Airlines for America®

We Connect the World

Industry Review: Allocating Capital to Benefit Customers, Employees and Investors

Updated August 26, 2026

http://airlines.org/dataset/a4a-presentation-industry-review-and-outlook/

U.S. Airlines Facilitate the Safe and Efficient Movement of People and Goods Worldwide

Data Reflects Passenger and Cargo-Only Operations*

> 1M **employees** around the world

Powering ~28K **flights** per day across the globe

Carrying ~2.7M **passengers** per day to/from ~85 countries

Moving ~61K **tons of cargo** per day to/from more than 220 countries

Sources: A4A, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Diio by Cirium and company literature

* Headcount as of Dec-2025; other statistics reflect daily average for 2025

The “Golden Age” Myth

By Bert Archer (November 2016)

“We have visions of air travel from the 1950s and ’60s as glamorous, passengers lounging on sofas while nattily becapped air hostesses poured Champagne before serving the lobster. Now these things did happen – but the thing is, they still do, and for the exact same people they always did. **Air travel used to be ruinously expensive…** Even game shows only gave away trips to Florida and California.”

“**The jet age was not for everybody...** In short, the airline business has gotten more mature than it was when it catered mostly to the **rich, people who didn’t really care whether a ticket cost the equivalent of what an average** person made in a month, or two months. **It has moved from a luxury service to one that most of us use at least once a year**.”

Bert Archer, Canadian author and journalist, “Outraged by new airline fees? Here’s why they’re good news,” *The Globe and Mail* (Nov. 16, 2016)

Source: https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/travel/the-case-for-airline-ancillary-fees/article32879054/

The “Golden Age” Myth

By Janet Bednarek (February 2023)

“Through the 1930s and into the 1940s, almost everyone flew first class. Airlines did encourage more people to fly in the 1950s and 1960s by introducing coach or tourist fares, but **the savings were relative**: less expensive than first class, but **still pricey**. In 1955, for example, so-called ‘bargain fares’ from New York to Paris were the equivalent of just over $3,200 in 2023 dollars. Although the advent of jets did result in lower fares, the cost was still out of reach of most Americans… The demographics of travelers did begin to shift during [the 1960s]. More women, more young people, and retirees began to fly; **still, airline travel remained financially out-of-reach for most**. If it was a golden age, **it only was for the very few**.”

Janet Bednarek, University of Dayton, “Longing for the ‘golden age’ of air travel? Be careful what you wish for,” CNN Travel (Feb. 28, 2023)

Source: https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/golden-age-of-air-travel-downsides/index.html

Congressional Testimony on Deregulation and Innovation

By Jeffrey Shane (March 2023)

"Thanks to…the *miracle* of deregulation, America today enjoys a **highly competitive, rapidly evolving, technologically sophisticated airline industry**. A defining feature of the business today is its **continuing quest for innovation**, for new ways of attracting customers, for distinguishing competitors from each other, and even for crafting new business models. **After decades of struggle, the industry has found a way to maintain its financial health, thereby ensuring continued investment in consumer-facing improvements**."

Jeffrey Shane, Under Secretary for Policy at the Department of Transportation, 2003-2008

Source: Testimony of Jeffrey N. Shane, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation United State Senate, Hearing on Enhancing Consumer Protections and Connectivity in Air Transportation (March 23, 2023)

Cruising Altitude

By Zach Wichter, *USA Today* (August 7, 2024)

"**Flying is great, despite all the complaints people have... Sure, flying used to be more luxurious, but that made it largely unaffordable**. "Up until 1978, interstate and international airline routes and prices were controlled by the federal government via the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB). Flights remained expensive even as technology made planes faster and more efficient. 'It was becoming increasingly obvious that the regulatory agency, the CAB, was falling behind in the regulation. It would take years to approve new routes and fare structures,' [Smithsonian curator of air transportation Bob] van der Linden said. **Overall, flying today is a much better deal in terms of dollars and cents than at almost any other time in history**."

"'**Today you could, if you do some good shopping, you could fly transcontinental, say New York to San Francisco, for $300**,' van der Linden said, noting that in actual dollar terms, it's the same price as in 1930. 'The price hasn't changed, but the value of the dollar has, dramatically. **In 1930, $300 could buy you an automobile**.'"

Source: Zach Wichter, "Now is a great and cheap time to fly, even if airlines aren't perfect," *USA Today* (Aug. 7, 2024)

Traveling by Air Is Safer Than Ever

"These days, we barely think about safety when we board a plane…because **flying across the sky is safer than walking across the street**. Airplanes produce fewer deaths per mile than cars, ferries, trains, subways or buses…"

"The **U.S. aviation system has become so amazingly, unexpectedly safe that other industries** in the business of fatal risk, from healthcare to artificial intelligence, **are hoping to bring lessons of the sky back to hospitals and research labs on the ground**."

Ben Cohen, "Flying in America Has Actually Never Been Safer," *The Wall Street Journal* (Jan. 12, 2024)

Source: Ben Cohen, "Flying in America Has Actually Never Been Safer," *The Wall Street Journal* (Jan. 12, 2024)

Traveling by Air Is Safer Than Ever (Cont'd)

"When **the risk of flying is so minuscule**, being afraid to board an airplane is hardly more justified than avoiding the supermarket for fear that the ceiling will collapse."

"**The safety of flying in countries like the U.S. is the eighth wonder of the world**. Far from being nervous as we approach the airport, we should be awestruck that flying is so free of risk — and deeply grateful to those who have made it so."

