian or Alaskan Native: 1%
- Immigrant^{xxiii}
 - Yes: 54%
 - No: 46%
- Gender^{xxiv}
 - Female: 52%
 - Male: 47%
 - Other: Less than 1%
- Age^{xxv}
 - 60+: 14%
 - 50-59: 27%
 - 30-39: 20%
 - 40-49: 20%
 - 21-29: 16%
 - 18-20: 2%
 - 17 and under: 1%



“When a plane comes in, we have to be there at the door. We get the first whiff of air that comes out, and all those people that come through the airplane — we are right there in front of them. Some people get close to us and ask us questions, so we’re in contact with people all day. The company has never taken any real action with regard to the virus. It’s all about the money for them.”

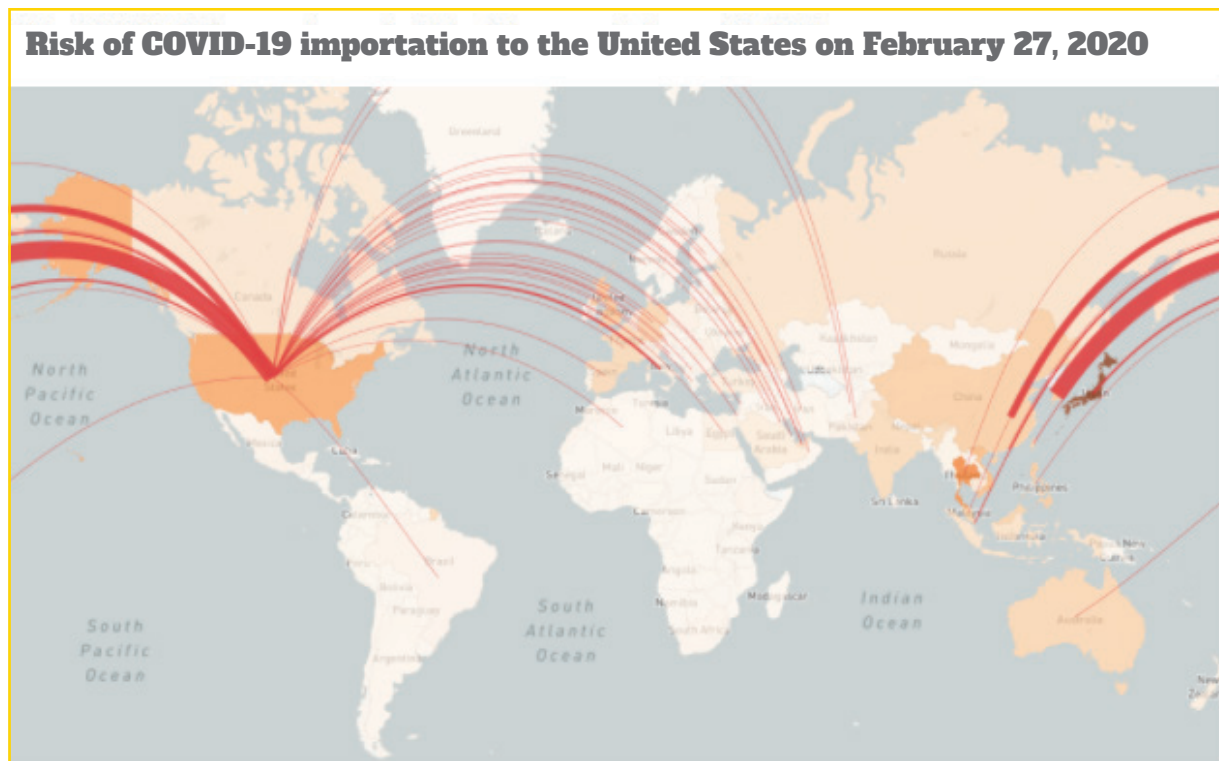
Reinaldo Gutierrez Carnet

Security Officer, Miami International Airport

Airports as “spreaders”:

The role of aviation in the proliferation of infectious disease

Disregard for safety may have played a role in how the air transportation system acted as a COVID-19 spreader in the early stages of the pandemic.^{xxvi} A recent analysis by the RAND Corporation found that COVID-19 spread quickly with the help of aviation, even before a pandemic was declared. The research found that “by the end of February, two weeks before the WHO declaration [of a pandemic], more than five cases of COVID-19 per day – or nearly 40 per week – were already being exported around the globe via air travel.”^{xxvii}



NOTE: The width of each line in this map is proportional to the number of imported cases. The line from Japan to the United States represents about one case every other month; the line from South Korea to the United States represents almost five cases every month.

Rand Graphic Source ^{xxviii}

As the survey indicates, when it comes to disease prevention in airports, little has changed since March 2020. The effects are potentially deadly for airport workers, who closely interact with passengers every day. While there is no systematic national tracking of COVID-19 infection rates by worksite and occupation,^{xxix} the experience of one group of airport workers, Transportation Security Administration (TSA) staff, may be an indicator that airport workers are contracting COVID-19 at higher rates than others. The TSA reports that, as of November 16, more than 2,800 TSA employees have tested positive for COVID.^{xxx} This total suggests that 4.6 percent of all TSA employees have tested positive, a rate 39 percent higher than the U.S. general population.^{xxxi} Each airport remains a potential locus for the rapid, potentially deadly spread of infectious disease.

This fact is not new. The risk of a pandemic to the U.S. air transportation system has been evident for some time, especially in the wake of the SARS (2003) and Ebola (2014) threats. Over the past 20 years, numerous disease outbreaks have threatened international travel. Other than Covid-19, none became

pandemics, but they were a warning that the threat is real and preparedness is necessary, from both a health perspective and an economic perspective. The 2003 SARS epidemic alone is estimated to have cost \$33 billion in global gross domestic product, according to the International Air Transport Association (IATA).^{xxxii}

After the 2014 Ebola outbreak, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conducted an investigation of the aviation sector and found there was no coordinated national preparedness plan, even despite commitments made to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to have one.^{xxxiii} Six years later, even after COVID-19 has nearly decimated the industry, the United States still does not have a comprehensive plan for national aviation preparedness to limit the spread of communicable diseases through air travel.^{xxxiv} Such a plan is critical to protect airport workers, the travelling public, and the country. Although some individual airports and airlines do have plans, the lack of a national plan has led to an uncoordinated, piecemeal approach that the GAO found may have contributed to “confusion among stakeholders and chaos at certain airports that occurred earlier this year.”^{xxxv}

“So why is there no comprehensive plan to limit the transmission of disease through our aviation system? Left to its own devices, the industry has failed to develop such a plan.”

The report also found that airline contractors were not always following existing health and safety requirements. Based on worker interviews, the GAO concluded:

“...service employees did not receive adequate communicable disease training and reported challenges accessing appropriate personal protective equipment, cleaning equipment, and cleaning supplies. Inadequate training, equipment, and supplies could lead to employee exposures to pathogens that could in turn result in infections. This risk could extend to passengers since they share the same aircraft environment. OSHA violations provide some evidence for concerns and challenges related to appropriate pathogen exposure-control planning, training, vaccinations, and personal protective equipment.”^{xxxvi}

Where workers act in union, they have the power to win better working conditions

Since the pandemic began, airport workers have fought to keep the industry afloat and make it safer. In March, airport workers won \$3 billion in CARES ACT funding to protect the jobs of subcontracted wheelchair agents, cabin cleaners, security officers and baggage handlers.^{xxxvii} However, a recent report from the staff of the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis found that, contrary to Congressional intent, the Treasury Department permitted many aviation contractors – such as Eulen and Total Airport Services – to lay off workers, while still receiving millions in aid.^{xxxviii} In addition to Congressional aid, through their union, workers got the word out early in March over social media with steps on how they can prevent COVID-19. In November, airport workers at the Denver airport ratified a collective bargaining agreement with their employer guaranteeing health and safety protections.^{xxxix} At Sea-Tac airport, workers came together to demand and win an additional breakroom to address unsafe crowding.^{xl} And years before the pandemic, workers at the Los Angeles airport pushed for and won emergency response training that includes instruction on contagious disease.^{xli}



