

# DSC 640 David Berberena Milestone 3

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## The Data-Backed Truth Behind Airline Safety



The media's desire to publish provocative news to elicit widespread buzz concerning hot-button issues for the sake of "informing the public" has inflated to an unparalleled level. Fact-checking has become more popular than ever due to the media's affinity for potentially flagrant storytelling as many industries have been the target of discrediting information. There comes a time when news networks need to look at the data surrounding the allegations they make before publishing derogatory and potentially defaming "news." The airline industry has been the latest sector to be scrutinized by the media, with claims being made that the airline industry is no longer safe and that flying on an airplane is dangerous. Images have been thrown around and recent incidents have been blown up to aid in the media's declaration, yet the propensity to believe the first thing one sees or hears is exactly what the news companies bank on for a higher bottom line. In reality, the airline industry has been ever-evolving in many aspects of business, with safety being at the forefront of technological advancement. So let's dive into what the real data says from some of the most credible airline industry databases.

The airline industry has been in existence for almost a hundred years and with the passing of time, it is assumed that airlines would have fewer incidents over time provided they incorporate the aforementioned technological advancements. The chart below outlines data from the Aviation Safety Network and compares the number of incidents from 1985 to 1999 and those from 2000 to 2014 for many major airlines.

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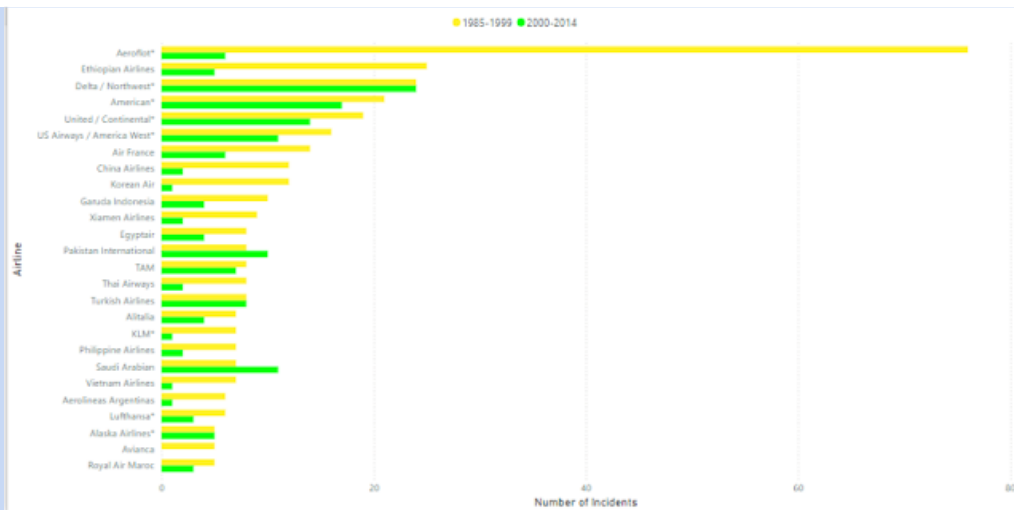
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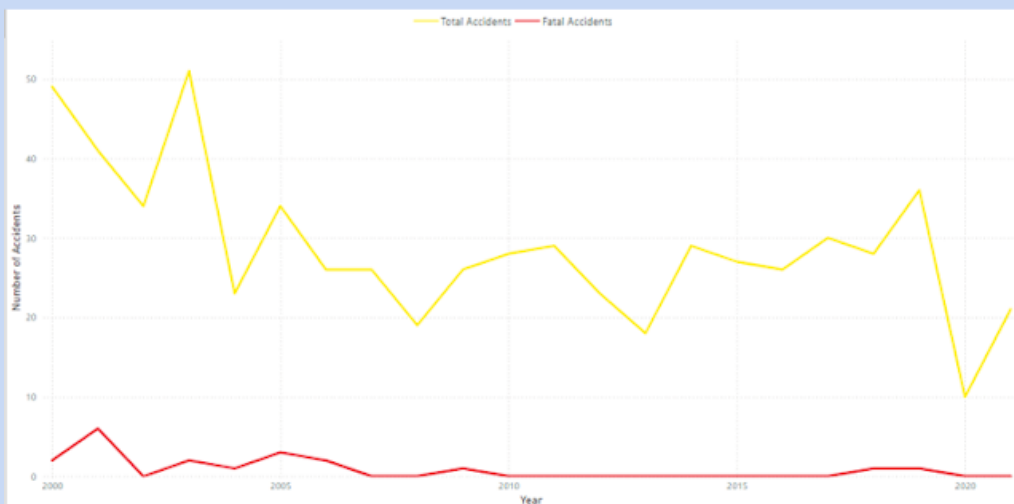
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It is clear to see that most of the airlines shown have made significant progress in reducing the number of safety incidents apparent in the late 20th century. International airlines such as Aeroflot and Ethiopian Airlines have made significant strides, contrary to the belief that U.S.-based airlines are better positioned to minimize incidents over foreign airlines (according to the media). The highest number of incidents in the 2000-2014 period belongs to Delta, one of the most popular domestic airlines, yet even with this seemingly negative label, the incidents per year average out to less than two. Stacking this against Aeroflot's staggering 70+ incidents from 1985 to 1999, the data shares a massive decline in airline incidents.