Arnold Barnett, George Eastman Professor of Management Science and professor of statistics at MIT Sloan School of Management, "Boeing, Airbus incidents have travelers asking, is it still safe to fly?" *The Hill* (Jan. 22, 2024)

Source: Arnold Barnett, "Boeing, Airbus incidents have travelers asking, is it still safe to fly?," *The Hill* (Jan. 22, 2024)

Economists Are Still Right About Airline Deregulation!

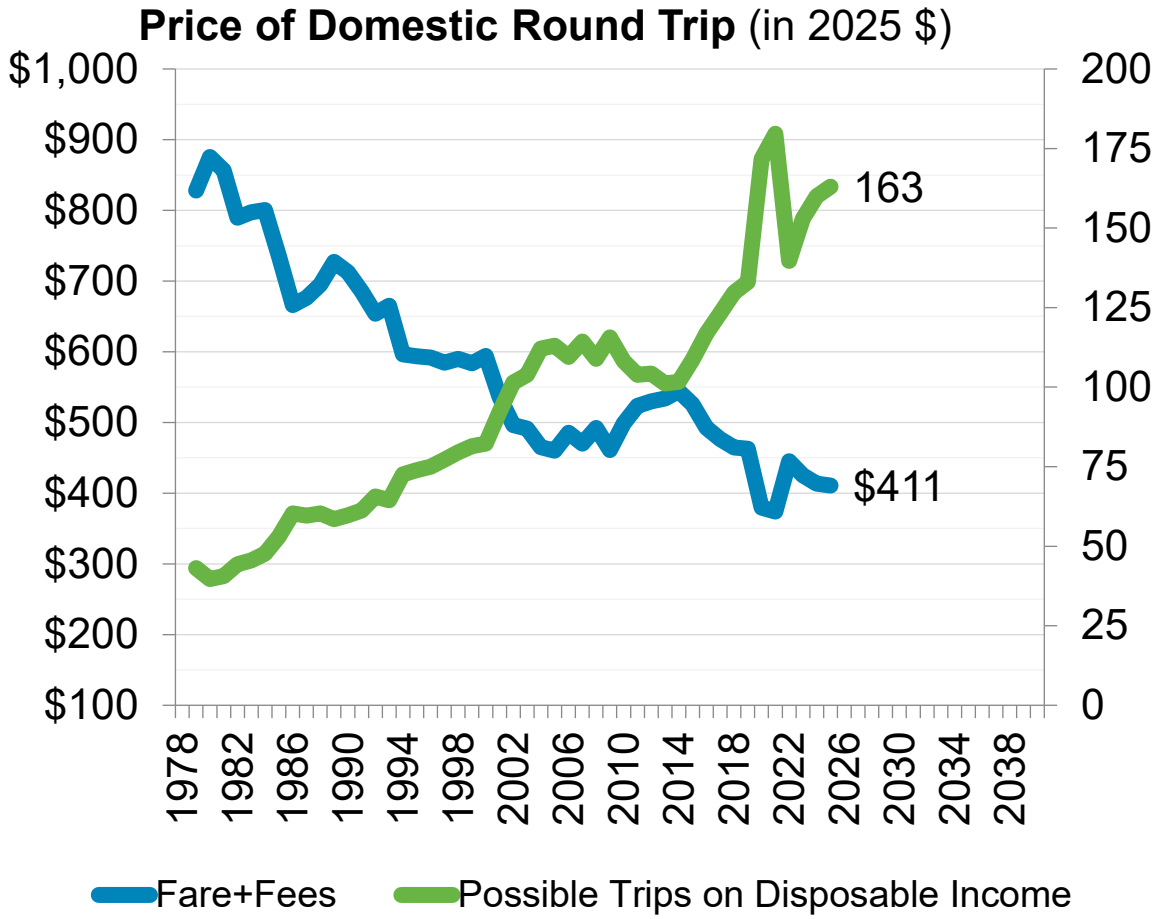
By Clifford Winston (January 2023)

