

DSC 640 Project

Friday, January 31, 2020

Travel by Air Still Safer Than Car

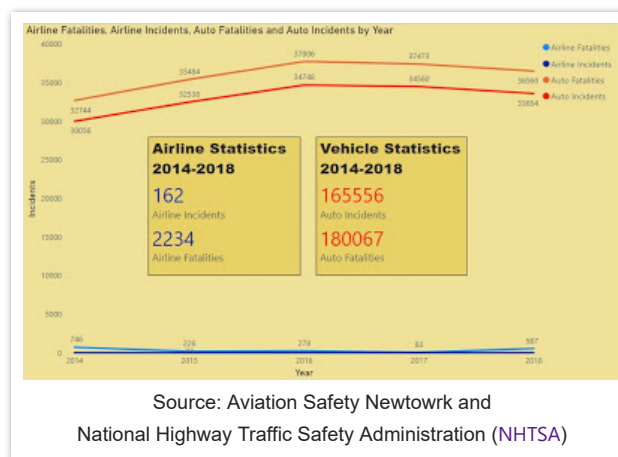
by Christine Hathaway

Recently, there has been a lot of talk that air travel is no longer safe. For years, we have believed that travel by plane was much safer than by automobile, but is this still the case?

The media would certainly like us to think so. They show charts and graphs depicting recent airline safety trends, and they are not good. So what is really behind these numbers? Are there indeed more crashes? And if so, what is the reason? Are airplanes no longer as safe as they used to be, or could there be other reasons behind the numbers? Could it be that more and more people are flying? Are some airlines safer than others? Would you be better off packing up the family in the old station wagon and driving to your favorite vacation spot this summer? Let's take a look at some of the numbers and see what is really going on.

Unfortunately, accidents happen. They shouldn't, but they do. They happen in the air as well as the ground. So let's look at some numbers from a five-year period, 2014 to 2018. During this time period, the

number of auto incidents was over 1,021 times as many as airline incidents (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2019). At first glance, air travel seems way safer. But wait, some of you are saying, a car accident usually involves just a few people, while an airline incident affects hundreds more. Is it possible that a smaller number of airline accidents could account for more fatalities than the auto accidents? Maybe an airplane isn't so safe after all. Let's look at the numbers again. In the same time period, auto accidents account for 80 times more fatalities than the airline accidents (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2019). Fewer incidents, fewer fatalities through the air. Seems that travel by air is still safer than by car.



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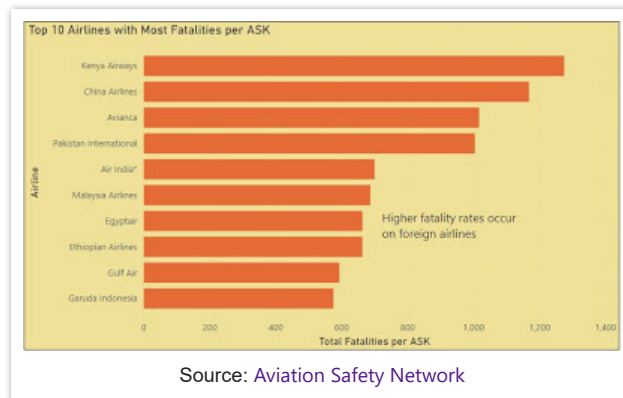
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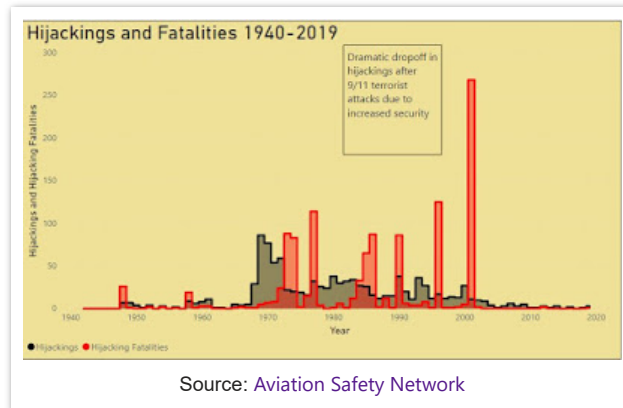
Some of you are still skeptical, perhaps it's not that autos are safer, maybe it has to do with location. Is it possible just domestic flights have become less safe? Perhaps you've seen reports that domestic flights have more accidents than foreign airlines. You may have even seen some charts or graphs showing many more incidents in domestic airlines. When looking at the raw numbers, this certainly appears to be true. But it can be misleading to compare accident and fatality numbers between airlines, because some airlines simply fly more, have more flights, and/or longer flight patterns. For example, an airline with 2 accidents that only flies twice a week has a much higher accident rate than one that has 2 accidents but flies fifty flights per day. Therefore, in order to compare smaller airlines to much larger airlines, it is important to compare statistics per ASK, or available seat kilometers flown every week.

Once the numbers are adjusted for ASK, it is easier to see that domestic flights have much lower fatalities and incidents per ASK than foreign flights. Let's look at an example.



Kenya Airways reported 2 fatal accidents and 283 fatalities throughout their history (Flight Safety Foundation, 1996-2020). However, when adjusted for ASK, it is the equivalent of 9 accidents and 1,275 fatalities per ASK. They have the highest fatalities per ASK for all airlines. In fact, once adjusted for ASK, the top 10 airlines with the most fatalities or accidents are all foreign airlines (Flight Safety Foundation, 1996-2020). Domestic flights are safer when considering ASK.

As a matter of fact, flying has become much safer since the terrorist attacks in 2001. Since that time period, hijackings, as well as hijacking fatalities, have dropped to essentially nothing. These



graphs clearly show that travel by air before and after 9/11 has changed dramatically (Flight Safety Foundation, 1996-2020). Tighter security at the airport may mean longer wait times to board the plane (Seaney, 2019), but flying really couldn't be any safer than it is today. And flying domestically is still safer than traveling by car. Go ahead and book those tickets to summer vacation, you'll be glad you did.

References

Flight Safety Foundation. (1996-2020). *Aviation Safety Network*. Retrieved from Aviation Safety Network: <https://aviation-safety.net/>

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