

Air Passenger Opinions on Security Screening Procedures



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One in three adults in the United States took an airline flight departing from a domestic airport between December 2003 and November 2004 (table 1), and 90 percent of these passengers expressed satisfaction with airport security screening procedures. These findings are from the December 2004 Omnibus Household Survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS).

The survey revealed a number of positive experiences for recent airline passengers:

- Ninety percent of travelers were satisfied or very satisfied with the time it took to screen passengers and carry-on items.
- Persons with disabilities reported spending less time waiting in line than persons without disabilities.
- There were no differences in satisfaction levels with screener courtesy based on passenger sex, education, disability status, income, age, or race.

But, despite these positive outcomes, little more than one-third of the adult U.S. population had total or a great deal of confidence that screening efforts made air travel secure. Another 46 percent of adults felt moderately confident that these procedures made air travel safer.

Screening Times

On average, passengers reported that they spent 20 minutes¹ waiting in line to get to the security screening checkpoint (table 2). There were no differences in wait time detected based on traveler age, race, sex, income, or educational levels. However, persons with disabilities reported spending less time waiting than persons without disabilities (11 minutes compared to 20 minutes).

Although about 29 percent of travelers reported that they were selected for extended screening (table 3), there were no statistically significant differences in waiting times reported by passengers who underwent basic screening and those who underwent extended screening (table 4). The latter includes additional activities such as a body pat down or use of a body wand.

Meeting Passenger Expectations

About half (47 percent) of the travelers surveyed found their wait shorter than expected, while 38 percent thought their wait time was about what they expected (table 5). Only nine percent of travelers reported longer than expected waits. Less than

¹ This estimate is based on survey participant's recollections of wait times and varies from actual wait times measured from samples at each checkpoint, for all hours of operation, by the Transportation Security Administration.

seven percent of travelers reported that they had no expectations regarding how long they would have to wait.

Travelers who reported their wait was shorter than expected reported that they waited, on average, about 14 minutes; those reporting their wait was longer than expected waited, on average, about 63 minutes (see table 4). Passengers whose wait was about what they expected passed through the screening process in about 18 minutes.

Passenger Satisfaction

Travelers indicated high levels of satisfaction with their overall experience at the passenger security checkpoint, including time spent going through the screening process, the thoroughness of the process, and the courtesy of the screeners. Ninety percent of travelers expressed satisfaction (were either satisfied or very satisfied) with the overall screening process (table 6).

Men were less likely than women to be satisfied or very satisfied with their overall experience (85 percent compared to 95 percent—see figure 1). The same was true of persons under 55, who were less likely than those 55 or older to report being satisfied or very satisfied (87 percent compared to 97 percent). Persons who were satisfied with the overall screening process reported that they waited an average of 17 minutes compared to 47 minutes for those who were dissatisfied (figure 2 and table 4).

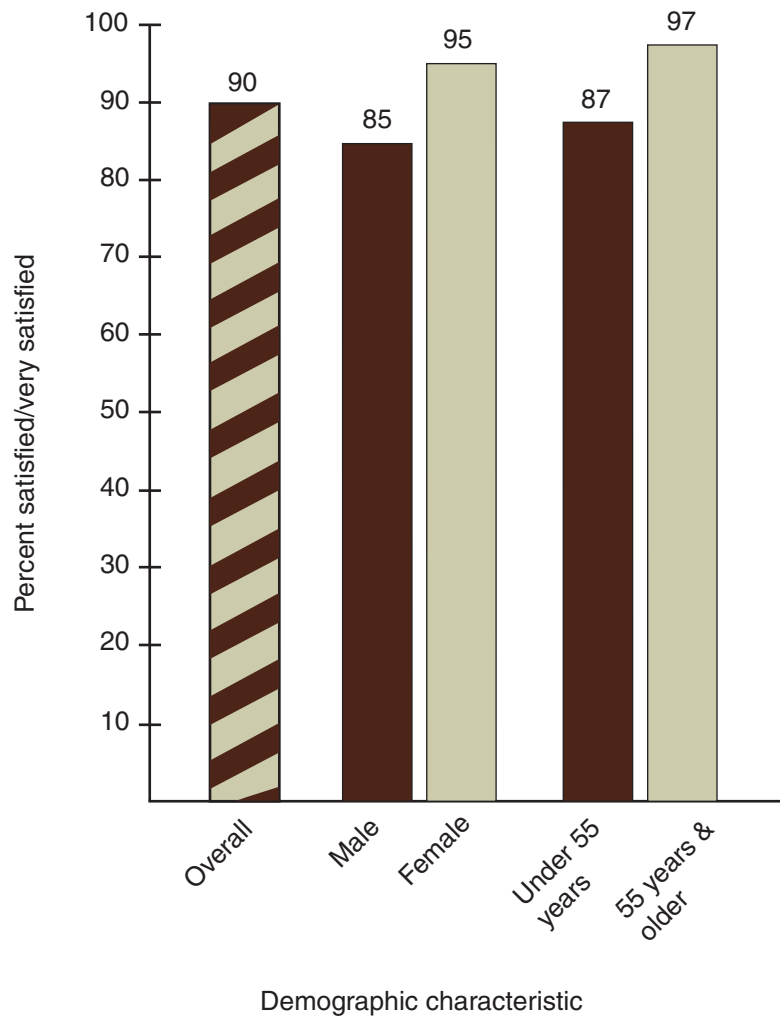
Ninety percent of travelers were satisfied or very satisfied with the time it took to screen passengers and carry-on items (table 7). Persons who expressed satisfaction reported that they waited an average of 19 minutes compared to 33 minutes for those who expressed dissatisfaction (figure 2 and table 4). Eighty-six percent of travelers found the thoroughness of the passenger screening process to be appropriate (table 8). Only six percent of travelers found the screening process excessive, and another eight percent found it inadequate. Ninety-four percent of travelers were satisfied or very satisfied with the courtesy of the screeners (table 9).

There were no differences in satisfaction levels with screener courtesy based on passenger sex, education, disability status, income, age, or race. Persons who were satisfied with screener courtesy reported that they waited 19 minutes to clear security compared to 37 minutes for those who were dissatisfied with screener courtesy (figure 2 and table 4). These results on satisfaction levels are consistent with passenger intercept studies conducted at airports by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA).

Information Levels

A majority (86 percent) of passengers reported that they were well or somewhat well informed about the passenger screening process and gleaned information from a variety of sources (table 10). On average,

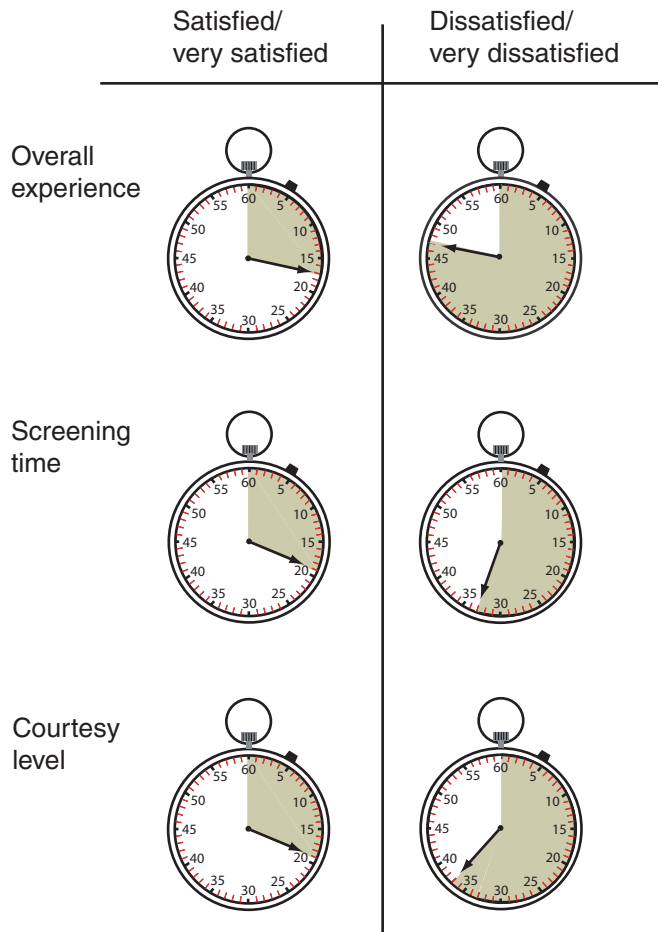
Figure 1—Percent of Fliers Satisfied or Very Satisfied with their Overall Experience at Passenger Screening Checkpoints, by Sex and Age



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Omnibus Household Survey, December 2004.

travelers reported using two to three sources of information. The top three sources of information for travelers were signs at the airport, the media (radio, newspaper, and television), and word of mouth through friends and relatives (table 11). More than half of travelers used one or more of these three sources. The least frequently used source of information was the TSA website, which was used by about 1 in 10 fliers. Five percent of travelers didn't use any of the seven sources covered by the survey; instead, they relied on their own experiences or simply did not seek information.

Figure 2—Reported Wait Times and Satisfaction with Overall Experience, Screening Time, and Courtesy Level (minutes)



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Omnibus Household Survey, December 2004.

Confidence Levels

Overall, just over one-third (36 percent) of the entire U.S. population, including those who did not fly, had a great deal of or total confidence in passenger screeners to keep air travel secure (table 12). A little less than half (46 percent) of the population of U.S. adults reported moderate confidence in the ability of passenger screeners to keep air travel secure. Less than one in five adults (the remaining 18 percent) had no or a small amount of confidence in passenger screeners. It is difficult to interpret the differences in opinions between fliers and nonfliers. However, a slightly higher proportion of fliers had moderate confidence (52 percent) compared to nonfliers (43 percent).

Technical Notes

Data presented in this report are taken from the December 2004 BTS Omnibus Household Survey. This survey was conducted by BTS on behalf of the Transportation Security Administration, U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The target population is the U.S. noninstitutionalized adult population (18 years or older). Results are based on 1,032 cases and a subset of 303 cases where the respondent reported flying between December 2003 and November 2004. These persons were randomly selected from households using a list-assisted random digit dialing (RDD) methodology. The findings summarized in this report are estimates derived from a sample survey. Sample surveys contain two major components of error—sampling and nonsampling error.

Survey data provide estimates of population parameters and are subject to error because findings are based on a sample rather than on the entire population. All estimates in this report and tables are weighted and have a coefficient of variation that is 30 percent or less. Standard errors for each estimate are included in the tables. All differences discussed in this report are statistically significant at the 0.05 level. In the tables there may be differences that may appear large, but they may not be statistically significant due to the relatively large standard errors surrounding the estimates. Some survey respondents who reported flying between December 2003 and November 2004 did not respond to all survey questions; consequently some estimates are based on less than 303 cases. Estimates are also subject to nonsampling error, for example, errors in respondent interpretation, interviewer recording, and data editing.

Sources of Data on Wait Times

In addition to the perceived wait times collected from passengers by the Omnibus Household Survey (OHS), the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) also directly measures wait times at security lines as part of its Performance Measurement Information System. TSA's estimate for the average peak² wait time for December 2003 to November 2004 was 13.0 minutes. The mean wait time reported by passengers in the OHS was 20.4 (± 3.5) minutes for the same period. Several factors may contribute to the difference between the two wait-times estimates.

While both surveys measure comparable wait times, the survey methodologies vary considerably.

- TSA's survey measures actual wait times at random time points during peak periods by handing cards with the initial start time to randomly

² Average Peak Wait Time represents the average wait time at the busiest period(s) of the day. This time may vary from airport to airport across the nation.

selected passengers as they enter the queue³. The card is collected and time stamped before the passenger walks through the metal detector. Thus the wait time includes the time spent from the beginning of the queue until the passenger reaches the metal detector and does not include time spent during the actual passenger screening. The TSA survey measures wait times at selected times, regardless of the number of passengers waiting in line, if any.

