

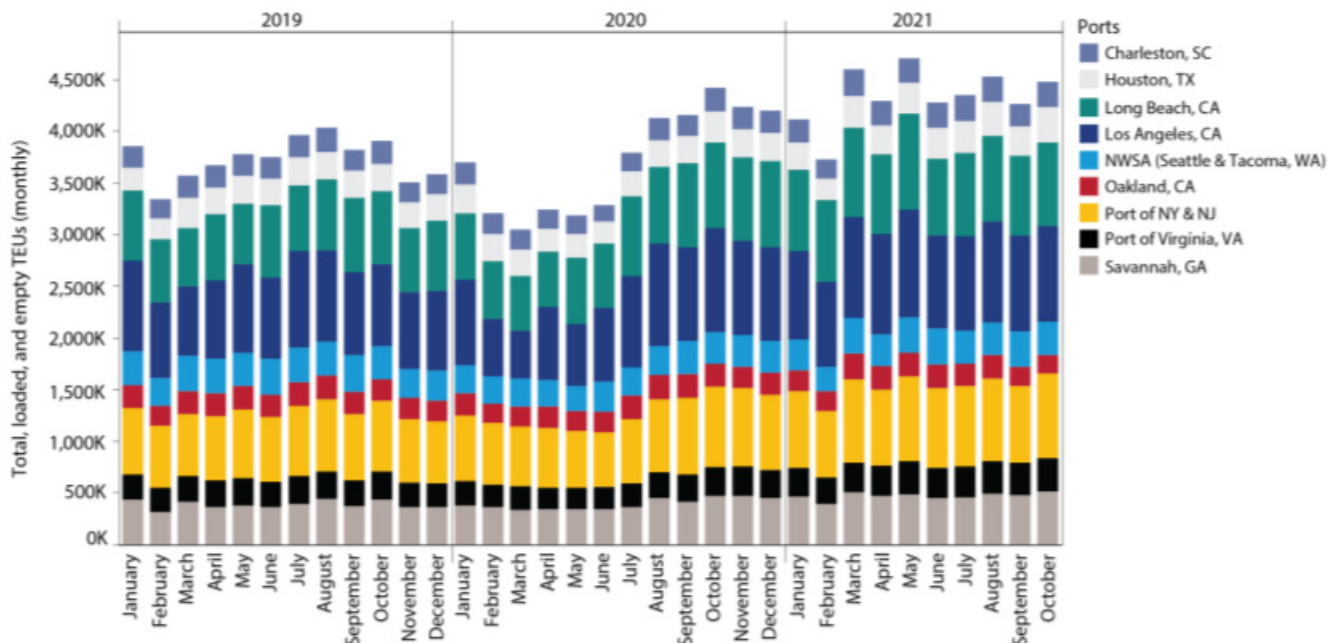
# Data Spotlight

January 24, 2022

## U.S. Ports Work Through Daunting Challenges to Deliver the Goods

With a perfect storm of existing capacity limits, rapid demand increases, and the labor shortages from initial COVID-19 pandemic reductions, [container ports are facing major challenges](#) in moving cargo. As the chart below shows, since late 2020, U.S. container ports have been successfully bringing in goods at a much stronger pace than before the pandemic.