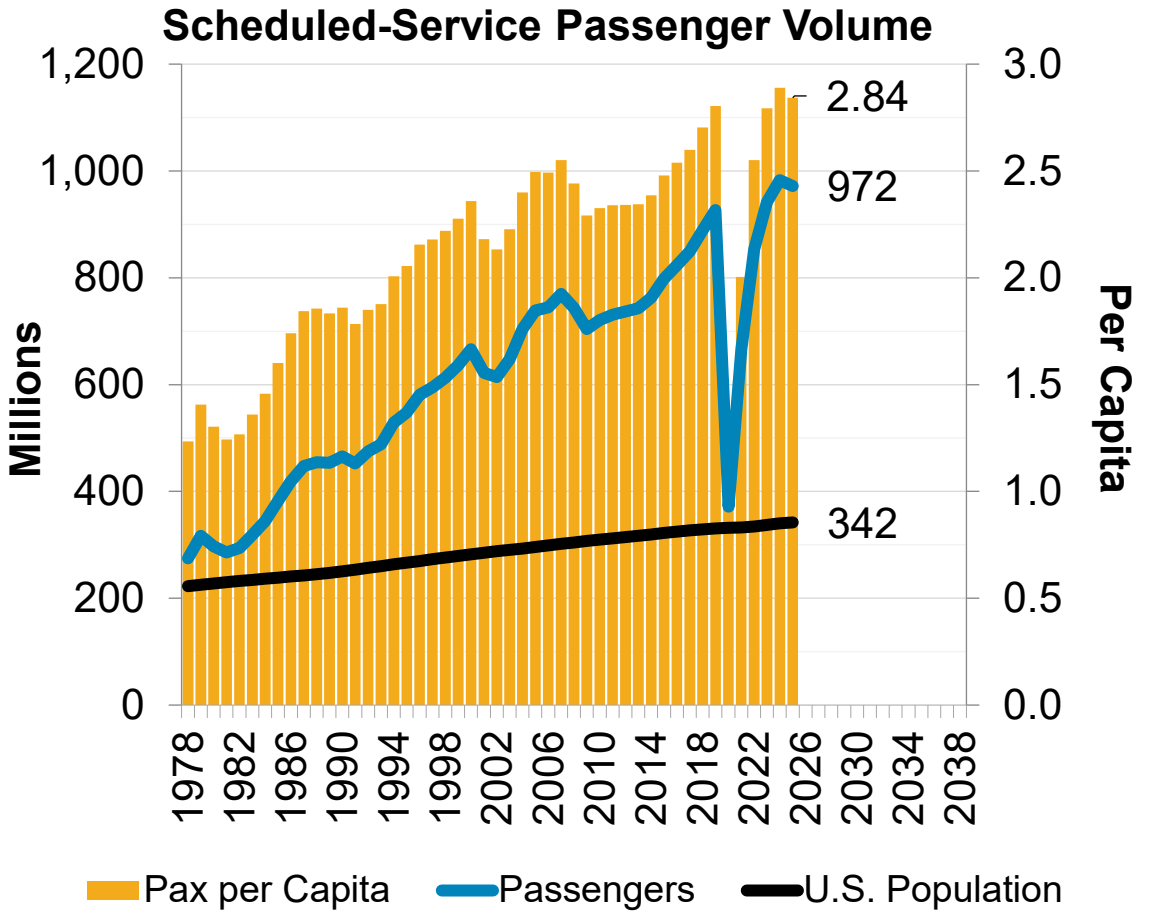
"The airline industry has periods of fat profits, but **those profits are notoriously fickle**. And if they're expected to stay in business in down times, airlines can't be expected to sacrifice revenue generated when demand is high without trying to make it up elsewhere."

Source: "Economists Are Still Right About Airline Deregulation!" Milken Institute (January 18, 2023)

As Real Airfares Plunged Post-Deregulation, Trips per Capita More Than Doubled

In 2025, Domestic Air Travel—Including Ancillary Services—Was ~50% Cheaper Than in 1979

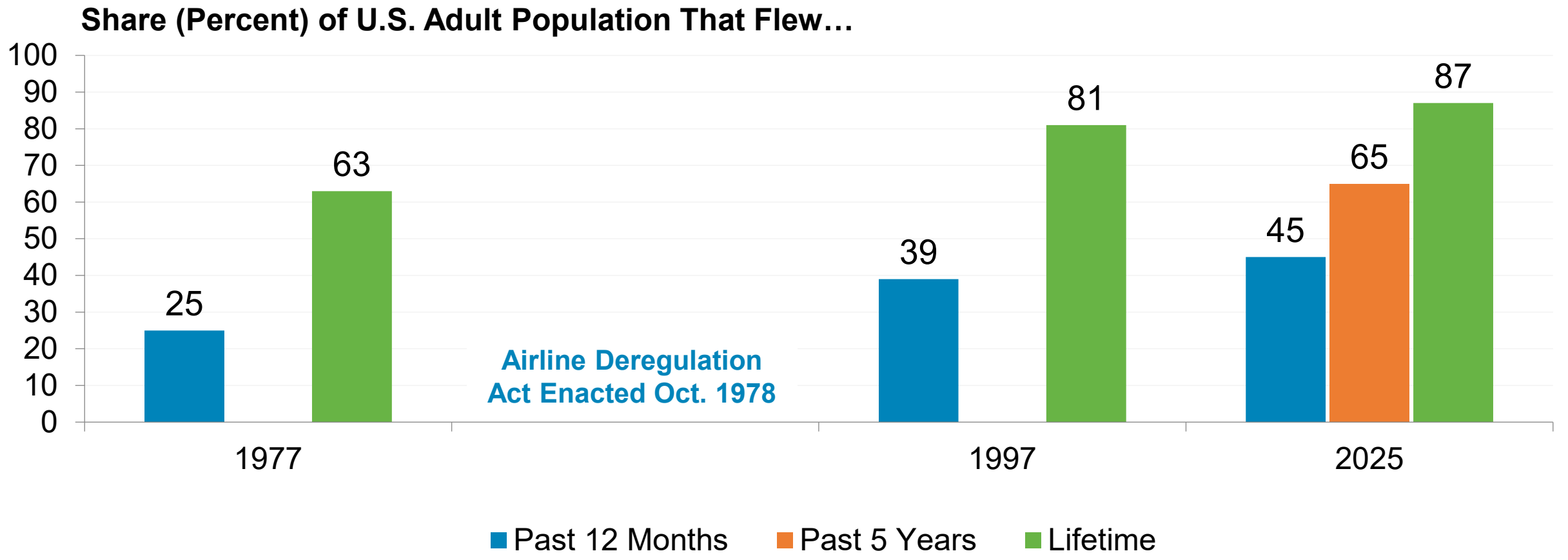




Sources: Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Labor Statistics and Bureau of Transportation Statistics (Data Bank 1C) via Airline Data Inc. and T1 scheduled service for U.S. airlines

As Air Travel Has Become Safer and More Affordable, More Americans Have Taken to the Skies