- OHS uses a national random sample of persons, screened to exclude those who did not use an airport in the previous 12 months. Although the OHS covers the same waiting period as the TSA survey, OHS asks the passenger to self-report the time spent standing in line. Because most passengers do not time their waits, the OHS obtains perceived wait times. Besides recall and rounding errors, OHS respondents may be including the entire security screening process, not just the time in line, in their estimates.

Table 1
Percent of Adults in the U.S. Departing from a Domestic Airport Between November 2003 and December 2004

| Departure status | Estimate (percent) | Standard error (percent) | Sample size |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| Flew during reference period | 33.3 | 1.8 | 303 |
| Did not fly during reference period | 66.7 | 1.8 | 585 |
| Total | 100.0 | NA | 888 |

KEY: NA = Not applicable

NOTE: All estimates are weighted to represent U.S. noninstitutionalized adult population (18 and older).

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Omnibus Household Survey, December 2004.

³ The total number of airports reporting between December 2003 and November 2004 ranged from 125 airports to 337 airports. Not all airports were required to report until June 2004.

Table 2
Minutes Reported Spent in Line Waiting to Go Through Security Screening
by Selected Demographics

| Characteristic | Average minutes | Standard error (percent) | Sample size |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| Overall | 20.4 | 1.8 | 295 |
| Male | 20.9 | 3.0 | 134 |
| Female | 19.9 | 2.0 | 161 |
| Less than 4-year degree | 20.1 | 3.4 | 137 |
| 4-year degree or higher | 18.9 | 1.5 | 153 |
| Disabled | 11.4 | 2.2 | 22 |
| Nondisabled | 20.4 | 1.9 | 269 |
| Household income less than \$75K | 18.0 | 1.8 | 143 |
| Household income \$75K or more | 22.1 | 4.1 | 98 |
| 18 to 54 years old | 21.2 | 2.3 | 183 |
| 55 or older | 16.5 | 2.0 | 109 |
| White (Non-Hispanic) | 17.3 | 1.2 | 243 |
| Other race | 27.3 | 6.1 | 48 |

NOTE: All estimates are weighted to represent U.S. noninstitutionalized adult population (18 and older).

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Omnibus Household Survey, December 2004.

Table 3
Percent of Passengers Reporting Being Selected for Extended Security Screening

| Characteristic | Estimates (percent) | Standard error (percent) | Sample size |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| Overall | 28.6 | 3.2 | 79 |
| Male | 28.5 | 4.5 | 37 |
| Female | 28.6 | 4.4 | 42 |
| Less than 4-year degree | 30.0 | 5.0 | 36 |
| 4-year degree or higher | 28.0 | 4.1 | 42 |
| Household income less than \$75K | 31.3 | 4.6 | 41 |
| Household income \$75K or more | 23.6 | 5.3 | 21 |
| 18 to 54 years old | 28.3 | 4.1 | 44 |
| 55 or older | 29.2 | 4.6 | 34 |
| White (Non-Hispanic) | 26.9 | 3.2 | 64 |
| Other race | 34.0 | 8.8 | 14 |

NOTE: All estimates are weighted to represent U.S. noninstitutionalized adult population (18 and older).

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Omnibus Household Survey, December 2004.

Table 4
Time Spent (reported by passenger) In Line Waiting to Go Through Security Screening by Nondemographic Characteristics