In my particular case, I generally feel safe at work. But I'm worried about what kind of sick-leave benefits I'd receive if I catch the virus or have to self-quarantine. I also worry about the airport being forced to shut down and there are no flights. I was only called back to work in October, after a six-month furlough. I don't want to go through that again.

Ali Mohammed

Baggage handler, Denver International Airport

These successes, however promising, are limited geographically. The problems airport workers are reporting are systemic problems, which require systemic solutions. In the absence of science-based, uniform health and safety standards, irresponsible actors will enact irresponsible policies. The airport services contractors Eulen and Menzies Aviation provide cases in point: since 2012, the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has cited Eulen for 22 health and safety violations – including some regarding personal protective equipment standards – at its Florida airport operations.^{xliii} Eulen settled most of the citations without admitting wrongdoing.^{xliii} Menzies Aviation has had \$580,225 in fines and civil judgments levied against it nationwide concerning worker health and safety violations at multiple airports since 2012.^{xliv}

America needs a plan to stop the spread of infectious disease through airports

Our nation's air travel system is a critical component of national infrastructure that propels our national and local economies by enabling the swift movement of people and goods across the country and around the globe. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) found that the air transport industry is estimated to support \$641 billion of GDP in the United States.^{xlv} But the COVID-19 pandemic has laid the industry low. In April 2020, there was a 96 percent decrease in passenger airline traffic compared to the same month a year earlier.^{xlvi}

Recovery has been slow, in large part, due to lack of consumer confidence in the safety of the system. A survey done by McKinsey and Company in October 2020 found that 79 percent of consumers said they were "worried" (60 percent) or "somewhat worried" (19 percent) about traveling by airplane.^{xlvii} Respondents were also asked to rank their comfort levels with 19 different activities, travel by airplane ranked third to last, behind going to the gym, using a ride-sharing service, and visiting a crowded outdoor space.^{xlviii}

A healthy and safe aviation sector in which we all have confidence would clearly benefit the physical and economic health of the country, investors, passengers, and essential workers. So why is there no comprehensive plan to limit the transmission of disease through our aviation system?

Left to its own devices, the industry has failed to develop such a plan. Airlines who compete with each other for short-term gain have little financial incentive to invest in safety over the long-term. Workforce fragmentation—with a patchwork of subcontracting companies competing in every airport—blocks coordinated action. Even if workers got the training they need, high turnover spurred by low wages

would continue to drive experienced workers from the job. In short, airport operations run by airlines have resulted in a dysfunctional system not up to the task of adequately safeguarding public health and safety.

The current airline-run system of subcontracting service and care work is an obstacle to system-wide health and safety. Under this low-wage, fragmented system, essential airport workers continue to do their same jobs—caring for passengers who request assistance moving through the airport, cleaning and disinfecting terminals, restrooms and aircraft, providing security, and ensuring that luggage and air cargo arrive at their destinations.^{xlix} But instead of working for a handful of airlines, they work in an airline industry that thrives on a system of low-bid contracting that incentivizes irresponsible practices like cutting corners on wages,^{li} benefits^{lii} and safety.^{liii} Airports, the largest workplaces in many American cities, have been turned into “fissured workplaces” —workplaces that make coordination and uniform standards nearly impossible and that leave too many workers “without fair and decent wages, a career path, or a safe work environment.”^{liv}

“The time has come to reimagine the aviation industry.”