Almost Nine in Ten Americans Have Flown Commercially; 45% Flew in 2025



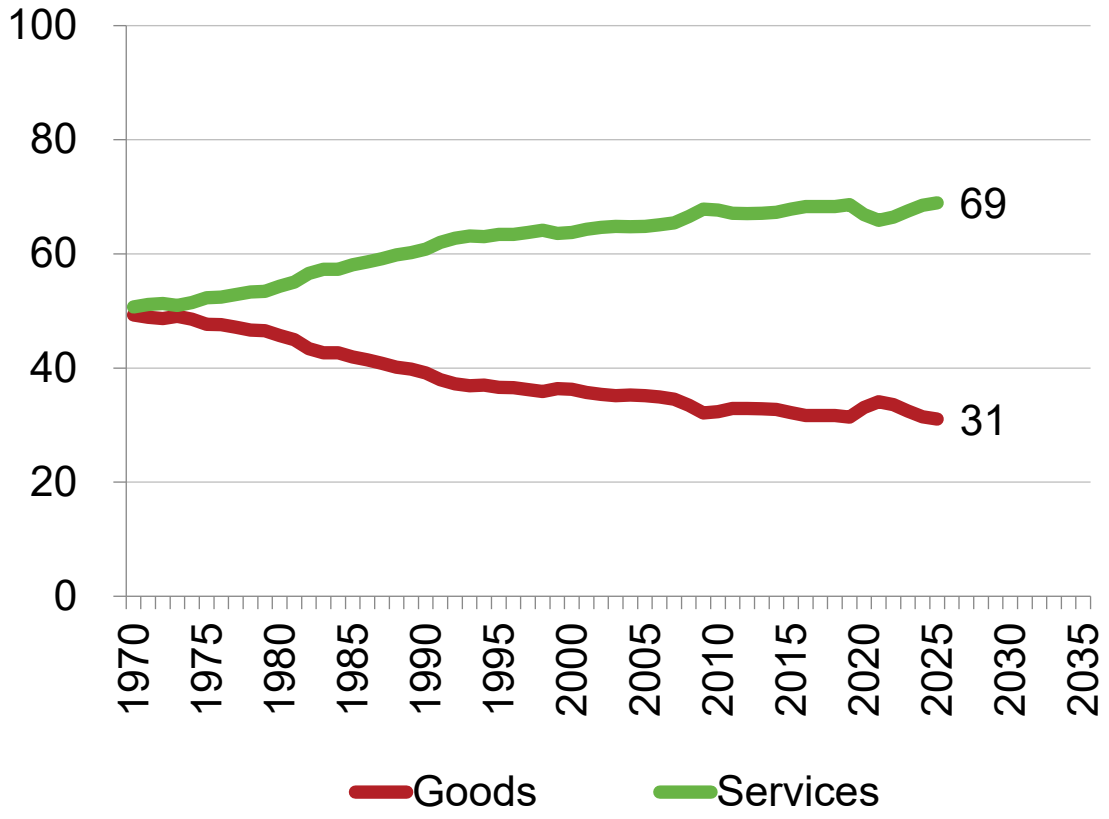
Sources: Historical A4A air travel surveys conducted by Gallup (1971 through 1997) and Ipsos

Note: "Past 5 Years" category was not presented as a possible response preceding 2020.

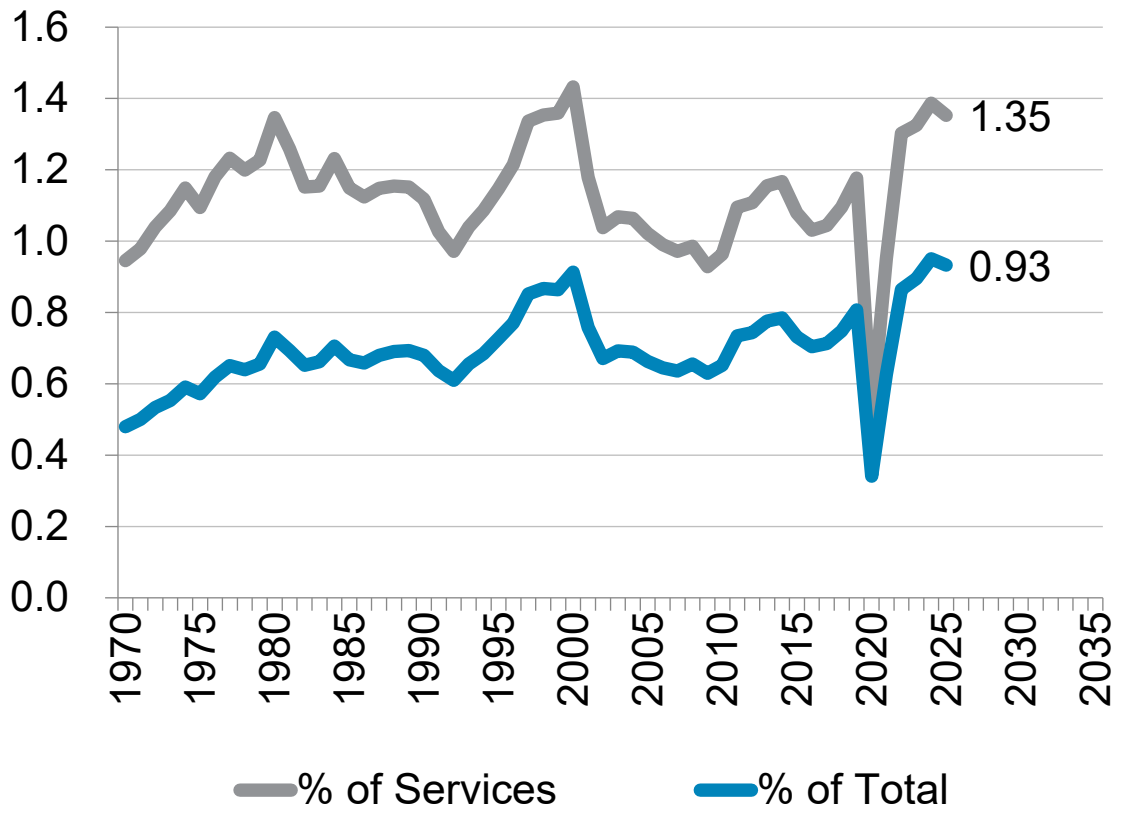
Over Two-Thirds of Americans' Spending Now on Services—Up From Half in 1970

