

Monthly civil aviation statistics, December 2020

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Highlights

Air travel recovery remained essentially flat in the final month of 2020 as major Canadian airlines carried 934,000 passengers on scheduled and charter services. This was down 87.0% from the same month in 2019 but up 19.7% from November, which is typical for December.

Most travel continued to be domestic as international demand remained generally weak amid border travel restrictions and enforcement of quarantines. However, compared with November international passenger volumes in December increased more than domestic volumes.

Compared with December 2019, operating revenues were down 80.6% to \$424.3 million in December 2020—wrapping up the worst year in history for Canadian airlines.

Air travel remains low in December

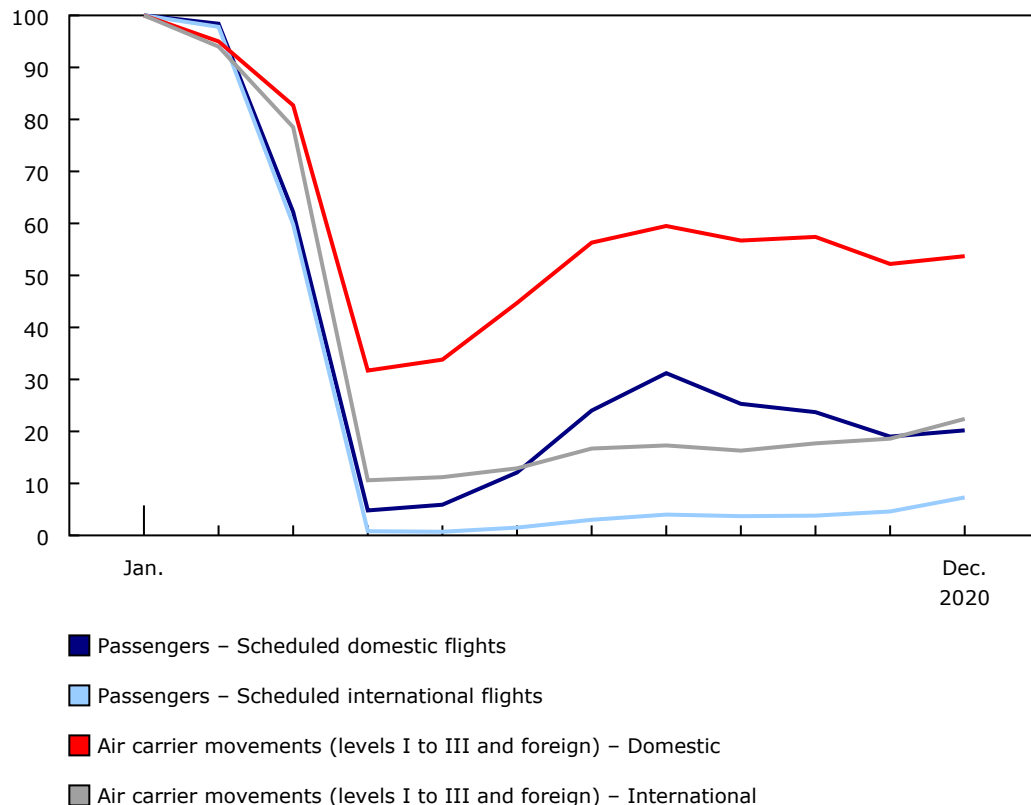
Canadian level I air carriers flew 934,000 passengers on scheduled and charter services in December, down 87.0% from the same month in 2019. This was similar to the 87.3% decrease registered in November, and marked the tenth consecutive year-over-year monthly decline—a period with the sharpest drop on record.

From November, the number of passengers rose 19.7%, which is typical for December because of the holiday period. Although they remained relatively low amid border restrictions and travel advisories, passenger numbers on international flights increased noticeably more (nearly +60%) than those on domestic flights (about +6%). Similarly, data on air carrier movements (takeoffs and landings) at major Canadian airports also indicate a larger increase in international movements than domestic movements in December.



Chart 1
Indexes of passengers carried and air carrier movements, domestic and international, January to December 2020

Index (January = 100)



Source(s): Monthly Civil Aviation Survey (5026); Aircraft Movement Statistics: Major airports (2715).

Despite an advisory against non-essential travel outside Canada and a mandatory 14-day quarantine period after returning from abroad, according to data from the release [Travel between Canada and other countries, December 2020](#), over 170,000 Canadians flew home from abroad in December, up by about one-third from November.

Air traffic fell 88.4% year over year to 2.1 billion passenger-kilometres in December, while capacity contracted 79.4% to 4.5 billion available seat-kilometres—a decline similar to that observed in the previous two months.

