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Airline woes on ground climb

Carriers lost more bags, bumped more fliers and had fewer flights on time in '06, a study finds.
From the Associated Press

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WASHINGTON — More airline passengers bumped, more bags lost and fewer on-time flights. For the third straight year, those problems grew worse for the industry, according to an annual study that rates airline quality.

"They just don't get it yet," said Dean Headley, an associate professor at Wichita State University and coauthor of the study slated to be released today.

One upside, researchers said, was that the number of complaints about airlines has stabilized.

The study does not include information from recent weather-related flight delays such as the ones that left JetBlue and United Airlines planes idling for hours on taxiways.

An industry spokesman does not expect travel woes to improve any time soon.

"We're going to see more delays, and those delays translate to cancellations, mishandled bags and unhappy passengers," said David Castelveter, spokesman for the Air Transport Assn., a trade group for the major U.S. carriers. "It's not a pretty picture."

Castelveter blamed the majority of delays on bad weather. Making matters worse, he said, more planes are going to be in the air in coming years and the air traffic control system is incapable of handling the rate of growth.

Congress, he said, needs to provide more money to update the system so it can better handle the increased traffic and weather problems.

The Airline Quality Rating report, compiled annually since 1991, looked at 18 airlines and was based on Transportation Department statistics. The research is sponsored by the Aviation Institute at the University of Nebraska in Omaha and Wichita State University.

Among the study's conclusions:

- Southwest had the lowest number of complaints in 2006, at 0.18 per 100,000 passengers. United and US Airways were tied with the most complaints, 1.36.
- Hawaiian Airlines had the best on-time performance (93.8%) for 2006, followed by Frontier Airlines (80.7%) and Southwest (80.2%). Atlantic Southeast Airlines had the worst on-time performance (66%).

On time was defined as within 15 minutes of the scheduled arrival time. Canceled and diverted flights were counted as late.

The biggest disappointment came in the rate of mishandled bags, Headley said.

Last year, 6.50 bags were lost, stolen or damaged for every 1,000 passengers, compared with 6.06 in 2005. Hawaiian had the best baggage handling performance; Atlantic Southeast had the worst.

The increase in lost bags comes as at least one domestic carrier — Spirit Airlines — is planning a new fee for passengers who check their bags.

Come June, Spirit will charge \$5 each for one or two checked bags if the ticket was booked online and \$10 each for passengers who do not book online.

Although that is an attractive revenue stream for other airlines to consider, Headley does not think the idea will fly with people who long have expected that the ticket price includes a checked bag or two.

"It will set off an absolute atomic bomb," he said.

On-time performance worsened last year, with 75.5% of flights arriving on time, compared with 77.3% in 2005, the report said.

JetBlue Airways took a hit in February when passengers on 10 planes spent five hours to 10 1/2 hours sitting on runways at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York because of icy weather and gate congestion.

It took days for the airline to recover from the February storm and resume normal operations. It also led JetBlue to put in place a customer bill of rights that promises vouchers to passengers who experience delays.

Overall, complaints about the airlines last year held steady at about 0.88 of a complaint for every 100,000 passengers. Nearly half the complaints were about flight problems or baggage.

The study found an increase in the number of passengers who were bumped or denied boarding because of oversold flights — 1.01 denied boardings per 10,000 passengers last year, compared with 0.89 per 10,000 in 2005.

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