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Fights are still breaking out on airplanes even as pandemic restrictions loosen

There were 2,359 reports of unruly passengers through most of 2022, with 823 launched investigations, the FAA said.



Passengers wait in line at a TSA security checkpoint inside Terminal C at DFW International Airport, Wednesday, March 1, 2023. (Elías Valverde II / Staff Photographer)



By [Alexandra Skores](#)

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Dallas-Fort Worth's hometown air carriers are still breaking up fights and subduing unruly passengers nearly a year after the face mask mandate dropped, with incidents often caught on camera and posted to social media.

On Monday, a video of a fight that broke out on a [Southwest Airlines](#) flight from Dallas to Phoenix [garnered over 13,000 views on Twitter](#) of a man holding another man in a headlock. [Another video, in September, showed a man "sucker punching" an American Airlines flight attendant in the back of the head on a flight from Cabo San Lucas to Los Angeles.](#)

[In November](#), a Southwest Airlines flight traveling from Houston to Ohio made an emergency stop in Arkansas because of an unruly passenger who, authorities said, tried to open an exit door during the flight.

There have even been passengers that have gone viral for posting on social media about their flights. [An Australian political commentator who was aboard an](#)

[American Airlines flight to Dallas caused an internet stir when she “rage-tweeted” about being “wedged between two obese people.”](#)

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Dallas, TX: March 6 - Another flight, another incident. This time on a Southwest Airline, a flight from Dallas to Phoenix. A fight breaks out between two men. The tattooed man "bumped into the man in the sport jacket's wife by accident, and he started mouthing off."

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52



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As of Dec. 15, the Federal Aviation Administration published there were 2,359 reports of unruly passengers. Of that number, the FAA launched 832 investigations with 553 enforcement action cases initiated, according to FAA data. Security violations are excluded because those cases are handled by TSA.

Sharona Hoffman, professor of law and bioethics at Case Western Reserve University in Ohio said these behaviors from passengers existed well before the pandemic began, but the pandemic elevated the frequency of incidents.

In late 2020, an FAA spokesperson said, the agency saw a large surge in passenger incidents. The FAA said passengers may act out for many reasons, but many lead to physical or verbal assault of crewmembers.

Interfering with an air carrier or airport crewmember is a violation of federal law. Historically, the FAA has closed cases about unruly passengers with civil penalties, warnings, counseling or no action if there is insufficient evidence of a violation.

In 2021, the FAA implemented a zero-tolerance policy toward unruly passengers, after seeing “a disturbing increase” in unruly passengers at airports. In April 2022, the FAA made it a permanent policy. Since then, the agency has said it is not addressing cases with warning notices or counseling.

There have been unruly passenger episodes for years, but they are getting more attention now because of social media, said Keith Jeffries, a former TSA senior

executive and now vice president of K2 Security Screening Group, an aviation security firm.

“Passengers are able to record and we’re seeing it more,” Jeffries said. “It’s not uncommon. I think is just the ability for folks to pull out their camera and start recording it that gets the attention.”



He said in 2020 and 2021, [there was a wave of unruly passengers that didn’t like wearing face masks](#). Since carriers have eased up on masking requirements, that hasn’t been as much of an issue.

“People were more nervous about flying because there was some risk,” Hoffman said. “A lot of people did not want to cooperate with mask mandates. It became sort of a political statement to resist those. Some people felt encouraged and almost courageous if they actually resisted mask mandates or created problems on airplanes.”

Now that the travel industry has rebounded, planes are a lot more crowded, which can lead to some stress for travelers, Hoffman said.

“Everybody is feeling more nervous,” Hoffman said. “There’s certainly more concern when you get on an airplane than there was before.”

The FAA said alcohol does come up in many cases, but the agency’s authority only extends when passengers are interfering with crewmembers.

“People will just get a little bit too many drinks in them before they depart for their spring break adventure or are coming back from, so that’ll be a huge driver,” Jeffries said.

[Spring break is in full swing this month in Dallas-Fort Worth](#). Dallas Love Field expects an average of over 30,000 travelers per day during the weeks of spring break observed between March 6 to 10 and March 13 to 17 for most local school districts. DFW Airport expects 4.2 million passengers for spring break this year.

There’s no bulletproof plan to stop unruly passengers, Jeffries said. But he believes airports and TSA have created a very robust security process.

“Is it perfect? Absolutely not,” he said. “Because as soon as we put in another deterrent, someone else is out there trying to circumvent that deterrent that we’ve placed in whether it’s a piece of technology or a process or procedure.”



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