As a result, the passenger load factor (the ratio of passenger-kilometres to available seat-kilometres) was 47.4%—the highest level since August, but down sharply from the 83.6% recorded in December 2019.

All measures severely impacted

In December, each passenger travelled an average of 2,296 kilometres, down 10.5% from December 2019. However, on a monthly basis, December recorded the most significant uptick in average passenger distance (+256 kilometres) in 2020, as international trips rose over the holidays.

As the number of flying hours dropped 78.6% to 41,000 in December, the volume of turbo fuel consumed also declined, falling 75.7% to 162.8 million litres.

Operating revenue earned by Level I carriers totalled \$424.3 million in December, down 80.6% from \$2.2 billion the same month a year earlier.

The worst year on record

The year 2020 was disastrous for aviation in Canada and around the world as two decades of air passenger growth were wiped out in a matter of months and revenue plunged accordingly. The COVID-19 pandemic hit the Canadian airline industry harder than prior disruptions such as the events of September 11, 2001, the 2003 SARS outbreak, and the global financial crisis of 2008 and 2009.

By mid-March, the Canadian government had closed the border to most foreign travellers and announced travel restrictions that would severely inhibit the movement of passengers. This led to the sharpest decline on record in April, when Level I air carriers flew 213,000 passengers—a 97.0% drop from April 2019. As a result, many air carriers cancelled or suspended routes, while others suspended their operations altogether.

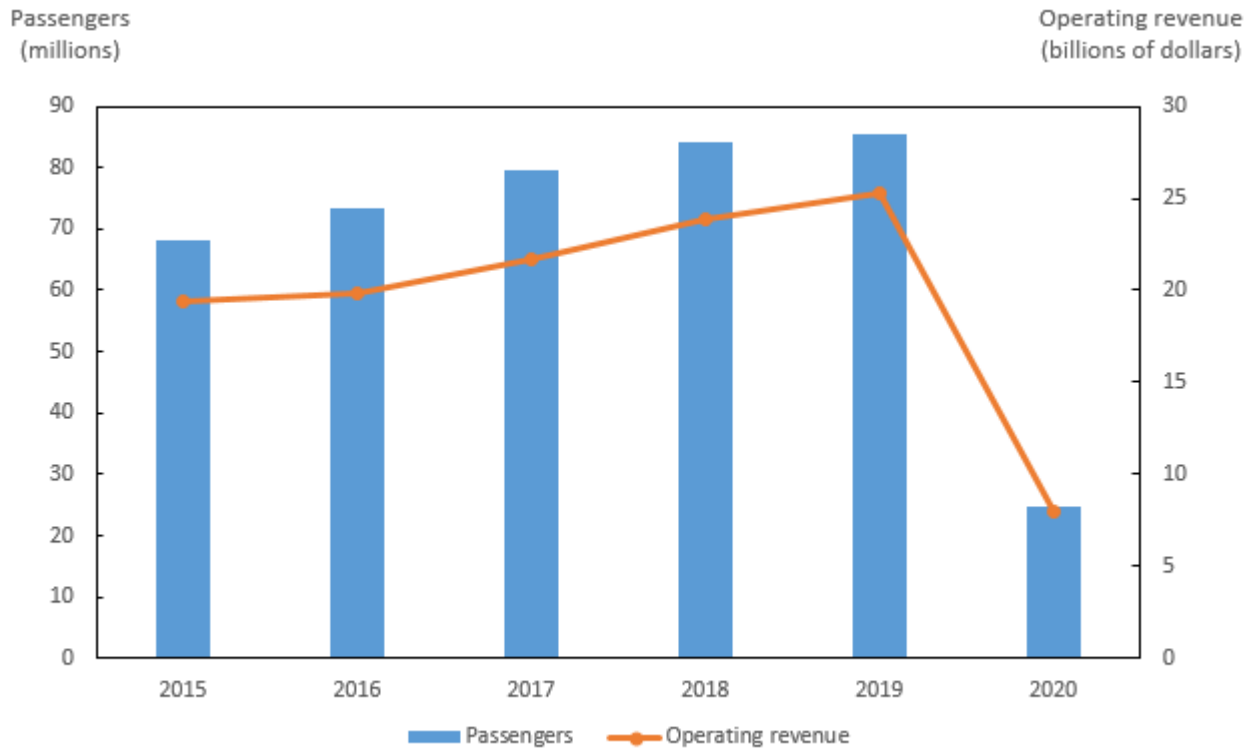
Demand for air travel increased slightly during the summer months—historically the busiest season for the Canadian airline industry. Despite modest growth in passenger volumes, the levels remained well below those reported the previous year. Domestic travel outpaced international travel, which continued to stagnate because of border restrictions and travel advisories.