| Characteristic | Average minutes | Standard error (percent) | Sample size |
|--|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| Overall | 20.4 | 1.8 | 295 |
| Selected for extended screening | 24.2 | 5.0 | 77 |
| Basic screening procedure | 18.0 | 1.4 | 216 |
| Wait time shorter than expected | 14.3 | 1.4 | 136 |
| Wait time about expectation | 17.6 | 1.7 | 112 |
| Wait time longer than expected | 62.5 | 11.3 | 25 |
| Very satisfied/satisfied with screening time | 18.7 | 1.9 | 270 |
| Dissatisfied/very dissatisfied with screening time | 32.8 | 6.8 | 24 |
| Very satisfied/satisfied with courtesy | 19.0 | 1.8 | 275 |
| Dissatisfied/very dissatisfied with courtesy | 37.0 | 8.9 | 19 |
| Very satisfied/satisfied with overall experience | 17.4 | 1.2 | 268 |
| Dissatisfied/very dissatisfied with experience | 47.0 | 11.2 | 26 |
| No/small amount of confidence in screeners | 32.0 | 7.4 | 50 |
| Moderate confidence | 17.8 | 1.6 | 145 |
| Great deal/total confidence in screeners | 15.3 | 1.9 | 95 |
| Thoroughness (of screening) was excessive | 36.3 | 8.4 | 18 |
| Thoroughness was appropriate | 18.8 | 2.0 | 248 |
| Thoroughness was inadequate | 27.5 | 7.4 | 23 |

NOTE: All estimates are weighted to represent U.S. noninstitutionalized adult population (18 and older).

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Omnibus Household Survey, December 2004.

Table 5
Distribution of Travelers Based on Differences Between Expected and Reported Wait Time at Security Screening

| Reported versus expected wait | Estimate (percent) | Standard error (percent) | Sample size |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| Shorter or much shorter | 46.8 | 3.4 | 138 |
| About what was expected | 37.8 | 3.2 | 115 |
| Longer or much longer | 8.8 | 2.0 | 25 |
| Had no expectations | 6.5 | 1.5 | 21 |
| Total | 100.0 | NA | 299 |

KEY: NA = Not applicable

NOTES: Percentages may not sum to 100 percent due to independent rounding. All estimates are weighted to represent U.S. noninstitutionalized adult population (18 and older).

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Omnibus Household Survey, December 2004.

Table 6
Percent Very Satisfied or Satisfied with Overall Experience at the Passenger Security Check Point by Selected Demographics

| Characteristic | Estimates (percent) | Standard error (percent) | Sample size |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| Overall | 90.1 | 2.2 | 273 |
| Male | 85.3 | 3.8 | 118 |
| Female | 95.0 | 1.8 | 155 |
| Less than 4-year degree | 91.9 | 3.3 | 130 |
| 4-year degree or higher | 88.6 | 3.0 | 138 |
| Disabled | 90.4 | 6.5 | 21 |
| Nondisabled | 90.3 | 2.3 | 249 |
| Household income less than \$75K | 91.3 | 2.9 | 134 |
| Household income \$75K or more | 88.8 | 4.3 | 88 |
| 18 to 54 years old | 87.4 | 3.0 | 162 |
| 55 or older | 97.2 | 1.5 | 108 |
| White (Non-Hispanic) | 90.9 | 2.1 | 228 |
| Other race | 88.1 | 6.3 | 42 |

NOTE: All estimates are weighted to represent U.S. noninstitutionalized adult population (18 and older).

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Omnibus Household Survey, December 2004.

Table 7
Passenger Satisfaction with Time Required to Screen Passenger and Carry-On Items

| Passenger status | Estimate (percent) | Standard error (percent) | Sample size |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| Very satisfied/satisfied | 90.5 | 2.1 | 275 |
| Dissatisfied/very dissatisfied | 9.5 | 2.1 | 24 |
| Total | 100.0 | NA | 299 |

KEY: NA = Not applicable

NOTE: All estimates are weighted to represent U.S. noninstitutionalized adult population (18 and older).

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Omnibus Household Survey, December 2004.

Table 8
Rating the Thoroughness of the Screening Process

| Rating | All passengers | | | Satisfied passengers | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| | Estimate (percent) | Standard error (percent) | Sample size | Estimate (percent) | Standard error (percent) | Sample size |
| Excessive screening | 6.2 | 1.5 | 20 | — | — | — |
| Appropriate screening | 86.1 | 2.2 | 249 | 92.1 | 1.7 | 242 |
| Inadequate screening | 7.7 | 1.7 | 24 | 4.6 | 1.3 | 15 |
| Total | 100.0 | NA | 301 | 100.0 | NA | 267 |

KEY: — = Unreliable estimate; NA = Not applicable

NOTE: All estimates are weighted to represent U.S. noninstitutionalized adult population (18 and older).

