

Air Rage

(A) The first recorded case of an airline passenger turning seriously violent during a flight, a phenomenon now widely known as “air rage”, happened in 1947 on a flight from Havana to Miami. A drunk man assaulted another passenger and bit a flight attendant. However, the man escaped punishment because it was not then clear under whose legal control a crime committed on plane was, the country where the plane was registered or the country where the crime was committed. In 1963, at the Tokyo convention, it was decided that the laws of the country where the plane is registered take precedence.

(B) The frequency of air rage has expanded out of proportion to the growth of air travel. Until recently few statistics were gathered about air rage, but those that have been indicate that passengers are increasingly likely to cause trouble or engage in violent acts. For example, in 1998 there were 266 air rage incidents out of approximately four million passengers, a 400% increase from 1995. In the same period American Airlines showed a 200% rise. Air travel is predicted to rise by 5% internationally by 2010 leading to increased airport congestion. This, coupled with the flying public’s increased aggression, means that air rage may become a major issue in coming years.

(C) Aside from discomfort and disruption, air rage poses some very real dangers to flying. The most extreme of these is when out of control passengers enter the cockpit. This has actually happened on a number of occasions, the worst of which have resulted in the death and injury of pilots or the intruder taking control of the plane, almost resulting in crashes. In addition, berserk passengers sometimes attempt to open the emergency doors while in flight, putting the whole aircraft in danger. These are extreme examples and cases of air rage more commonly result in physical assaults on fellow passengers and crew such as throwing objects, punching, stabbing or scalding with hot coffee.

(D) The causes of air rage are not known for certain, but it is generally thought that factors include: passenger behavior and personality, the physical environment and changes in society. A recent study has identified the issues that start the incidents to be as follows.

Alcohol	25%
Seating	16%
Smoking	10%
Carry on luggage	9%
Flight attendants	8%
Food	5%

(E) One of the major causes seems to be the passenger's behaviour or their personality. Fear of flying and the feeling of powerlessness associated with flying can lead to irritable or aggressive passengers. Also, alcohol consumed on a plane pressurized to 8000ft affects the drinker more quickly and the effects are stronger. Many people do not take account of this and drinking may increase any negative reaction to the flying environment they have, which, combined with the lowering of their inhibitions, may cause air rage. Smoking withdrawal, which some liken in severity to opiate withdrawal, is another major cause of air rage incidents. Passengers caught smoking in the toilets occasionally assault flight attendants and have been known to start fires. When conflicts occur in these conditions, they can escalate into major incidents if the passenger has a violent personality or a fear of flying and because of the enclosed nature of a plane offers no option of retreat as would be natural in a "fight or flight" reaction.

(F) Some people feel that the physical environment of a plane can lead to air rage. Seats on most airlines have become smaller in recent years as airlines try to increase profits. This leads to uncomfortable and irritated passengers. Also, space for carry-on luggage is often very small. Because up to 8% of checked in luggage is lost, misdirected or stolen, passengers have been trying to fit larger carry-on items into these small storage areas and this can lead to disputes that can escalate into air rage. Airlines could also be to blame by raising passengers' expectations too high with their marketing and advertising. Many air rage incidents start when disappointed passengers demand to be re-seated. Finally, there is some evidence to show that low oxygen levels can raise aggression level and make people feel more desperate. Airlines have lowered oxygen levels to save money. Now the level of oxygen in the air that the pilots breathe is ten times higher than in cabin class.

(G) Another reason that has been suggested is that society is getting ruder and less patient. The increased congestion at airports, longer queues and increased delays have only added to this. In addition, some air rage incidents have been linked to the demanding nature of high achieving business people, who do not like people telling them what to do and resent the power that the cabin staff have over them. For them, a flight attendant is a waiter or waitress who should do what the passenger wants.

(H) The strongest calls for action to control air rage have come from pilots and aircrew. The International Transport Workers' Federation argues that there are too many loopholes that let people escape punishment and that the penalties are too light. They want to notify all passengers of the penalties for air rage before taking off, rather than after the passenger begins to cause serious problems, when it may be too late. The Civil Aviation Organisation has been organizing international cooperation and penalties have increased in recent years. The most severe punishment so far has been a 51-month jail sentence, a fine to pay for the jet fuel used and 200 hours community service for a man who attempted to enter the cockpit and to open the emergency door of a domestic US flight.

(I) Various other measures are being used to control air rage. Air crew are getting training on how to calm passengers and how to predict where incidents might result in air rage and take action to prevent this. Other measures include, strengthening doors to stop people entering the cockpit, training crew in the use of plastic restraints to tie down unruly passengers and having pilots divert their planes if passengers cause problems. Banning passengers who are guilty of air rage from flying has also been tried to a lesser extent