The sluggish air travel recovery observed over the summer season stalled in autumn and, by the end of 2020, more severe travel restrictions were announced in the face of new outbreaks and variants of COVID-19. Although carriers continued to adjust their schedules to align with lower demand for travel, the load factor remained well below 50% to the end of 2020, down from a monthly average of over 80% in 2019.

To summarize 2020, Level I airlines carried 24.7 million passengers, down 71.0% from 2019. In fact, these carriers transported more passengers in January and February alone than in April through December combined. The first three months of the year accounted for about 75% of the total annual number of passengers. Compared with 2019, air traffic fell 73.8% year over year to 59.9 billion passenger-kilometres, while capacity dropped 66.3% to 91.3 billion available seat-kilometres. The number of flying hours in 2020 fell 64.5% to 809,000 hours.

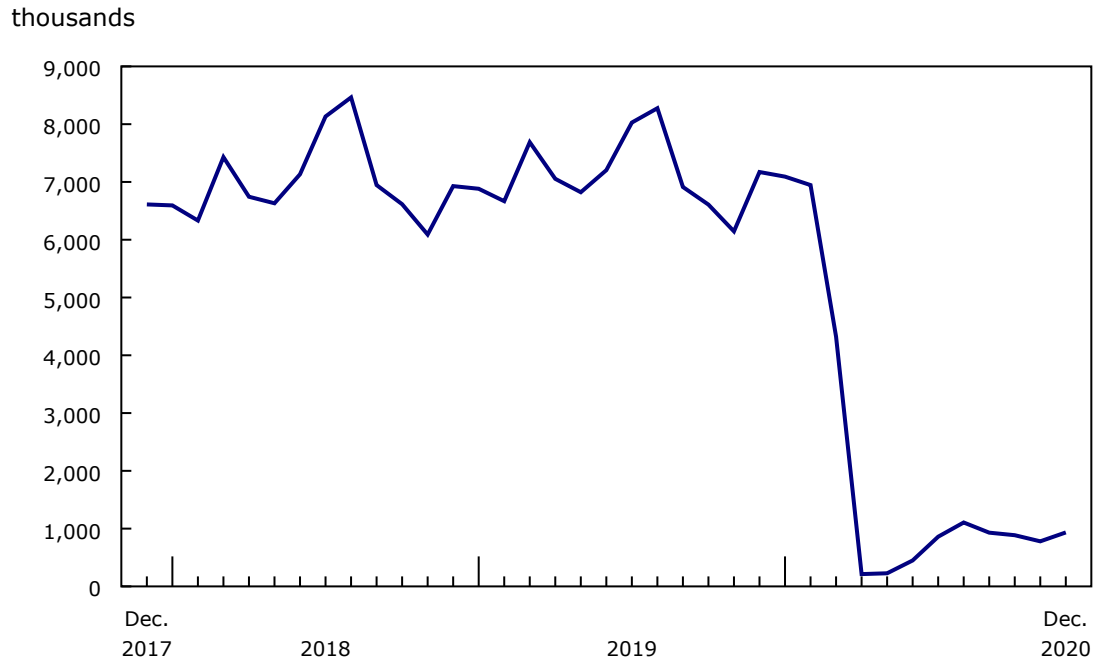
The bottom line in 2020—the operating revenue of Level I carriers plummeted 68.4% to \$8.0 billion from \$25.3 billion in 2019.

Infographic 1 – Passengers carried and operating revenue, Canadian Level I air carriers, annual totals