Air Travel Approaching 1% of U.S. Personal Consumption Expenditures

Relative Share (%) of U.S. PCE



Air Transportation Share (%) of U.S. PCE

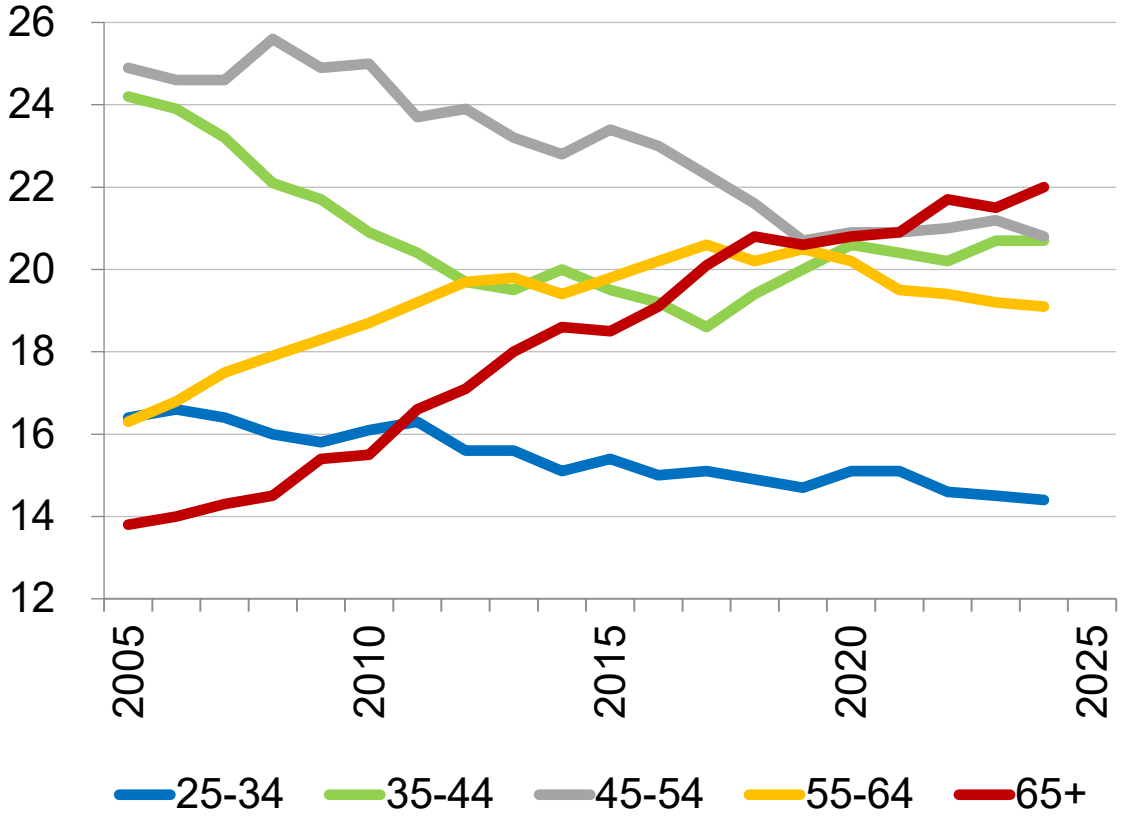


Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis

U.S. Seniors, Who Value Experiences Such as Travel, Constitute a Growing, Spending Force

