

MITRE Air Traffic Update: Who CARES About Non-Stop?

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You Can Get There...but You May Have to Connect

U.S. airlines reduced some non-stop service while still complying with the CARES Act.

When Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in March, it provided grants and loans to U.S. airlines, but it left it up to the Department of Transportation (DOT) to determine the service requirements carriers would be required to maintain to receive assistance.

The DOT determined that—in general—passenger carriers would have to continue to serve most of the airports they had served before the crisis hit.¹ However, carriers were not required to maintain all the same routes. That is, if an airline served Orlando, it would have to continue to serve Orlando, but it was not required to fly there non-stop from every place it had before the pandemic.

Faced with drastically reduced passenger demand, eliminating some non-stop service—while maintaining the ability to connect through a hub—was a sensible way to reduce costs while ensuring that passengers could still reach their destinations. As the following chart shows, this is what the major airlines did.

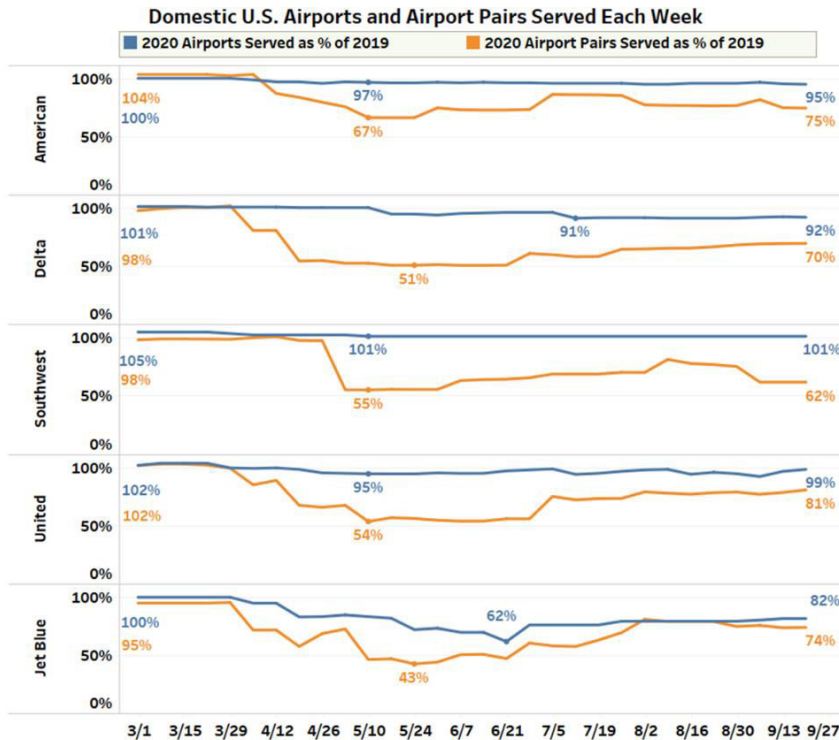
The chart's blue lines show the number of individual airports served each week, March through September 2020, expressed as a percentage of the same week in

¹ DOT allows airlines to petition for exemptions to continue serving some of their smaller markets. In addition, if an airline serves multiple airports in the same city, it is only required to maintain service to one of them.

Since the end of March, U.S. airlines have eliminated many non-stop flights but continued to serve most airports. Will this change?

2019. The beginning, ending, and minimum values are labeled for each series. As the data show, most airlines barely reduced the number of airports served, if at all.²

The yellow lines, on the other hand, show the number of unique airport pairs with direct flights, also as a percentage of the same week in 2019. In this case, by mid-May the number of domestic airport pairs with non-stop service had dropped substantially—up to 50 percent or more in some cases. The data go on to show that the airlines have since resumed some of their non-stop service, but still at levels 20 to 30 percent below last year.



Direct Flights Have Been Trending Upward

The open question now is how these trends will look after September.

The number of direct flights offered has been generally trending upward over the past few months, and it may continue to increase or stabilize at current levels. However, if there is no extension of the CARES Act, we could see a drop in both airports served and the number of city pairs with non-stop service.

We will be closely watching this trend and others in the months ahead.

For information about MITRE's research in this arena, contact Joseph Hollenberg at joeh@mitre.org.

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² The principal exception among the airlines shown is JetBlue, which had requested and received exemptions from certain airport service requirements.