

Aircraft movement statistics: Major airports, December 2020

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Highlights

In December, total aircraft movements at Canada's major airports were down 31.1% compared with December 2019, following the 26.6% decline reported in November.

Despite the significant year-over-year declines, transborder (flights between Canada and the United States) and other international movements each reached their highest levels in December since travel restrictions were first announced in March.

Boundary Bay in British Columbia was Canada's busiest airport on both a monthly (11,458 movements) and annual (185,431) basis. In fact, 2020 marked the first time in almost 40 years that Toronto/Lester B. Pearson International in Ontario was not the most active airport in the country.

Domestic movements (within Canada) declined 35.8% in 2020, from 3.4 million movements in 2019 to 2.2 million in 2020. Scheduled service, particularly in Eastern Canada, was impacted heavily by the collapse in passenger demand. The magnitude of the overall decline was masked in part by domestic non-scheduled aircraft movements such as flight training and fire-fighting operations.

December declines cap an unforgettable year for aviation

December capped a devastating year for air travel as total movements at the 90 airports with NAV CANADA towers and flight service stations fell to 256,064, down one-third from the levels reported in December 2019. Itinerant movements (flights from one airport to another) decreased 41.4% to 159,635, while local movements (flights that remain in the vicinity of the airport) dipped 3.0% to 96,429.

Domestic activity dropped to 146,070 movements, down 33.0% compared with December 2019. Transborder traffic fell to 8,562 movements (-77.3%) and other international movements decreased to 5,003 (-69.6%)—the highest number of non-domestic movements since the introduction of travel restrictions in March.

On a monthly basis, transborder and other international movements grew 22.5% and 18.0%, respectively, from November. In December, arrivals and departures to the United States averaged 276.2 per day, up from 233.0 in November and 213.0 in October, while international arrivals and departures averaged 161.4 per day, up from 141.3 in November and 130.7 in October.

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

For December, Boundary Bay was Canada's busiest airport with 11,458 movements, followed by Toronto/Lester B. Pearson (10,932 movements) and Vancouver International in British Columbia (10,688).

A devastating year for aircraft movement statistics

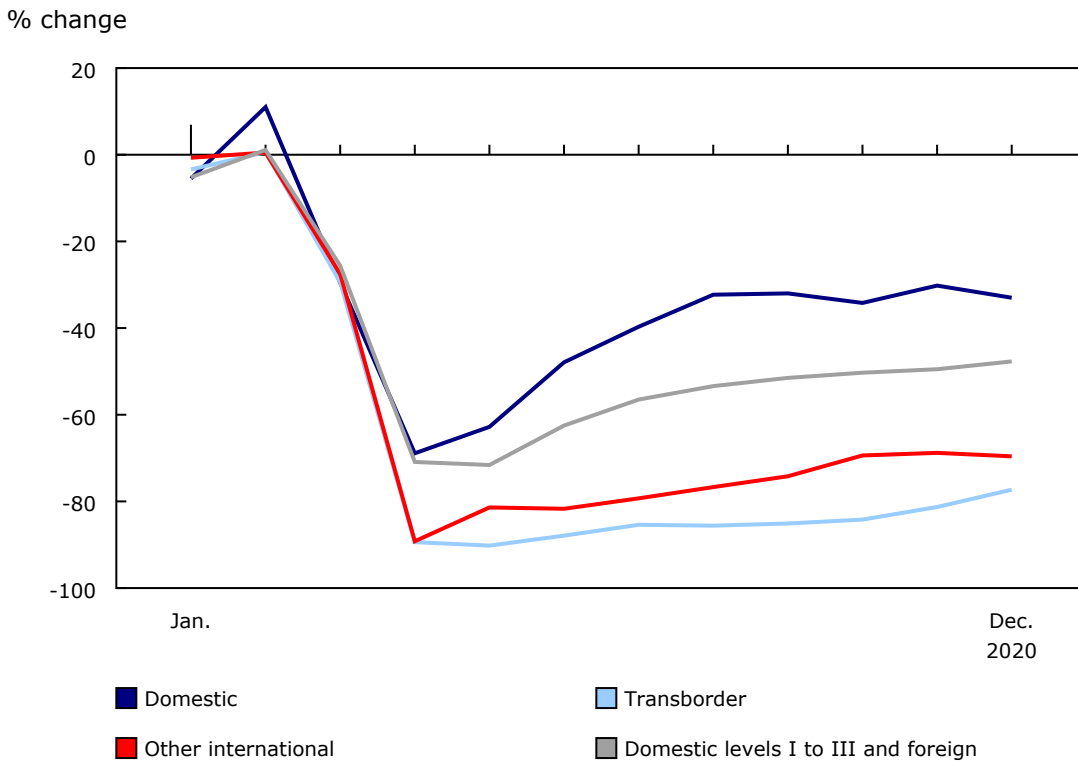
In 2020, total aircraft movements were 3.8 million, down sharply from 5.9 million in 2019. As a result of COVID-19, air traffic plummeted to its lowest point in April following the introduction of border closures and travel restrictions to curb the spread of the virus in late March. Traffic rose into the summer, following a seasonal pattern, but remained well below 2019 levels.

For additional contextual information on events affecting air travel, including summaries of selected Canadian economic events, as well as international and financial market developments by calendar month, check out the [Canadian Economic News](#).

Domestic activity fares better

Domestic movements declined 35.8% in 2020, from 3.4 million movements in 2019 to 2.2 million in 2020. Scheduled service, particularly in Eastern Canada, was impacted heavily by the collapse in passenger demand. The magnitude of the overall decline was masked in part by domestic non-scheduled aircraft movements such as flight training and fire-fighting operations.

Chart 1
Year-over-year change in aircraft movements, by sector

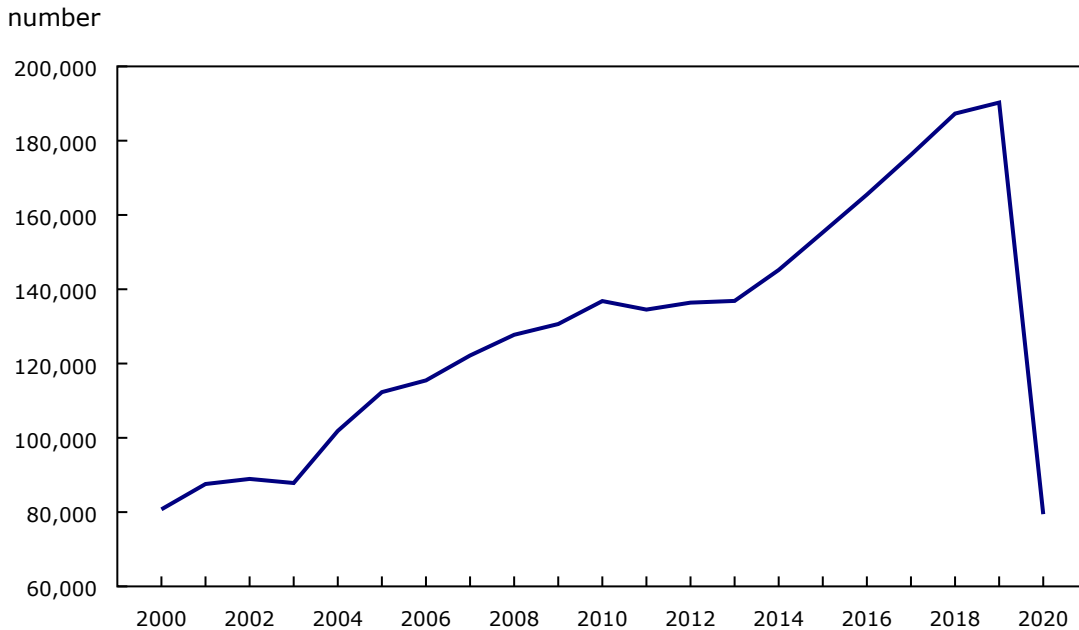


Source(s): Tables [23-10-0008-01](#) and [23-10-0015-01](#).

Of all types of traffic, transborder movements recorded the largest decline (-68.0%) in 2020, falling to 155,793. These movements reached their lowest point in May, the same month that Canada's largest airline suspended service to the United States temporarily. This traffic saw little change until a slight uptick was observed during the winter travel season.

Other international movements—on an upward trend since just after the 2003 SARS outbreak—dropped to 79,449, down 58.2% from 2019. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, other international take-offs and landings nosedived to levels not seen in 20 years.

Chart 2
Other international movements



Source(s): Tables [23-10-0008-01](#) and [23-10-0015-01](#).

Passenger hubs hit hardest

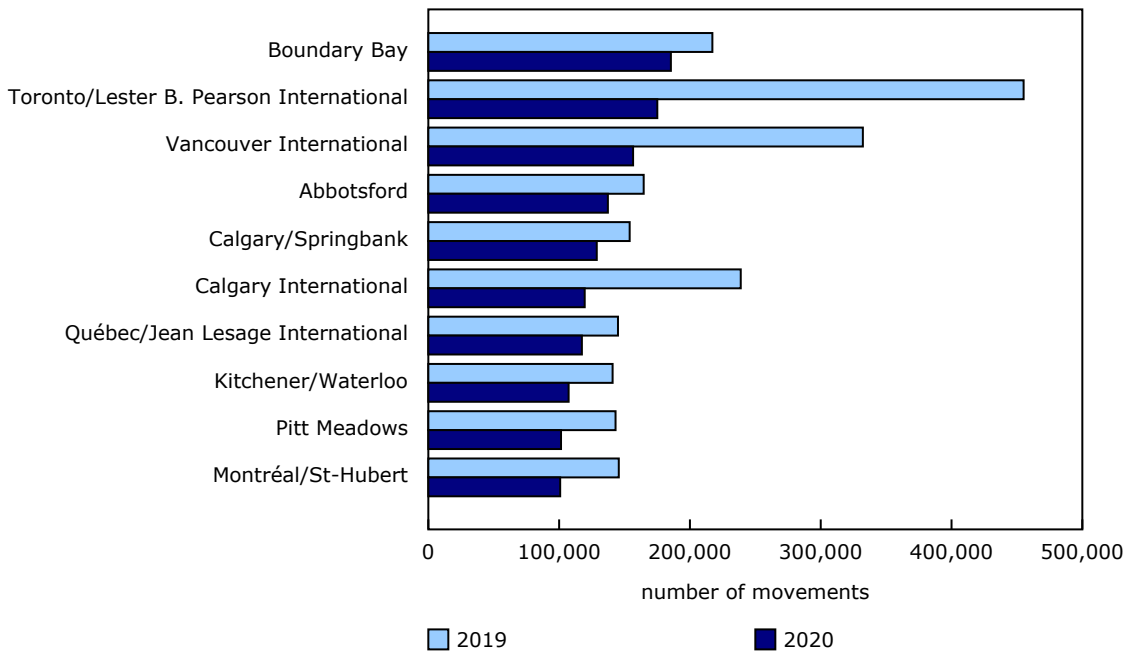
Toronto/Lester B. Pearson—historically the country's busiest airport—experienced the largest decline (-61.5%) in air traffic in 2020, with 280,047 fewer takeoffs and landings than in 2019. Sharp decreases were also observed at Vancouver International (-52.9%) and Montreal/Pierre-Elliott Trudeau in Quebec (-59.0%). Together, these three airports were responsible for the [majority of passenger traffic in 2019](#).

In contrast, cargo hubs such as Montreal/Mirabel International in Quebec and Hamilton International in Ontario recorded more moderate declines in itinerant movements (-14.3% and -19.1%, respectively). Demand for air cargo remained strong, as cargo-specific carriers benefitted from fewer passenger flights, which resulted in a reduction in overall cargo capacity. Furthermore, e-commerce sales soared because of recurring closures of non-essential businesses and stay-at-home orders.

Canada's busiest airports in 2020

Boundary Bay in British Columbia was Canada's busiest airport in 2020, with 185,431 take-offs and landings, down 14.6% from 2019. Toronto/Lester B. Pearson—previously Canada's busiest airport on an annual basis since 1983—tumbled to second place with 175,060 movements, followed by Vancouver International in third with 156,540 movements.

Chart 3
Total aircraft movements at top 10 Canadian airports, 2020



Source(s): Table 23-10-0002-01.

Tighter restrictions usher in the New Year

On January 29, 2021 the Government of Canada announced additional travel restrictions to prevent the further introduction and transmission of COVID-19 and its new variants. Canada's airlines agreed to suspend all flights to and from Mexico and Caribbean countries between January 31 and April 30, 2021. Additionally, in February, all international flights, including most of those previously exempted, began funnelling passengers through four Canadian airports. Furthermore, all passengers arriving in Canada must present proof of a negative COVID-19 test 72 hours before departure and quarantine at a government-approved hotel for three days upon arrival.

Timely data on aircraft traffic at major Canadian airports with NAV CANADA towers are reported in [Weekly aircraft movement statistics](#).

Note to readers

This survey collects data on itinerant and local aircraft movements at major airports in Canada.

Major airports include all airports with either a NAV CANADA air traffic control tower or a NAV CANADA flight service station.

On November 5, 2020, NAV CANADA recognized the increase in air traffic at Red Deer Regional Airport in Alberta prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and changed its status from a flight service station to offer air traffic control service at the airport for 16 hours per day. As a result, effective November 1, 2020, monthly aircraft movement data for the airport are available in tables 23-10-0002-01 to 23-10-0008-01 (airports with NAV CANADA towers). Data prior to November 2020 remain available in tables 23-10-0009-01 to 23-10-0015-01 (airports with NAV CANADA flight service stations).

On January 30, 2020, NAV CANADA air traffic control service was re-established at Montréal/Mirabel International in Quebec for 16 hours per day. In 2008, because of a reduction in traffic levels, air traffic control service at the airport was replaced by a flight service station. As a result, effective February 1, 2020, monthly aircraft movement data for the airport reverted to tables 23-10-0002-01 to 23-10-0008-01 (airports with NAV CANADA towers). Data from December 2008 to January 2020 remain available in tables 23-10-0009-01 to 23-10-0015-01 (airports with NAV CANADA flight service stations).

An aircraft movement is defined as a take-off, landing or simulated approach by an aircraft, as defined by NAV CANADA.

Data for 2019 and 2020 may have been revised.

The data in this monthly release are not seasonally adjusted.

Available tables: [23-10-0002-01](#) to [23-10-0015-01](#) .

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [2715](#).

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).