

FEAR OF FLYING? NOT ACCORDING TO THE FACTS

(Updating *Backgrounder* No. 545, "What Deregulation Has Meant to Airline Safety," November 12, 1986.)

The rash of closely averted airline accidents over the past few months, together with the tragic August crash of Northwest Airlines flight 255 in Detroit, has heightened public concern over airline safety. This anxiety is understandable. But it obscures the fact that the United States air travel system is now safer than ever. Of course, policymakers should continue to work to make air travel even safer. New air traffic rules proposed this summer by the Department of Transportation, and contained in legislation pending in Congress, could help do this by reducing the danger of mid-air collisions. Such carefully focused rules, rather than a sledgehammer assault on airline deregulation, is what will improve the safety of the system.

As the following table indicates, there have been significantly fewer accidents, and a much lower accident rate, for air travel in the eight years since passage of the 1978 Airline Deregulation Act than during the eight years before. From 1971 to 1978, there were 1,766 U.S. commercial aviation accidents. In the eight years following, there were 1,579 accidents, a drop of 10.6 percent. Relative to the amount of air traffic, this change is even more dramatic. From 1971 to 1978, there were 2.34 accidents per 100,000 flight hours; from 1979 through 1986, this rate was only 1.65--almost 30 percent lower.

Improving Safety Record. The safety record has been even better over the last two years, despite the impression created by sensationalist media reports. Last year, commercial aviation experienced only 1.14 accidents and only 0.25 fatal accidents per 100,000 flight hours. Through August 31 of this year, the latest date for which records are available, the accident rate was lower--just 0.99 accidents per 100,000 flight hours.

The record is even better for major commercial air carriers. Last year there was only one fatal accident, with three fatalities, for all major U.S. scheduled airlines. And until the August Detroit accident, there had been just one accident, and four fatalities, among the major airlines for this year. In fact, in the two years

COMMERCIAL AVIATION SAFETY RECORD BEFORE AND AFTER DEREGULATION

	1971-1978	1979-1986	% Change
Total Accidents	1,766	1,579	-10.6
Fatal Accidents	387	345	-10.9
Total Fatalities	3,083	1,944	-36.9
Total Accident Rate	2.34	1.65	-29.5
Fatal Accident Rate	0.51	0.36	-29.4
Fatality Rate	4.09	2.08	-49.1

Accidents rates calculated in accidents per 100,000 flight hours.

Source: Office of Aviation Safety, Federal Aviation Administration.

from August 1985 to this August, there were no major air disasters involving a U.S. scheduled airline--the longest such period of safe flight in U.S. aviation history.¹

Of course, safety was improving even before deregulation. Yet, as several recent studies indicate, this long-term trend has not slowed since deregulation.²

Dangerous Highways. Deregulation, moreover, may have saved lives in an unexpected way. By reducing the cost of flying, deregulation has made it possible for millions of Americans to travel by air rather than by automobile, a far more dangerous mode of transportation than airplanes. Richard McKenzie of Clemson University and William Shughart of George Mason University estimate that over 35 lives are saved for every billion passenger miles travelled by air instead of car.³ It has been estimated that deregulation has increased the number of airline passenger miles travelled by about 16 percent, or over 58 billion additional passenger miles in 1986.⁴ Even if only 10 percent of this had been undertaken by car, more than 200 lives would have been saved in 1986 because of deregulation.

Despite aviation's excellent safety record, one area of understandable concern is the growth in the number of mid-air near misses. The first nine months of this

1. The U.S. safety record includes flights by U.S. airlines anywhere in the world. From 1982 to 1985, a similar U.S. record of safety was interrupted only by the crash of an Eastern Airlines Boeing 727 in Bolivia.

2. See Nancy L. Rose, *Financial Influences on Airline Safety*, paper prepared for the Northwestern University Transportation Center Conference on Deregulation and Transportation Safety, June 23-25, 1987, and Richard B. McKenzie and William F. Shughart II, *Deregulation's Impact on Air Safety: Separating Fact From Fiction*, Center for the Study of American Business Working Paper, August 1987, p. 14.

3. *Ibid.*

4. See studies cited in James Gattuso, "A Proposal To Untangle America's Air Travel," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 600, August 27, 1987, p. 4.