

Behavior Modification

Alcohol-related disruptive passenger behavior aboard U.K. airlines continues to decrease, but smoking-related incidents hold steady.

BY RICK DARBY

Data for reported disruptive behavior aboard U.K. airlines from April 2005 through March 2006 indicate that alcohol intoxication continued to decline as a contributing cause.¹ Alcohol was identified or suspected as a factor in 35 percent of incidents, a decline from 45 percent in the April 2001–March 2002 reporting period (Table 1).

Most disruptive behavior involving alcohol abuse did not occur because of drinks served aboard the aircraft, however. In the latest reporting period, 90 of 479 incidents (8 percent) were categorized as resulting from airline service. Consumption before boarding was implicated in a larger number of incidents in every reporting period.

Smoking-related incidents appear stubbornly resistant to reduction. Smoking or wanting to smoke featured in 40 percent of incidents, of which 83 percent involved lighting up in the aircraft lavatory. There was little percentage change in smoking incidents in the five yearly periods shown in Table 1.

The U.K. Civil Aviation Authority classifies disruptive passenger behavior incidents by severity — as “serious” or “significant” — according to their threat to flight and personal safety.² The number of serious incidents, 56, increased from 53 in the 2004–2005 reporting period, and the rate increased. There was one serious

incident per 16,000 flights, compared with one per 17,000 flights in the previous reporting period, a 6 percent increase. The rate had been as low as one serious incident per 27,000 flights in the 2002–2003 reporting period.

“Some 80 percent of incidents involved male passengers, similar to previous years,” the report said. “The data indicate that the predominant age group involved in disruptive passenger incidents [was] those in their 20s and 30s, and this follows the trend of previous years.” About a fourth of incidents involved people traveling alone, a figure similar to those in previous years, the report said. The number of incidents involving 10 or more people traveling together was 29 in the 2005–2006 reporting period, compared with 22 the previous year.

“The majority of cases reported could be described as general disruptiveness, with verbal abuse either to cabin crew or other passengers occurring in 40 percent of cases,” the report said. In about a fourth of all incidents, passengers disobeyed airline crewmember instructions.

Violence was perpetrated in 142 of the total 1,359 reported incidents (more than 10 percent), with violence against crewmembers in 64 reported incidents (less than 5 percent).

“In the majority of incidents, a warning was given to the offending passenger, and the evidence from the reports suggests that the warning was

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Disruptive Passenger Behavior Incidents Aboard U.K. Airlines, 2001–2006					
	April 2001– March 2002	April 2002– March 2003	April 2003– March 2004	April 2004– March 2005	April 2005– March 2006
Total incident reports	1,055	648	696	1,486	1,359
Severity					
Serious	52	35	28	53	56
Significant	528	613	668	1,433	1,303
Other	475	—	—	—	—
Rate					
Flights per serious incident	18,000	27,000	24,000	17,000	16,000
Passengers carried per serious incident (millions)	1.8	2.7	2.9	2.1	2.0
Incident details					
Violence involved	101	90	106	183	142
Violence toward crewmembers involved	49	48	46	79	64
Contributing factors					
Alcohol involved	472 (45%)	271 (42%)	290 (42%)	530 (36%)	479 (35%)
Alcohol — pre-boarding	198	121	85	151	118
Alcohol — served by airline	92	63	66	95	90
Alcohol — passenger’s own	182	88	85	154	171
Smoking involved	385 (36%)	260 (40%)	275 (40%)	562 (38%)	546 (40%)
Smoking in lavatory	306	221	226	430	455
<p>Notes: The U.K. CAA abolished the “other” category beginning in June 2001, which resulted in an artificially large decrease in total incidents between the 2001–2002 reporting period and the following period. Some incidents that would previously have been classified as “other” are now classified as “significant,” so comparisons involving the 2001–2002 reporting period may not be accurate. The criteria for classifying “serious” incidents have remained unchanged throughout the five years.</p> <p>In incidents where alcohol was involved, the subcategories do not sum to the totals because the source of the alcohol often was not known or not reported.</p> <p><i>Serious incident</i> is defined as “one which actually threatens flight safety or personal safety, or has the potential to do so if the situation escalates.”</p> <p><i>Significant incident</i> is defined as “one which causes concern but which does not cause a major threat to the safety of the aircraft or its occupants.”</p> <p>Source: U.K. Department for Transport</p>					

Table 1

effective in 35 percent of cases, but ineffective in 31 percent of cases,” the report said. The result of the warning was not reported in the remainder of the incidents.

In 16 incidents, a passenger had to be physically restrained by handcuffs or a strap, and in an additional 18 incidents some other form of restraint was applied. The flight crew decided to make an unscheduled landing in eight incidents, compared with five in the 2004–2005 reporting period and four in the 2003–2004 period. There were 10 incidents in which flight crew abandoned taxiing or takeoff procedures and returned to the gate. In

136 incidents, passengers were removed from the aircraft.

All disruptive passenger behavior has potential safety consequences and must be taken seriously, but the report said that incidents should be seen in perspective. In the 2005–2006 reporting period, U.K. airlines operated about 900,000 flights and carried about 114 million passengers. Only one in 2 million passengers caused a serious incident, the report said. It added, however, that the exposure of cabin crewmembers to passenger misbehavior was substantially higher than for passengers. ●

Notes

1. U.K. Department for Transport. “Disruptive Behaviour on Board UK Aircraft — 2004/05.” Available via the Internet at <www.dft.gov.uk/stellent/groups/dft_aviation/documents/page/dft_aviation_613654-01.hcsp>.
2. The U.K. Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) defines a *significant incident* as “one which causes concern but which does not cause a major threat to the safety of the aircraft or its occupants.”

The CAA defines a *serious incident* as “one which actually threatens flight safety or personal safety, or has the potential to do so if the situation escalates.”