

Looking back at weekly aircraft movements in 2020

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The introduction of measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic hit Canada's air transportation industry harder than either the events of September 11, 2001, or the 2003 SARS outbreak.

During the week starting April 11, 2020—within four weeks of the mid-March COVID-19 restrictions being imposed, total itinerant aircraft movements (flights from one airport to another) at airports with NAV CANADA towers reached their lowest level. The 14,105 take-offs and landings that week represented a little over 25% of the weekly average reported in 2020 prior to the outbreak (i.e., before the week of March 14).

With the drop in air passenger traffic, air cargo became a mainstream business for some airlines. Prior to the pandemic, for example, goods revenue accounted for less than 10% of air carrier operating revenue, while the second quarter of 2020 saw [cargo revenue increase to 44%](#).

Canada's post-lockdown increase in itinerant movements was driven largely by the domestic sector. With air traffic normally peaking over the summer, which, in 2020, coincided with a drop in new COVID-19 cases, domestic itinerant movements (i.e., take-offs and landings) edged up steadily, reaching their highest post-COVID-19 level in the week starting August 8.

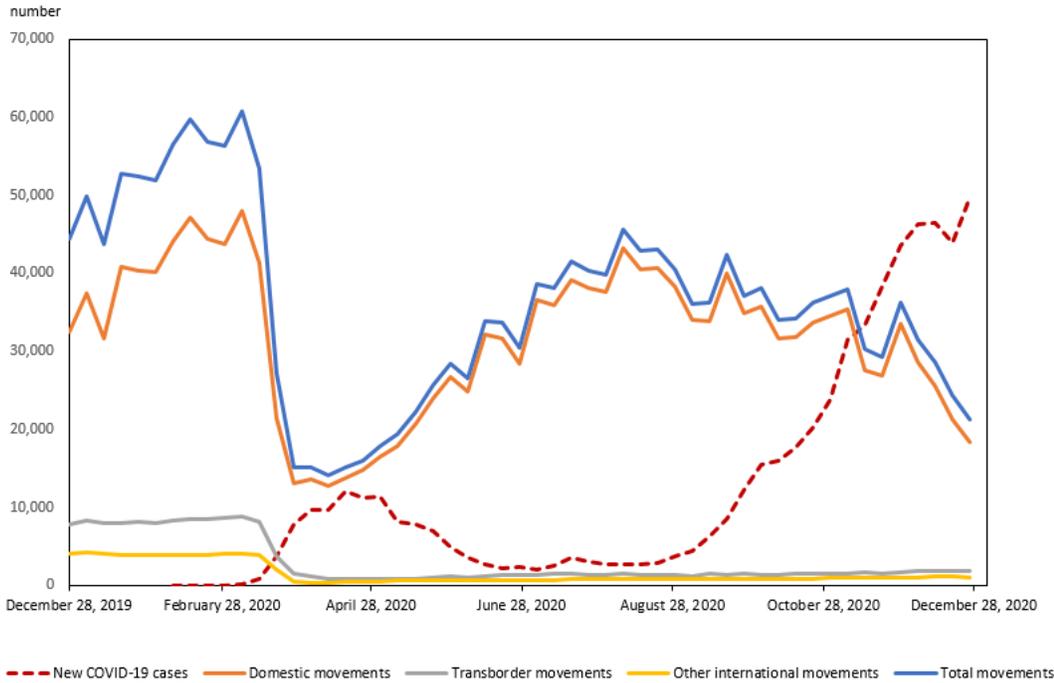
With restrictions on non-essential travel between Canada and other countries remaining in place, transborder movements were relatively flat, while other international movements fared marginally better. While these non-domestic movements accounted for almost one-quarter (23.1%) of total movements in 2020 during the weeks before mid-March, they accounted for just over 5% during the busy summer travel season.

After an average of fewer than 3,000 new COVID-19 cases per week in Canada during the summer, the resurgence of COVID-19 cases in the fall saw an average of almost 40,000 new cases per week during the last two months of the year. In response, some major airlines reduced service levels, while others further postponed re-start dates. With one exception, this resulted in 2020 closing with seven week-over-week declines in total itinerant movements.

The discovery of new strains of the virus and the pace of vaccine rollouts along with the effectiveness of restrictions imposed by governments point to more uncertainty in air travel. Weekly estimates of itinerant aircraft movements will continue to provide Canadians with timely data in order to assess the impact on activity at major Canadian airports.



Infographic 1 – Weekly itinerant aircraft movements and weekly new cases of COVID-19 in Canada



Sources: Public Health Infobase - Data on COVID-19 in Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada and Weekly Aircraft Movements (5325), table 23-10-0287-01.

Note to readers

Following the introduction of travel restrictions and with the subsequent flight cancellations, Statistics Canada has produced weekly aircraft movement estimates in order to assess the impact of this situation on Canadian airports with NAV CANADA air traffic control towers. These weekly estimates are drawn from the same data source as the Monthly Aircraft Movements program (2715), which is available two months after the reference period. Because the weekly estimates are released before the two-month period is over, there are some differences in methods and data processing. As such, the weekly estimates are not of the same quality as the monthly statistics and should be viewed as preliminary estimates only.

With each release, data for previous periods may be revised.

Infographic 1 is based on data from table 23-10-0287-01.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number 5325.

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca).