

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-475T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Each year, hundreds of millions of passengers rely on airlines to get them to their destination without incident—including some of the 57 million Americans with a disability. While airlines maintain their performance and service have improved, passengers may still experience a range of inconveniences.

A number of consumer protections are in place at the federal level. These protections have addressed long tarmac delays and increased compensation for passengers who are involuntarily denied boarding. Some protections are specific to passengers with disabilities, requiring that airlines provide (1) help enplaning and deplaning, and (2) compensation for lost or damaged wheelchairs. DOT enforces these protections.

This statement discusses (1) DOT's data on airline operational performance from 2008 through 2017, and (2) what is known about passenger complaints and airlines' practices related to accessibility and non-discrimination issues. This statement is based on six prior GAO reports issued in the past 3 years. For that work, GAO analyzed relevant DOT data and passenger complaints; reviewed DOT documents and regulations; and interviewed DOT officials and representatives from selected airlines and consumer advocate organizations. For this statement, GAO updated prior analyses on passenger complaints for accessibility and discrimination issues and reviewed recent DOT rulemakings.

View [GAO-20-475T](#). For more information, contact Andrew Von Ah at (202) 512-2834 or vonaha@gao.gov.

March 3, 2020

AIRLINE CONSUMER PROTECTIONS

Information on the Passenger Experience

What GAO Found

The Department of Transportation's (DOT) data show that airlines' operational performance—as measured by rates of denied boardings, mishandled baggage, and flight delays—generally improved from 2008 through 2017, the latest available data at the time of GAO's review. Nevertheless, in 2018, GAO found that passenger complaints to DOT across all complaint categories increased about 10 percent from 2008 through 2017 for 12 airlines that GAO selected for review. Complaints about airlines' operational performance accounted for around 50 percent of the total.

Passenger disability complaints submitted to airlines—which vastly outnumber such complaints submitted directly to DOT—have steadily increased since 2011. Unlike all other categories of passenger complaints, airlines are required to annually report the number of disability-related complaints they receive to DOT. Passenger disability complaints submitted directly to DOT also increased in 2019, accounting for the second highest level in the past 10 years. Complaints to airlines and DOT in 2017—the most recent year data were available—were most commonly about failure of airline staff to provide assistance, seating accommodation issues, and issues related to service animals. Passenger complaints submitted to DOT related to discrimination also rose in 2019, with 96 complaints filed. From 2010 through 2019, DOT received, on average, 80 complaints a year from passengers alleging discrimination, most commonly about racial discrimination.

Disability Complaints Reported to U.S. Airlines and the Department of Transportation (DOT) by Passengers, 2010 through 2019

Year	Disability complaints to U.S. airlines	Disability complaints to DOT
2010	19,347	572
2011	18,953	628
2012	20,584	741
2013	21,965	683
2014	24,044	784
2015	26,401	944
2016	27,842	865
2017	29,662	840
2018	Not available	826
2019	Not available	904

Source: GAO presentation of DOT data. | [GAO-20-475T](#)

DOT requires that airlines provide training on accessibility issues and encourages non-discrimination training for its staff. In 2017, GAO found that 12 selected airlines had accessibility-related training requirements for their staff and contractors, with some variations in the content and format. In 2019, GAO reported that representatives from six selected U.S. airlines provide non-discrimination training to employees, although not all contractor staff receive that training. Airlines have taken initial actions in other areas. More recently, in 2020, GAO found that only about 4.5 percent of the eight largest U.S. airlines' fleet of aircraft with single aisles were designed to accommodate airplane onboard wheelchairs.