Airlines created the subcontracting system in order to push down wages.^{lv} Under the system, contractors bid for work through an airline-run Request for Proposal (RFP) process. In the labor-intensive airport services industry, labor represents the majority of the cost of doing business. Therefore, the contractor who pays the least most often offers the lowest-priced bid, which wins the contract. Overall there is a “race-to-the-bottom” whereby contractors cut wages in order to compete with one another.^{lvi} But in truth, race-to-the-bottom competition occurs in other areas as well. Contracting companies also compete on the basis of cutting health care^{lvii}, sick leave^{lviii}, and reducing investments in health and safety.^{lix}

In this way the airlines’ system of subcontracting incentivizes poor treatment of both workers and the public. And the system is widespread. Since industry deregulation in 1978, both airlines and airport authorities have increasingly shifted passenger services to third-party companies who compete vigorously to win lowest-cost bid contracts.^{lx} Both the absolute number and the share of outsourced jobs have increased substantially in subsequent decades. By 1991, 16 percent of jobs were outsourced, by 2001, 19 percent, by 2011, 26 percent, and as of 2019, 31.5 percent of jobs were outsourced.^{lxi} In many major U.S. airports, there is no defined system specifically for regulating the quality, capacity or number of contractors allowed to operate on airport property. As a result, airport service jobs are no longer the good jobs they once were.

