

Data Spotlight

December 6, 2021

Thanksgiving 2021 Air Travel was No Turkey as Sunday After Holiday Sets New Pandemic Air Travel Record

Although BTS air travel performance data (e.g., delays and cancellations) for late November is not yet available, the dominant story in the media has been about airlines being relatively well-prepared for the Thanksgiving air travel surge. And a surge it was; the Sunday after Thanksgiving was America's busiest air travel day since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

As the chart below on the right indicates, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) screened more than 20.2 million people at U.S. airports during the 10 days of Thanksgiving holiday travel from Friday, November 19 through Sunday, November 28. That's down just 11.5% from the 22.8 million screened during the 2019 Thanksgiving period. It's also more than double the 9.1 million people TSA screened in 2020.

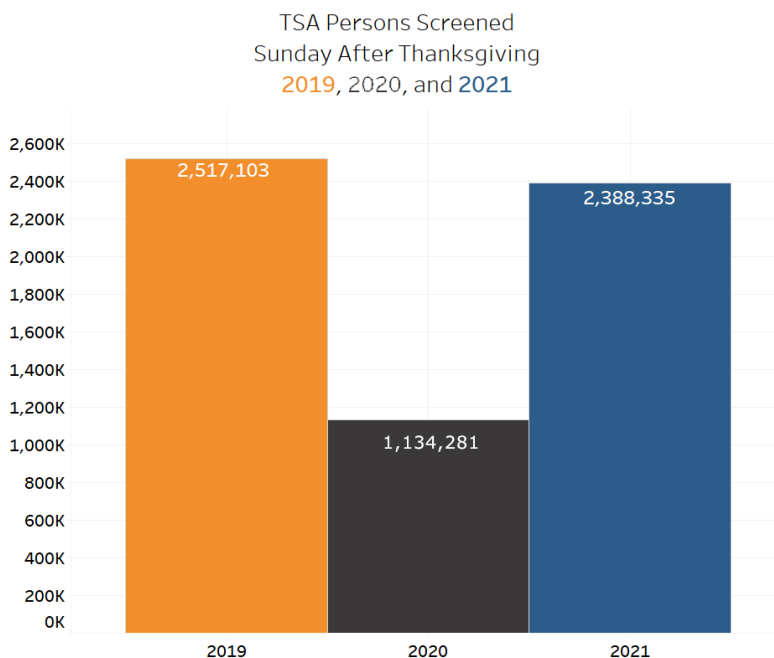


The chart above on the left shows that the nearly 233 thousand domestic flights during the holiday period were down only 7.3% from the same period in 2019. It's also an increase of 33% from 2020.

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BIG SUNDAY TRAFFIC NEARLY MATCHED 2019 LEVELS.

The single-day chart below represents the number of people screened by TSA on the Sunday after Thanksgiving in 2021 (blue), 2020 (gray), and 2019 (orange). For this one day, often the single busiest air travel day of the year, the overall holiday period percentage difference between 2021 and 2019 was cut by more than half from the 11.5% discussed above to just 5.1%.



AIRLINES BOOST FLIGHT OPERATIONS IN CRUCIAL THANKSGIVING WEEK.

The boost in airline preparation during the holiday period can be seen in the table below, which shows the 2021 percentage difference from 2019 in the number of flights operated (orange). For the first three weeks of November, airlines operated between 10% and 12% fewer flights than they had in 2019. However, for the final week, when holiday travelers were most likely to fly, they reduced that gap to 6% in expectation of the stepped-up recreational travel.

Difference from 2019 in Domestic Flights and Persons Screened November 2021, by Week

	10/31 – 11/6	11/7 – 11/13	11/14 – 11/20	11/21 – 11/27
Domestic Flights	-12%	-10%	-11%	-6%
Persons Screened	-23%	-18%	-14%	-14%

Did the increase in flights during the last full week of November help make air travel smoother for holiday passengers? We don't know, but the airlines' effort to accommodate the demand they anticipated was clear.