**Fiscal Facts: Air Travel in Wisconsin Gains Altitude, But Still Trails Pre-Pandemic Levels**

Passenger volumes on commercial flights in Wisconsin increased in 2021 after the freefall of a year earlier, but continued to trail pre-pandemic levels to a greater extent than the nation.

Milwaukee and Madison airports, which account for more than three-fourths of the state’s total air passengers, remained farther behind 2019 levels than smaller airports. This came amid a national trend in which business air travel rebounded much more slowly than leisure.

At Wisconsin’s eight airports that provide commercial air service, passenger numbers for domestic flights increased more than 78% in 2021, after they plummeted by a previously unthinkable 62% in 2020, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics. That rebound, while considerable, still left passenger levels nearly 32% lower in 2021 than in 2019 – compared to a nearly 25% decline seen nationally.

In 2021, domestic flight passenger levels at Milwaukee were 33.2% below 2019; Madison was 39.3% below. Two large airports just outside Wisconsin, Chicago-O’Hare and Minneapolis-St. Paul, also had greater declines in 2021 over 2019 compared to the rest of the country. Minneapolis-St. Paul was down 32.4%; Chicago-O’Hare was 29.1% lower.

Two Wisconsin airports that rebounded most strongly in 2021 were also two of the smallest by passenger volume: Rhinelander and Eau Claire, which were 3.6% and 15.9% below 2019 levels, respectively. The state’s third-largest airport by passenger volume, Appleton, also had a comparatively strong rebound in 2021, finishing the year down 8.3% from 2019.

Some of the shifts seen in recent months may hint at longer-term changes that could affect air travel and the travel and hospitality industry more broadly. There is considerable evidence that business air travel has been much slower to rebound from the 2020 downturn than leisure travel.

An analysis of the top destinations from Milwaukee Mitchell International Airport in 2021 found that recreational Sun Belt destinations such as South Florida, Las Vegas, and Nashville actually saw increased passengers last year relative to 2019. Meanwhile, many other destinations saw decreases.

Some projections find at least some portion of this shift could be permanent, as a greater share of business that previously required travel to conduct in-person is now done remotely. Officials at Mitchell Airport point to another factor that could hamper the swift restoration of routes lost during the pandemic or the initiation of new service: labor shortages.

Time will tell if recent trends in business travel represent long-term shifts. But even if business travel never returns fully to pre-pandemic levels, maintaining a robust network of commercial air service throughout Wisconsin will remain essential to the state’s competitiveness in a global economy.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at* [*wispolicyforum.org*](https://wispolicyforum.org/research/state-tax-burden-up-but-overall-burden-still-falling/)*.*