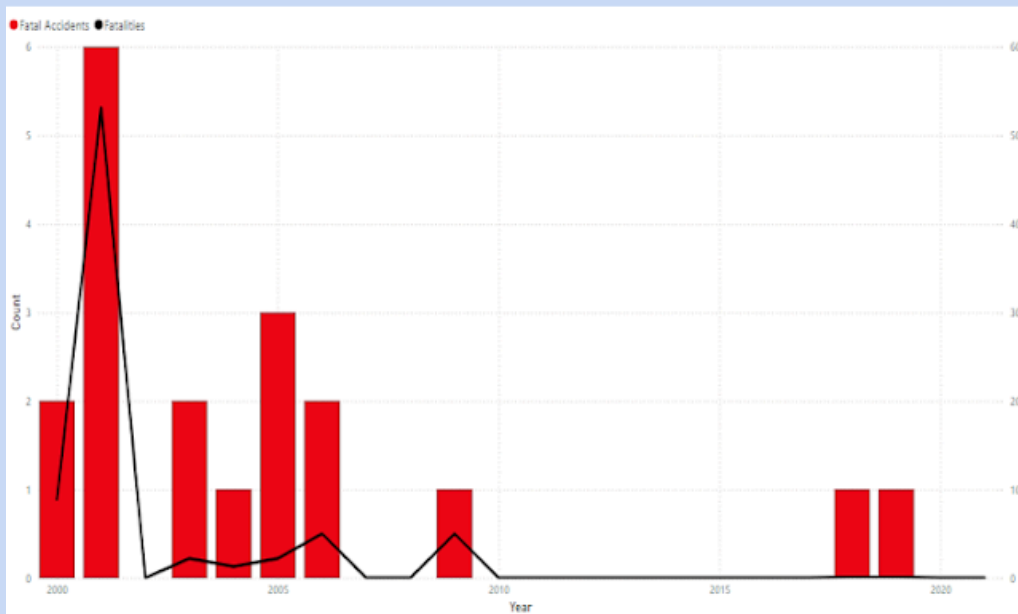
Airlines for America is another credible airline safety database containing accident data across the domestic airline industry. This database provides more recent data dating back from 2000 to the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. Now the media has perpetuated that COVID-19 took the airline industry by surprise as it fumbled to implement new safety measures to protect its customers, causing widespread panic and inevitably leading to increased fatal accidents. While that may sound like a convincing argument, viewing the data once again tells a different story. The visualization below describes the relationship between total airline industry accidents and those considered to be fatal accidents.



From 2000 to 2021, both the total number of airline accidents and fatal accidents are trending downward, with total accidents decreasing in number at a much faster rate. Looking at the chart, the total accidents for 2021 (the height of COVID-19) were over forty percent less

than in 2019 before COVID-19 reared its head. Fatal accidents did not occur during the surge of the pandemic either, laying to rest any more accusations from the media that the airline industry fumbled safety measures from a flight perspective and that flying on an airplane is more dangerous because of recent events such as the pandemic.

With the decreased number of global airline incidents, domestic airline accidents, and U.S. fatal airline accidents over time being proven by the data, the media may still clutch onto its one ray of hope to discredit the airline industry and stay relevant in its deteriorating argument: the number of casualties suffered by airline accidents. With international concern caused by major events like Malaysia Flight 17 and more recent domestic causes like the pandemic, the media has built a portfolio that reveals death across the airline industry. Airlines for America will again have its data shown as it looks at total domestic airline fatalities over the same twenty-one-year span. The dual-axis bar and line chart that follows highlights the comparison between U.S. airline fatal accidents and total fatalities.



The first half of the 2000s was one of the deadliest in the history of the American airline industry due to the events of 9/11 and American Airlines Flight 587 as shown by the peak year of both fatal accidents and fatalities being 2001. The industry was quick to adopt, implement, and enforce new safety measures as seen by the steep drop in both fatal accidents and fatalities approaching the 2010s. This application of more stringent safety standards led the U.S. airline industry to realize an entire decade with only two fatal accidents and almost zero fatalities, even with COVID-19 making itself known.

While the media begs to differ with the facts, the airline industry was considered to be one of the forerunners for pandemic safety precautions as airplanes were quickly deemed to be hosts of superspreader events by medical authorities. With swift responses to unprecedented change, the airline industry has proven itself to be one of the safest industries to travel with, and the data supports this while effectively debunking the media's stance on airline safety.

## References

1. Silver, N. (2014, July 18). Should Travelers Avoid Flying Airlines That Have Had Crashes in the Past? FiveThirtyEight. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/should-travelers-avoid-flying-airlines-that-have-had-crashes-in-the-past/>
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3. Boice, J. (2022, December 16). Airline-safety.Csv. Fivethirtyeight. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://github.com/fivethirtyeight/data/blob/master/airline-safety/airline-safety.csv>

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