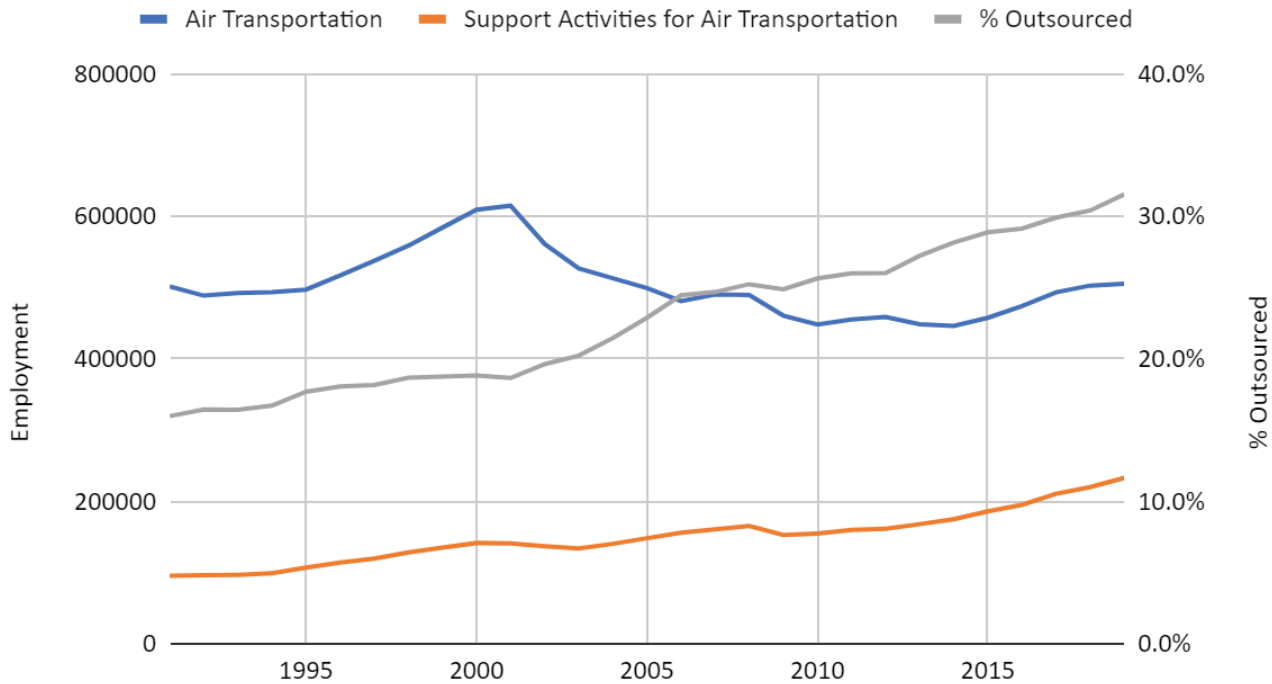


We feel very insecure during this pandemic. We risk Covid-19 exposure each day when we travel to work and during the hours we’re working too. A mask alone just isn’t good enough to protect ourselves and our families. I have heard that several of my coworkers have been infected. If we have to call off because we are sick with COVID-19, we don’t have any economic compensation during that time. My coworkers are afraid because we work very close to passengers who come from everywhere. Many of us have pre-existing health conditions that put us at high risk but we still have to come to work. We deserve appropriate PPE, paid sick days, and hazard pay because we’re putting ourselves and our families at risk every day.

Yolanda Rodriguez

Janitor, O’Hare International Airport

Airplane Industry Employment and Proportion Outsourced



Source for chart^{lxii}

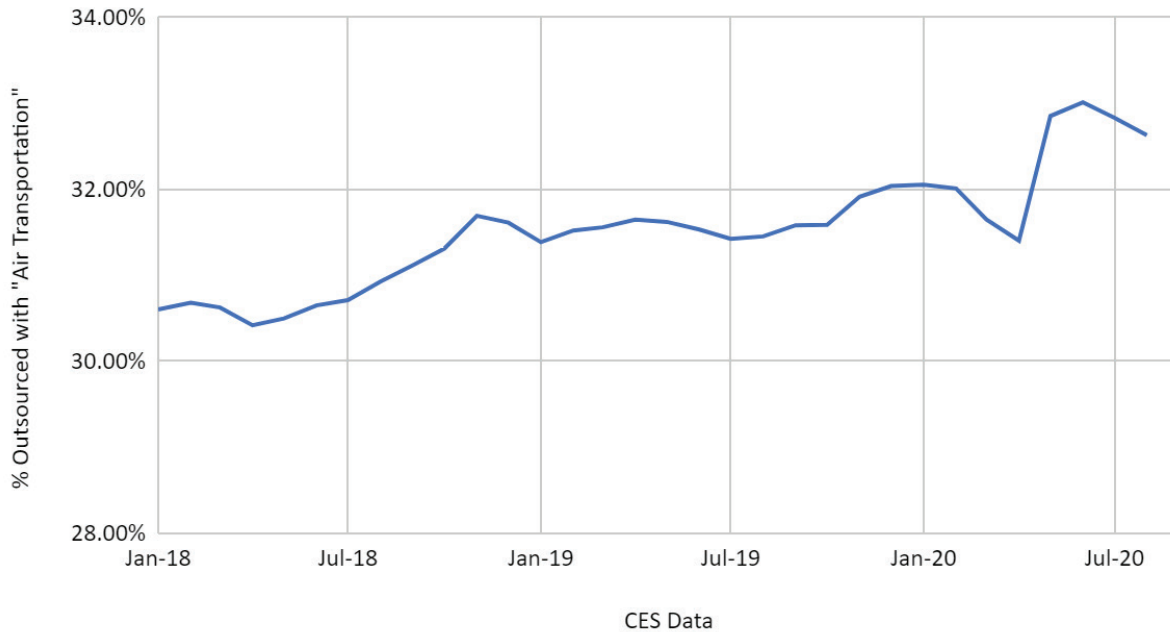
For example, in 2002, 75 percent of porters and bellhops, also known as skycaps, were directly employed by airlines and earned an inflation adjusted equivalent of \$27.18 per hour.^{lxiii} In 2019, 96 percent of those workers were employed by contractors and earned an average of \$12.23 an hour.^{lxiv}

Passenger attendants – such as those workers that care for passengers requiring wheelchair assistance – are another case in point. In 2002, 41 percent of passenger attendants were directly hired by airlines and earned the inflation adjusted equivalent of \$15.52 an hour whereas the remaining 59 percent of those workers were contracted and earned the equivalent of \$13.06.^{lxv} In 2019, 98 percent of passenger attendants were contracted and earned an average of \$12.44 an hour.^{lxvi}

The dynamic is clear. Wages of outsourced workers decrease as airlines do more outsourcing. But wage suppression by airlines also appears to impact *some* workers directly employed by the airlines, people working in the professions the airlines have targeted for outsourcing. The wages for directly employed janitors, for example, fell by nearly 30 percent during the 2002-2019 period.^{lxvii} How did airlines treat people working in professions where outsourcing is not prevalent? Over this same period, airlines actually *increased* compensation for direct airline employees overall by approximately 35 percent.^{lxviii}

Recent data appears to show an acceleration of outsourcing. In January, 2018, the proportion of outsourced workers stood at 30.6 percent.^{lxix} In January, 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, that proportion stood at 32.06 percent.^{lxx} By June, the proportion peaked at 32.85 percent before trending slightly downwards in July and August to 32.73 percent and 32.52 percent respectively.^{lxxi} The proportion of workers outsourced grew faster between April and May than at any other time since at least 1991.^{lxxii}

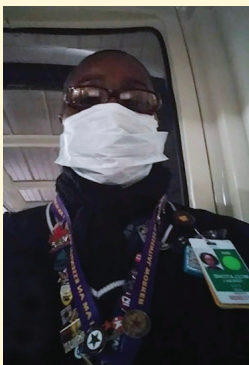
% of Outsourced Workers Appears to Be Increasing with Pandemic



Source for chart^{lxiii}

The result of irresponsible outsourcing practices is low-wage, part-time, no-benefit working conditions that give workers no incentive to stay on the job. This leads to high turnover, which threatens public safety through loss of trained, experienced staff, leaving behind inexperienced workers, unfamiliar with the worksite.^{lxiv} What Dr. Michael Goodboe, then of the Wackenhut Training Institute, says about the security industry applies equally to airports:

Paying low wages that lead to high turnover is penny wise and pound foolish....But what's worse is that high turnover is inherently dangerous in an industry charged with the security and safety of human beings. Clearly, when employees don't stay long enough to become proficient at the job, overall performance suffers.^{lxv}



"There's a lack of enforcement about people wearing masks in the airport and there are no set guidelines or clear trainings for workers to stay safe. Every day when I go to work I do what I can on my own to stay safe—everything from hand washing to tea to pills to prayer—but there's a lot more companies could do. As an escalator guard, I've noticed they do not clean the escalator rails at all which is a health hazard to everyone that uses them. We should be social distancing in the clock-in area, we should be taking everybody's temperature, no exceptions, and we should have more PPE."

Teresa McClatchie

Escalator guard, Houston's Bush Intercontinental Airport

High turnover characterizes many airport service occupations. A 2011 GAO report suggests roughly 21 percent aggregate turnover nationally for all airport workers – both directly employed by airports and airlines and by their contractors.^{bxxvi} Although there does not appear to be any reliable national-level data on turnover specifically among contractors’ employees, reports from individual airports have found turnover rates among subcontracted employees to far exceed the aggregate national number:

- **Seattle-Tacoma International Airport:** A 2014 staff memo reported airport service worker turnover varying from 25 percent to more than 80 percent.^{bxxvii} The Port of Seattle indicated the risk turnover poses: “Newer workers are almost twice as likely to be cited for security violations as more experienced workers” with a year on the job.^{bxxviii} The report identified the primary drivers of turnover as “job quality” (wages, physically demanding work, family-unfriendly work schedules, uncertainty and inconsistency in hours worked) and “limited career opportunities.”^{bxxix}
- **Portland International Airport:** According to an analysis of 2017 Portland International Airport security badge data released by the Port of Portland, the annual turnover rate for a number of airline service providers ranged from 59.3 to 142.8 percent, in contrast with turnover rates of 8.5 and 23.6 percent for the airport’s major airlines.^{bxxx}