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Omnibus Household Survey, December 2004.

Table 9
Satisfaction with Screener Courtesy by Selected Demographics

| Characteristic | Estimates (percent) | Standard error (percent) | Sample size |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| Overall | 94.0 | 1.5 | 280 |
| Male | 92.1 | 2.7 | 125 |
| Female | 95.8 | 1.5 | 155 |
| Less than 4-year degree | 95.4 | 1.9 | 132 |
| 4-year degree or higher | 93.0 | 2.4 | 143 |
| Disabled | 95.2 | 4.7 | 22 |
| Nondisabled | 94.1 | 1.6 | 255 |
| Household income less than \$75K | 95.3 | 2.2 | 137 |
| Household income \$75K or more | 95.0 | 2.2 | 92 |
| 18 to 54 years old | 93.1 | 2.1 | 170 |
| 55 or older | 96.9 | 1.5 | 107 |
| White (Non-Hispanic) | 93.6 | 1.9 | 234 |
| Other race | 96.1 | 2.3 | 43 |

NOTE: All estimates are weighted to represent U.S. noninstitutionalized adult population (18 and older).

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Omnibus Household Survey, December 2004.

Table 10
Level of Knowledge Regarding Passenger Screening Procedures

| How informed | Estimate (percent) | Standard error (percent) | Sample size |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|
| Well or somewhat well informed | 85.8 | 2.5 | 263 |
| Not very well or not informed | 14.3 | 2.5 | 38 |
| Total | 100.0 | NA | 301 |

KEY: NA = Not applicable

NOTES: Percentages may not sum to 100 percent due to independent rounding. All estimates are weighted to represent U.S. noninstitutionalized adult population (18 and older).

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Omnibus Household Survey, December 2004.

Table 11
Sources for Information About the Airport Passenger Screening Process

| Source | Estimate (percent) | Standard error (percent) | Sample size |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|
| Radio, TV, newspaper | 57.6 | 3.4 | 171 |
| Signs at airport | 55.0 | 3.4 | 162 |
| Word of mouth | 52.9 | 3.4 | 156 |
| Printed materials | 28.3 | 3.1 | 79 |
| Airline/agent website | 24.6 | 2.9 | 75 |
| Called airline/agent | 19.5 | 2.8 | 52 |
| TSA website | 9.1 | 1.9 | 25 |
| Did not use any of the above | 5.4 | 1.4 | 16 |
| Mean number of sources | *2.5 | 0.1 | 295 |

*This number is an average, not an estimated percent.

NOTES: Percents will not add to 100 percent since more than one source may have been used. All estimates are weighted to represent U.S. noninstitutionalized adult population (18 and older).

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Omnibus Household Survey, December 2004.

Table 12

Overall Confidence Levels in the Ability of Security Screeners to Keep Air Travel Secure

| Amount of confidence | All adults | | | Fliers | | | Nonfliers | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| | Estimate (percent) | Standard error (percent) | Sample size | Estimate (percent) | Standard error (percent) | Sample size | Estimate (percent) | Standard error (percent) | Sample size |
| No/small amount | 18.3 | 1.5 | 155 | 17.2 | 2.5 | 52 | 19 | 1.9 | 103 |
| Moderate amount | 46.1 | 2.0 | 387 | 51.5 | 3.3 | 149 | 43 | 2.5 | 238 |
| A great deal of/total | 35.7 | 1.9 | 301 | 31.3 | 3.0 | 97 | 38 | 2.4 | 204 |
| Total | 100.0 | NA | 843 | 100.0 | NA | 298 | 100 | NA | 545 |

KEY: NA = Not applicable

NOTES: Percentages may not sum to 100 percent due to independent rounding. All estimates are weighted to represent U.S. noninstitutionalized adult population (18 and older).

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Omnibus Household Survey, December 2004.