**20-Foot Equivalent Units (TEUs) Handled by the Top 10 U.S. Container Ports:  
January 2019–September 2021**

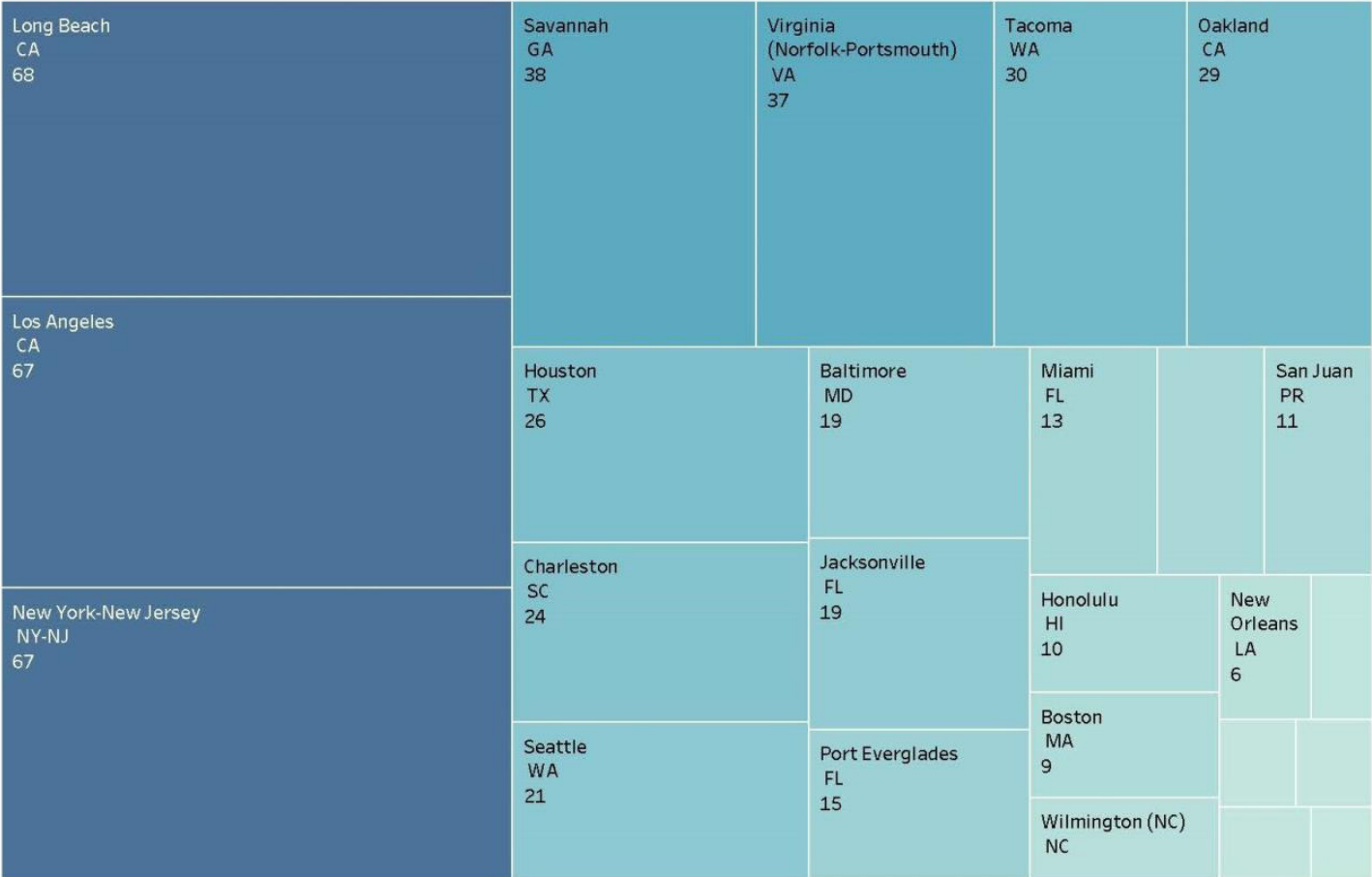


**SOURCES:** U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics analysis; based upon TEU volumes at the ports of Charleston, SC, <http://scspa.com/about/statistics/>; Houston, <https://porthouston.com/>; Long Beach, <https://www.polb.com/>; Los Angeles, <https://www.portoflosangeles.org/>; Northwest Seaport Alliance (Seattle / Tacoma), <https://www.nwseaportalliance.com/>; Oakland, <https://www.oaklandseaport.com/>; New York/New Jersey, <https://www.panynj.gov/>; Port of Virginia, <http://www.portofvirginia.com/>; and Savannah, <https://gaports.com/>; as of December 2021.