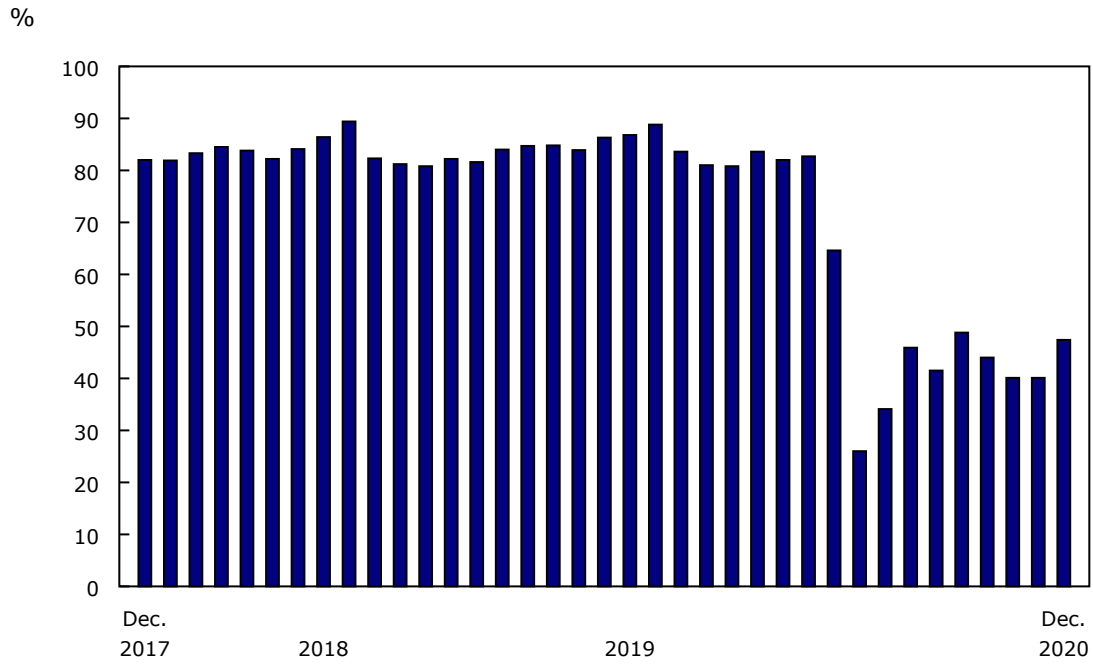
Source: Monthly Civil Aviation Survey (5026).

Chart 2
Passengers carried, Canadian air carriers, Level I



Source(s): Table [23-10-0079-01](#).

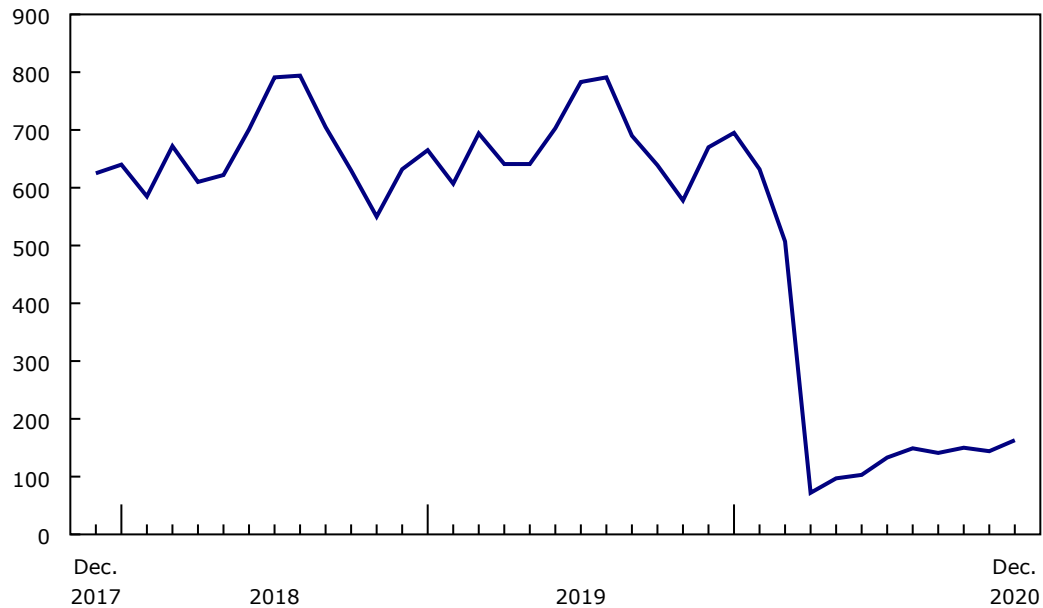
Chart 3
Passenger load factor, Canadian air carriers, Level I



Source(s): Table [23-10-0079-01](#).

Chart 4
Turbo fuel consumed, Canadian air carriers, Level I

millions of litres



Source(s): Table [23-10-0079-01](#).

Note to readers

The Monthly Civil Aviation Survey covers all Canadian Level I air carriers: Air Canada (including Air Canada Rouge), Air Transat, Jazz, Porter, Sky Regional, Sunwing, and WestJet (including Swoop, WestJet Encore and WestJet Link).

The number of air carriers increased from six in 2019 to seven in 2020, after one Level II air carrier was reclassified to Level I.

The average passenger trip length is calculated by dividing the number of passenger-kilometres by the number of passengers. Trips across Canada and the world are included in this calculation.

Data in this monthly release are not seasonally adjusted.

Available tables: table [23-10-0079-01](#).

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5026](#).

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).