Safety Reports

Aviation Safety Data Accessibility Study Index: Public Concerns About Aviation Safety

Some public survey data report on consumer attitudes toward aviation safety and toward the individuals and organizations that provide and manage air safety. These data indicate that consumers have relatively high levels of confidence in individuals such as pilots, controllers, and maintenance personnel and lower levels of confidence in organizations such as air carriers and the FAA. They also regard potential mechanical, behavioral, and institutional compromises in the integrity of the air safety system as matters of great concern.

In several polls over the past few years, members of the public who had flown commercially were asked about their views on aviation safety. A Roper poll in July 1996 asked if measures to increase airline safety and security "would be worth increased costs and inconvenience to passengers." Seventy eight percent of respondents thought "more extensive inspections of passengers and baggage" would be worthwhile, and 88 percent thought "more extensive inspections of the mechanical safety of the airplanes" would be worthwhile. In a more general result from an ABC News/Washington Post poll of August 1996, 77 percent of respondents "would be willing to pay 10 percent more for airline tickets if the money were used to increase safety and security." Other surveys indicate that around 30 percent of business and nonbusiness fliers use the safety records of carriers as one of the top five criteria in choosing between carriers (Miller 1991), and that consumers regard safety issues as more important than many other issues, such as departure frequency and food quality (Comm 1993).

Other polls give a more detailed view of consumer concerns. Shown in Table 1 are results from a Harris poll investigating attitudes toward a variety of safety issues. Respondents were asked whether particular "threats to air safety" should be matters of great, mild, or no concern.

Table 1

THREATS TO AIR SAFETY	1996		1989	
	Great Concern	Mild Concern	Great Concern	Mild Concern
Inadequate Regulation	55%	35%	55%	31%
Pilot Error	65%	29%	58%	34%

Poor Ground Control	66%	28%	60%	31%
Airplane Structural Fault	72%	22%	72%	22%
Mechanical Error	78%	19%	72%	23%
Poor Maintenance	83%	13%	80%	14%

Responses from 1996 and 1989 are shown to illustrate the basic stability in the survey results. Related to these concerns is the degree of confidence that fliers have in the organizations and groups involved in the aviation industry. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, this confidence varies widely.

Table 2

Is group doing all it can to maintain air safety?	Princeton Poll, 5/96 Degree of Confidence			
	High	Fair	Low	None
Federal Agencies	14%	36%	24%	14%
Pilots	47%	33%	6%	4%
Controllers	36%	40%	8%	5%
Ground Crews	25%	48%	11%	5%
Major (Jet) Airlines	42%	37%	5%	5%
Commuter (Prop) Airlines	12%	33%	22%	15%

Table 3

Feelings about the safety standards of:	Yankelovich poll, 5/96

	Very confident	Fairly confident	Some reservations	A lot of reservations
Commercial Airlines	18%	36%	22%	16%
Discount Airlines	7%	24%	30%	27%

In a similar Gallup poll of July 1996, 13 percent of respondents expressed a great deal of confidence in the FAA's safety efforts in commercial aviation, 50 percent moderate confidence, 26 percent not much confidence, and 9 percent no confidence.

These admittedly sparse data can be interpreted in the following way: aviation consumers are fairly trusting of the individuals (pilots, controllers, maintenance workers) who affect the safety of flying, and are less trusting of institutions, both private and public, that are in the business of providing and ensuring safety (Tables 2 and 3). In spite of these levels of trust, passengers are perhaps aware of the complex set of interactions that must occur in a safe flight. Even though air accidents are extremely rare, any breakdown in this chain of interactions can compromise the safety of a particular flight or aircraft. Therefore, passengers remain concerned about the integrity of each link in the chain, regardless of the trust felt in the intentions of those who manage and maintain the chain (Table 1).