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INSIGHT

COVID-19 and Passenger Airline Travel

March 20, 2020

The COVID-19 global pandemic presents particular risks and challenges to commercial passenger airline travel. Taking a passenger flight involves numerous interpersonal interactions, transiting through often crowded airport terminals, and sitting in close proximity to others for extended periods, both onboard aircraft and at airport gates. These activities may increase the probability of exposure to infectious disease.

Curtailing infectious disease spread through airline travel is challenging, in part because the passenger airline system in the United States is highly concentrated around 30 large hub airports, with tens of thousands of passengers passing through each of these airports every day. In early March 2019, a year before the COVID-19 outbreak, about 2.25 million passengers passed through screening checkpoints across the United States on a daily basis. Passenger activity for early March 2020 appeared to be only slightly lower, averaging just under 2 million daily passengers. However, as travel restrictions and warnings in response to COVID-19 have been issued, passenger volumes at Transportation Security Administration (TSA) checkpoints decreased to less than 1 million daily passengers by mid-March 2020. This travel reduction has had considerable economic impact, and questions remain as to whether adequate steps are being taken to reduce the potential spread of COVID-19 through passenger airline travel.

International Travel

The federal response to address COVID-19 spread through passenger airline travel has focused on risk-based health screening of inbound international passengers and restrictions placed on certain international arrivals. On January 31, 2020, President Trump suspended travel from China. International travel restrictions have since expanded to include travelers from Iran, the European Schengen area, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. Travelers returning home to the United States from these areas must enter the country through one of 13 designated entry airports for enhanced screening and are instructed to stay at home for 14 days thereafter and monitor their health for COVID-19 symptoms. On March 19, 2020, the U.S. Department of State issued a global health advisory urging U.S. citizens to avoid all international travel, noting that many airlines have canceled international flights in response to COVID-19 creating disruptions that could prevent travelers from returning to the United States for an undetermined time frame.

Congressional Research Service
https://crsreports.congress.gov
IN11265

Domestic Flights

Efforts to restrict domestic air travel have largely been voluntary. The President's Coronavirus Guidelines for America advise individuals to avoid discretionary travel. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has noted that "[c]rowded travel settings, like airports, may increase chances of getting COVID-19, if there are other travelers with coronavirus infection." Individual travelers weigh their options for canceling or delaying a trip depending on their unique circumstances.

Restrictions have been put in place at some airports to limit access. For example, access to the terminal at Baltimore-Washington Thurgood Marshall International Airport (BWI) has been restricted to ticketed passengers and airport workers.

Screening Checkpoints

TSA has eased some travel rules, allowing passengers to bring up to 12 ounces of liquid hand sanitizer though screening checkpoints and wear masks during the screening process. It is instructing passengers to keep personal items such as wallets, keys, and cell phones inside carry-on bags rather than placing them in plastic bins. TSA is also allowing passengers to use expired driver's licenses as identification since some state motor vehicle agencies are now closed due to COVID-19. TSA has instructed its workers to increase cleaning of screening checkpoints, but in 2020 it reportedly eliminated federal funding for checkpoint cleaning services, leaving airports to shoulder the cost. Security screeners must wear gloves when swabbing or patting down passengers, and passengers may request that screeners put on new gloves. TSA reportedly is providing surgical masks to screeners, but wearing them is optional. The TSA screeners' union has asked TSA to provide N95 masks that are currently in short supply.

Aviation Workforce Infections and Absenteeism

In addition to passengers, airports and airlines employ large numbers of individuals who work at and transit through airports and interact with passengers. In theory, these individuals could be infected and spread or become infected by COVID-19 while at airports or aboard aircraft. Moreover, the aviation system itself could be significantly impacted by COVID-19 if high levels of absenteeism in the sector's safety-critical workforce result or if key facilities and infrastructure become temporarily unavailable subsequent to possible COVID-19 contamination. In March 2020, for example, the Federal Aviation Administration closed air traffic control towers for disinfecting after a controller at Las Vegas McCarran International Airport, three technicians at Chicago Midway airport, and a worker at New York Kennedy International Airport reportedly tested positive for COVID-19. While these airports remained open to air traffic, albeit with reduced capacity, several flights were canceled. More widespread disruptions could occur if larger facilities, like en route centers or terminal radar approach control facilities, are affected.

Impacts to the security screening workforce could also affect passenger airline operations. A few TSA screeners have tested positive for the virus. It has also been reported that hundreds of TSA screeners are opting to stay home under a more relaxed policy regarding paid "safety leave." TSA has closed several checkpoints in response to decreased passenger demand, but may need to alter checkpoint availability depending on staffing levels. TSA already faced concerns regarding screener attrition prior to COVID-19. Further attrition coupled with a recently implemented freeze on hiring and overtime pay could leave the agency short-staffed in some locations should the COVID-19 outbreak abate and airline passenger demand pick back up.

Sudden reductions in passenger demand are causing numerous flight cancellations and could lead to furloughs and layoffs at airlines that collectively employed almost 750,000 people as of January 2020. Virus-related absenteeism among airline employees, particularly pilots, flight

attendants, and ground handlers, could complicate airlines' efforts to maintain reduced flight schedules.

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