Americans Age 65+ Accounted for ~22% of Spending in 2024 vs. ~15% in 2010

Share of U.S. Consumer Spending by Age Group



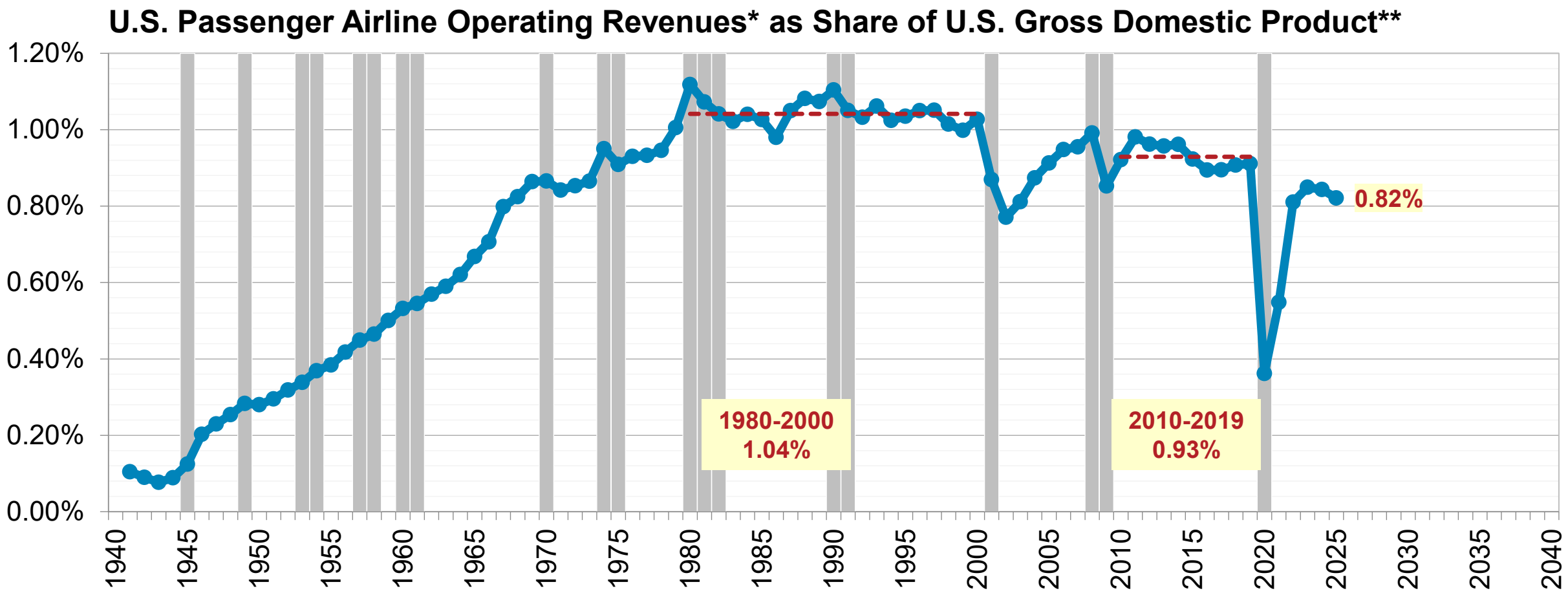
"'Seniors' high spending propensities reflect health, wealth and perhaps lingering psychological effects of the pandemic… **They have less consumer debt, minimal student debt and are more likely to own their homes outright**. Many of those who have mortgages refinanced at the unprecedented low in mortgage rates after the pandemic hit. They are also less likely to need to move due to an expanding family or a new job than Gen Z and Millennials, shielding them from the impact of rising housing costs."

The Wall Street Journal (Oct. 8, 2023)

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Surveys and Gwynn Guilford, "The U.S. Economy's Secret Weapon: Seniors With Money to Spend," *The Wall Street Journal* (Oct. 8, 2023)

Reduced Revenue Relative to Size of U.S. Economy Cost Airlines ~$33 Billion in 2025

Heightened Competition Among Carriers and Travel Modes Plus Ease of Comparison-Shopping

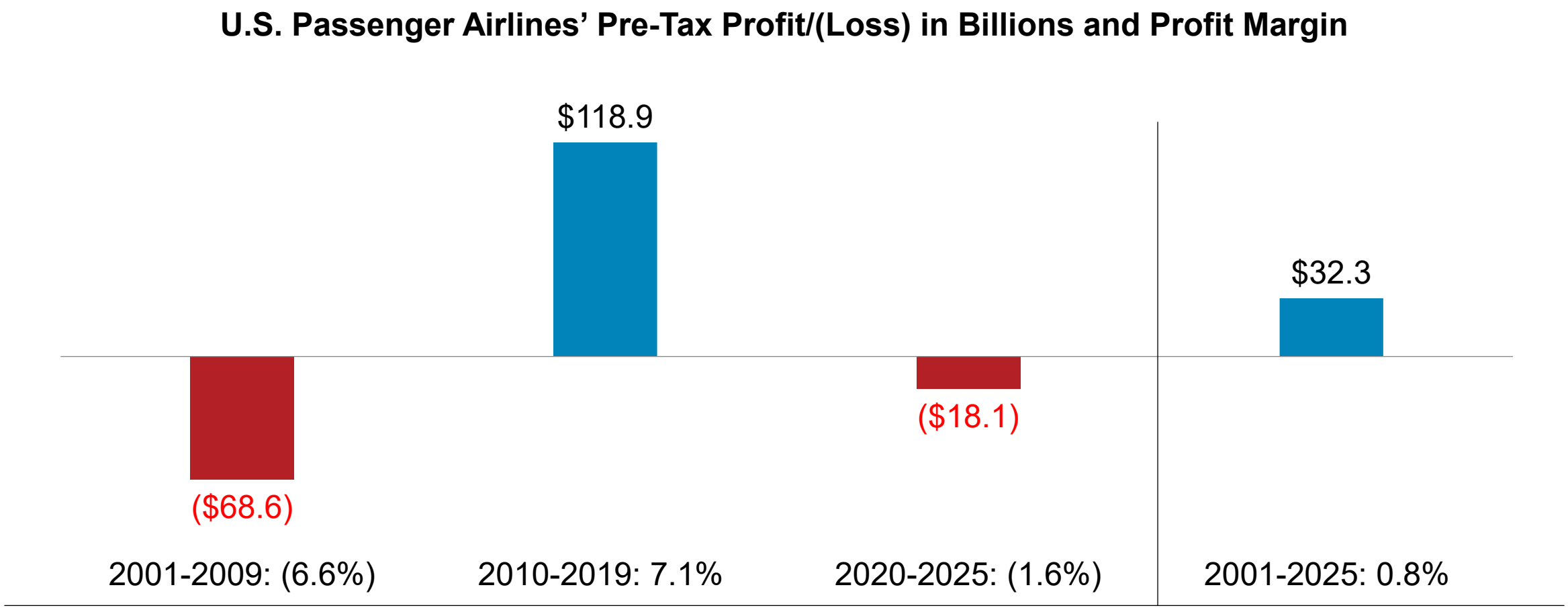


Source: A4A Passenger Airline Cost Index

* DOT Form 41 systemwide operating revenues on a four-quarter rolling basis ** Gray shading indicates U.S. recession exceeding one month in respective year