**IN OUR JUST-IN-TIME SHIPPING MODEL, PORTS OPERATE CLOSE TO CAPACITY.**

Under normal conditions, our port facilities have [capacity limits](#), determined in part by the size (acreage) of terminals, length of berths, depth of access channels, and the amount and type of cargo handling equipment (e.g., container cranes). Excess capacity means idle resources, and ports are less likely to invest in greater capacity before market indicators signal the need to expand. The chart below indicates relative container crane capacities of 25 top U.S. ports.

Number of Container Cranes at the Top 25 Container Ports: 2020



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics analysis, as of December 2021.

**DEMAND FOR GOODS BOUNCED BACK AND QUICKLY EXCEEDED PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS.**

With COVID-19, demand for goods plummeted shortly after the pandemic’s onset in March 2020, then quickly surpassed pre-pandemic levels. As the chart below shows, demand growth during the pandemic was atypically swift, if not unprecedented, beginning in the latter half of 2020.

**Index of U.S. Goods Imports (Real): January 2017–November 2021**

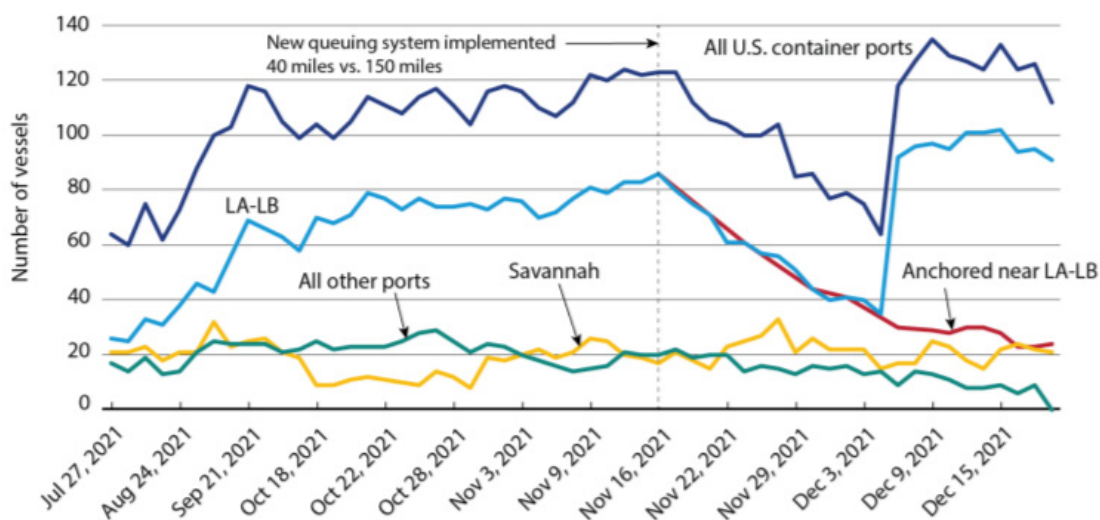


**SOURCE:** U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics index, based upon U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, *U.S. International Trade in Goods and Services*, available at <https://www.census.gov/> as of January 2021.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Although the backlog of ships at anchor outside of the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles has not disappeared, by the end of November 2021, it had started to approach a normal level. Following a brief spike in December, the backlog again began trending downward partially thanks to a new queuing system to manage the backlog. BTS will continue monitoring changes in [port capacity](#), [transportation employment](#), and [consumer demand](#) to gauge their effect on port activity.

**Weekly Containerships Awaiting Berths at all U.S. Ports: July 27, 2021–December 21, 2021**



**NOTES:** LA-LB totals (blue line) include containerships in drift/holding areas near LA-LB (red line). Data reported at more frequent intervals starting October 18, 2021.

**SOURCES:** U.S. Department of Transportation, Maritime Administration, Office of Policy and Plans; and the Marine Exchange of SoCal. Special Tabulation, as of December 2021.

Learn more about U.S. port capacity and throughput and vessel dwell times with our [Port Performance Freight Statistics](#) pages.