



Disruptive behaviour on board UK aircraft: April 2004 - March 2005

Background

1. UK airlines have since April 1999 reported disruptive behaviour on board aircraft to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), on a common reporting basis. The CAA has analysed the data for the year 1 April 2004 to 31 March 2005. This note summarises the outcome. At Annex A is a table comparing key data over the last four years.

Number of incidents recorded

2. There were 1486 reported incidents of disruptive behaviour in 2004/05. The CAA classifies incidents according to their actual or potential threat to flight and personal safety, taking into account consequences such as aircraft diversions. In 2004/05, 1433 significant and 53 serious incidents were reported. After adjusting for airlines that only started reporting this year, this represents a 59% increase over 2003/04.

3. Analysis of returns from individual airlines shows that there was a significant increase in reported incidents from two airlines. This suggests that there is not widespread growth in disruptive behaviour amongst air passengers, but that the greater awareness of the issue, combined with a zero-tolerance policy in dealing with disruptive passengers within the airline industry has been reflected in increased reporting of incidents by the two airlines concerned.

4. During 2004/05 no case was reported in which disruptive behaviour contributed to an aviation accident, although there was a small number of incidents where violence against cabin crew was reported. These figures continue to show that, although the number of incidents reported has increased significantly this year, "air rage" is still not a widespread phenomenon. The probability of any individual passenger being affected by an incident of disruptive behaviour is extremely low. However, there remains a low level of anti-social behaviour, which on occasions escalates into a serious incident that could pose a threat to the safety of the aircraft and/or its occupants. Cabin crew are more at risk than passengers by virtue of flying more frequently and the nature of their responsibilities.

The offenders

5. Some 80% of incidents involved male passengers, similar to previous years. The predominant age group were those in their 30s (35% of incidents). Approximately a quarter of incidents involved people travelling alone. Whereas last year 14 incidents involved groups of 10 or more, this year there were 22 incidents involving large groups.

The offences

6. The majority of cases reported could be described as general disruptiveness, with verbal abuse either to cabin crew or other passengers occurring in 39% of cases. Approximately a quarter of all cases involved passengers disobeying airline staff. Smoking restrictions and alcohol were common triggers for unruly or aggressive behaviour, while arguments between passengers often stemmed from domestic disputes, arguments over allocation of seats or the effect of reclining a seat on the person behind.

7. Alcohol was identified or suspected as being a contributory cause in 36% of all incidents. Around 29% of the alcohol related incidents involved passengers drinking their own alcohol and 28% involved passengers drinking alcohol before boarding. The data confirms that drinking prior to boarding often has a knock-on effect on behaviour on the aircraft. Smoking, or the desire to smoke, featured in 38% of incidents, 77% of which involved smoking in the toilets.

8. There were also many cases of aggressive or threatening behaviour; of repeated refusal to follow instructions and of passengers exhibiting signs of personality disorder. Violence was involved in 11% of significant incidents.

9. As in the previous year, the 53 incidents categorised by the CAA as being serious included several in which passengers acted extremely irrationally and were suspected of being under the influence of drugs. Many involved excessive consumption of alcohol and varying degrees of violent, abusive or unacceptable behaviour. There were also a number of incidents where passengers interfered with smoke alarms, thereby causing a fire risk whilst smoking in the toilets.

The consequences

10. In the majority of incidents a warning was given to the offending passenger, and the evidence from the reports suggests that the warning was effective in 40% of cases, but ineffective in 30% of cases (in the remainder, the degree of effectiveness of the warning was not reported).

11. In 22 incidents a passenger had to be physically restrained by handcuffs and/or a strap (compared to 16 in 2003/2004 and 6 in 2002/2003), and in a further 18 incidents other forms of restraint were used. There were 5 occasions on which the aircraft had to divert (similar level to the previous year) and 22 when the aircraft had to discontinue taxi or take-off procedures and return to its stand (compared to 7 in 2003/2004). There were 183 incidents reported where passengers were removed from the aircraft.

12. Since cabin crew would not necessarily know at the time of reporting an incident whether further action was taken, there are no reliable figures on how many incidents led to arrest or other police action. However, police or security attended 406 incidents involving disruptive behaviour on-board UK aircraft

during the year (over double the amount in the previous year).

The context

13. The number of recorded incidents should be seen in the context of the number of flights operated by UK carriers and the number of passengers carried. In 2004/05, these participating UK airlines operated about 900 000 flights, carrying about 112 million passengers. In this period 53 serious incidents were recorded. This means that the chance of an individual passenger boarding a flight on which a serious incident took place was around 1 in 17 000, and that only 1 in every 2.1 million passengers was the cause of a serious disruptive incident. However, the risks to which cabin crew are exposed are substantially higher than for passengers.

Department for Transport, August 2005

Annex A - Comparison of key data over 4 years

	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
Total incident reports	1055	648	696	1486
Severity				
Serious	52	35	28	53
Significant	528	613	668	1433
Other	475	-	-	
Context				
Number of flights per serious incident	18 000	27 000	24 000	17 000
Millions of passengers carried per serious incident	1.8	2.7	2.9	2.1
Incident details				
Violence involved	101	90	106	183
Violence towards crew	49	48	46	79
Contributory factors				
Alcohol involved	472 (45%)	271 (42%)	290 (42%)	530 (36%)
Alcohol - pre-boarding	198	121	85	151
Alcohol - airline	92	63	66	95
Alcohol - own	182	88	85	154
Smoking involved	385 (36%)	260 (40%)	275 (40%)	562 (38%)
Smoking in toilet	306	221	226	430

Changes to the reporting scheme

From 1 June 2002 airlines reported only those incidents which were likely to be categorised subsequently by the CAA as being "serious" or "significant". This was to minimise the burden on airlines, to focus attention on those incidents which pose actual or potential risks to crew and passengers and to ensure consistency in reporting. The exclusion of "other" incidents from June 2001 onwards has resulted in a large reduction in the overall number of incidents reported in comparison to previous years.

The CAA also made minor changes in the criteria used to classify incidents, with the result that some incidents that may previously have been classified as "other" are now classified as "significant". This means that a comparison of the "significant" incidents with previous years may not be entirely accurate. However, the criteria for classifying "serious" incidents, which is entirely the responsibility of the CAA, did not change, and comparisons in this category are valid.