Conclusion:

Elected officials must take action

In March 2020, Congress passed the CARES Act to help the country through the pandemic, with Congress explicitly designating the airline industry as a “severely distressed sector” in need of its own massive public financial relief package.^{bxxxi} That relief package included \$50 billion dollars in aid—including payroll support payments, loans, and loan guarantees—to major airlines such as American, Delta, United, Southwest, Alaska, and JetBlue.^{bxxxi} In offering massive financial support for the aviation sector, Congress recognized the public’s interest in keeping the aviation sector viable. In accepting support, airlines tacitly agreed their operations have public implications. But public money confers public responsibility. In other words, the taxpaying public should get a return on their investment—an air travel system that is safe for both workers and passengers.

As we have seen, however, the disorderly, fragmented, low-standard aviation services system currently in place at our nation’s airport has failed to address the threat of infectious disease on its own. That’s why airport workers—69 percent of whom, according to our survey, come from Black and brown communities ravaged by COVID-19^{bxxxi}—are calling on elected officials at the federal, state, and local levels to take action to respond to COVID-19, mitigate or prevent all future pandemics, and fully restore consumer confidence in the sector. Airports, the world’s daily gathering places, should be a place where we can stop future pandemics before they start.

Policy solutions won’t be easy or simple, but Covid has shown us that new approaches are needed urgently. The time has come to reimagine the aviation industry.



To get to the planes we ride in a van together with 7-8 people. In the van, it's not possible to physically distance, there's no enforcement of the mask policy, and some people don't wear masks. Breakrooms are another risk. We used to only have one breakroom, where 20 or 30 people would be at a time. Acting through our union we got a second breakroom but we still need another to keep us safer. Personally, I wear my mask. When I go home, I change clothes, leave my shoes outside, and disinfect myself. Still, I've known about eight airport workers who've gotten the virus and it doesn't feel safe. But we don't have a choice. We need money to pay our bills. This virus kills people. It's not a joke. We need the companies to care about the workers, to see us as humans, and to respect us.

Selam Andarge

Cabin cleaner, Seattle-Tacoma International Airport

At the federal level, elected officials should consider questions such as:

- Is it time to reform the Airline Deregulation Act? How does the Act block progress on improving service, safety and security at our nation's airports?
- What are alternatives to the current failing system to better provide critical frontline service, safety, and security functions at our airports? Are there more effective systems in other parts of the world?
- Congress' watchdog agency, the U.S. General Accountability Office, has repeatedly identified the lack of a comprehensive federal plan for the airline industry with regard to communicable diseases. What legislation or other intervention is needed to compel the creation of a comprehensive, enforceable plan?

At the state level, elected officials should consider questions such as:

- Are there existing state preemption policies that prevent efforts by airports to improve standards for passengers and workers?
- Given the important gaps in the airline industry exposed by COVID, what state legislation might be appropriate to mandate statewide health and safety or training standards at airports?

At the local level, elected officials should consider questions such as:

- What steps can airports take to prevent the harm caused by airline subcontracting?

- Are there opportunities – such as lease agreements and licensing requirements – for airports to impose higher standards on airlines and their subcontractors, or possibly taking a direct role providing passenger services?

For the sake of the health of airport workers, the traveling public, and the country at large, elected officials must address current problems and do everything they can to prevent the spread of infectious disease at America's portion of the world's daily gathering points, our nation's airports.

This report was produced by Airport Workers United, an initiative of the Service Employees International Union. Since our movement began in 1999, nearly 155,000 airport workers have won raises and other improvements and 32,000 airport workers have won a union with SEIU at 37 airports throughout the country.

Endnotes:

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- xvi SEIU Survey of Airport Workers, July – September 2020
- xvii SEIU Survey of Airport Workers, July – September 2020
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- xix SEIU Survey of Airport Workers, July – September 2020
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