From 2001-2025, U.S. Airlines Posted a 0.8% Pre-Tax Profit Margin

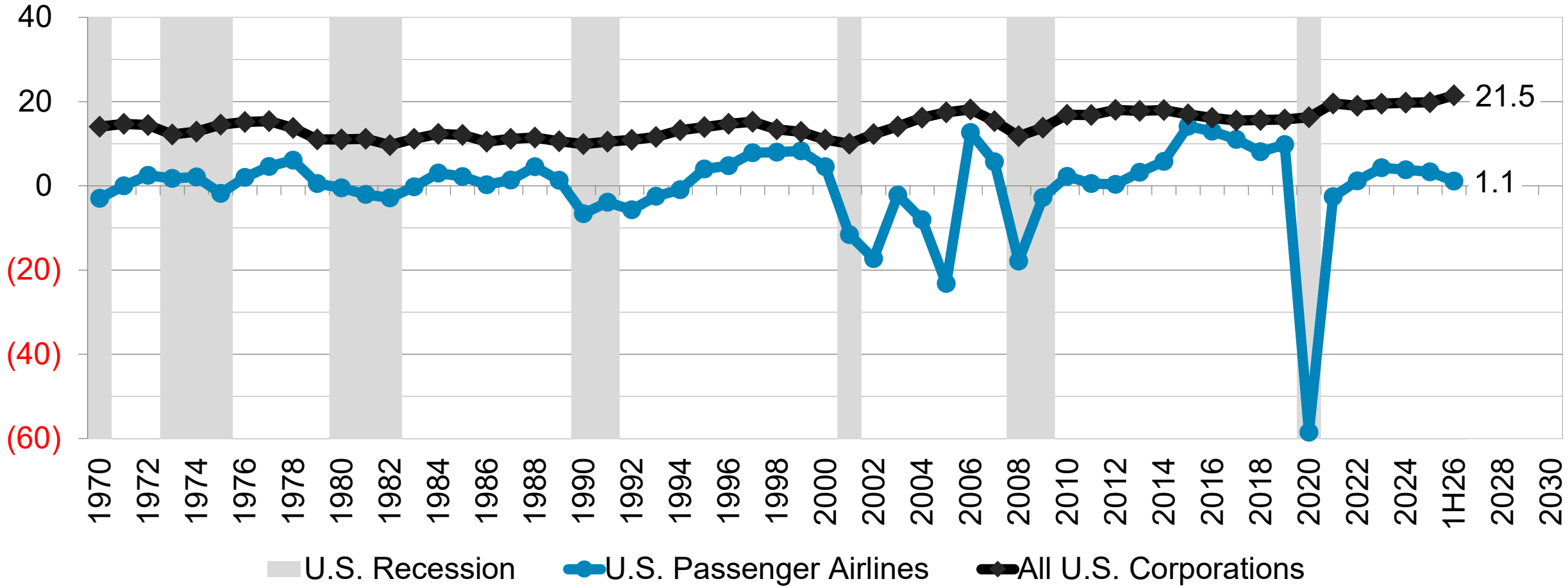
From 2020-2025, $18.1 Billion in Pre-Tax Losses Translated to a Negative 1.6% Margin



Source: A4A Passenger Airline Cost Index and U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics

Even in Best Years, Airline Profitability Lags the U.S. Corporate Average

Pre-Tax Profit Margin (%) Gap Was Narrowest in 2015

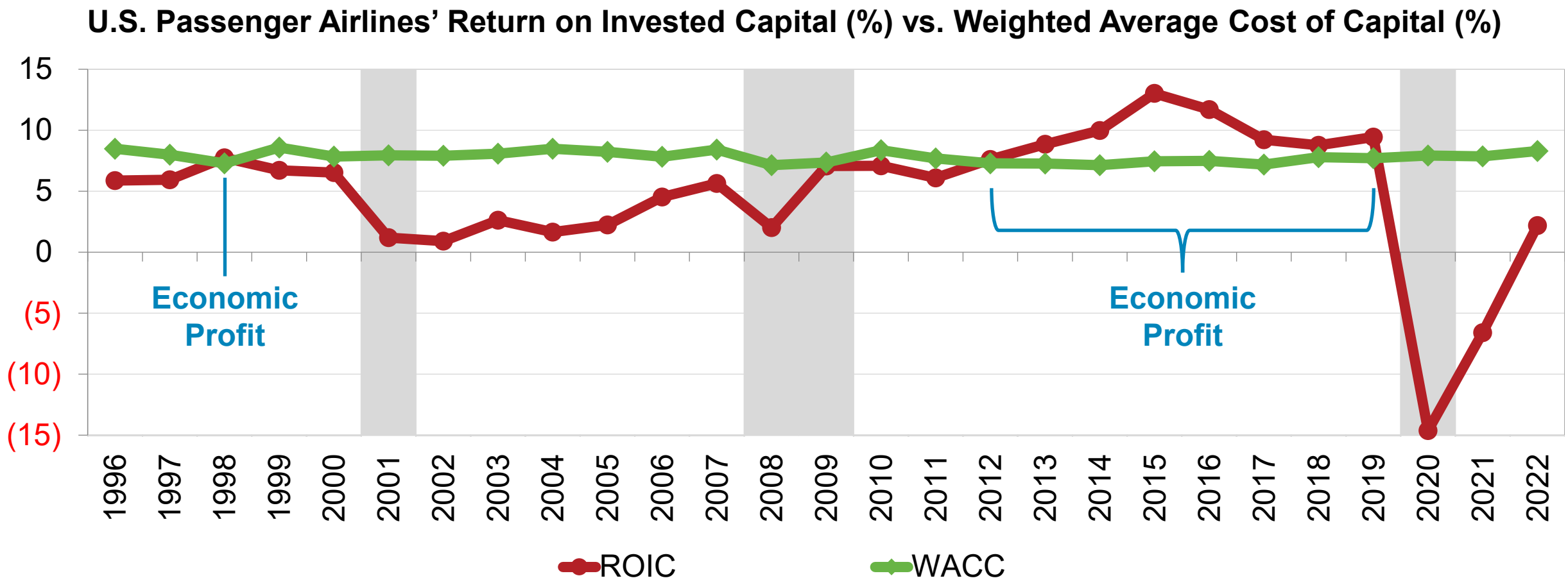


Source: ATA Annual Reports (1970-1976), A4A Passenger Airline Cost Index (1977-present); U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

Note: Years with at least two months in recession highlighted in gray

U.S. Airlines Achieved a Rare Feat in 2012-2019, Generating Economic Profits aka Value Added

Before That Period, 1998 Was the Last Year in Which They Earned Their Cost of Capital



Source: IATA

Note: Years with at least two months in recession highlighted in gray

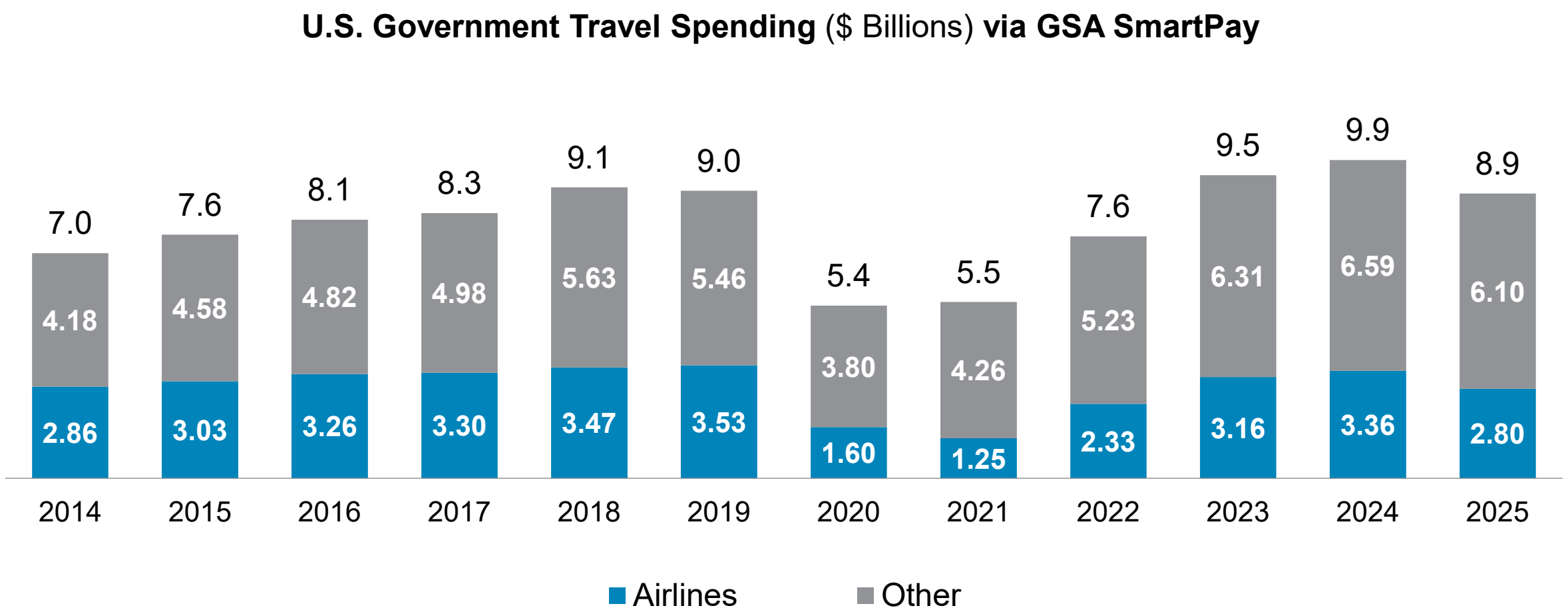
Top-20 Corporate Travel Programs by Amount Spent on U.S.-Booked Air: 2024 vs. 2019

2019	2024
1. Deloitte	1. Amazon
2. Amazon	2. Deloitte
3. IBM	3. Meta
4. Google	4. PwC
5. EY	5. Google
6. PwC	6. McKinsey & Co.
7. Apple	7. Apple
8. Microsoft	8. The Boeing Company
9. McKinsey & Co.	9. RTX Corp.
10. Accenture	10. Lockheed Martin
11. Lockheed Martin	11. EY
12. The Boeing Company	12. FedEx
13. KPMG	13. The World Bank Group
14. ExxonMobil	14. BCG
15. Facebook	15. Accenture
16. United Technologies	16. Microsoft
17. GE	17. Walt Disney Co.
18. Bank of America	18. Oracle
19. JPMorgan Chase	19. Johnson & Johnson
20. Disney	20. Northrop Grumman

Source: *Business Travel News* ranking of corporate travel programs that spent the most on U.S.-booked air

U.S. Federal Agency Spending on Travel Subsided in FY 2025

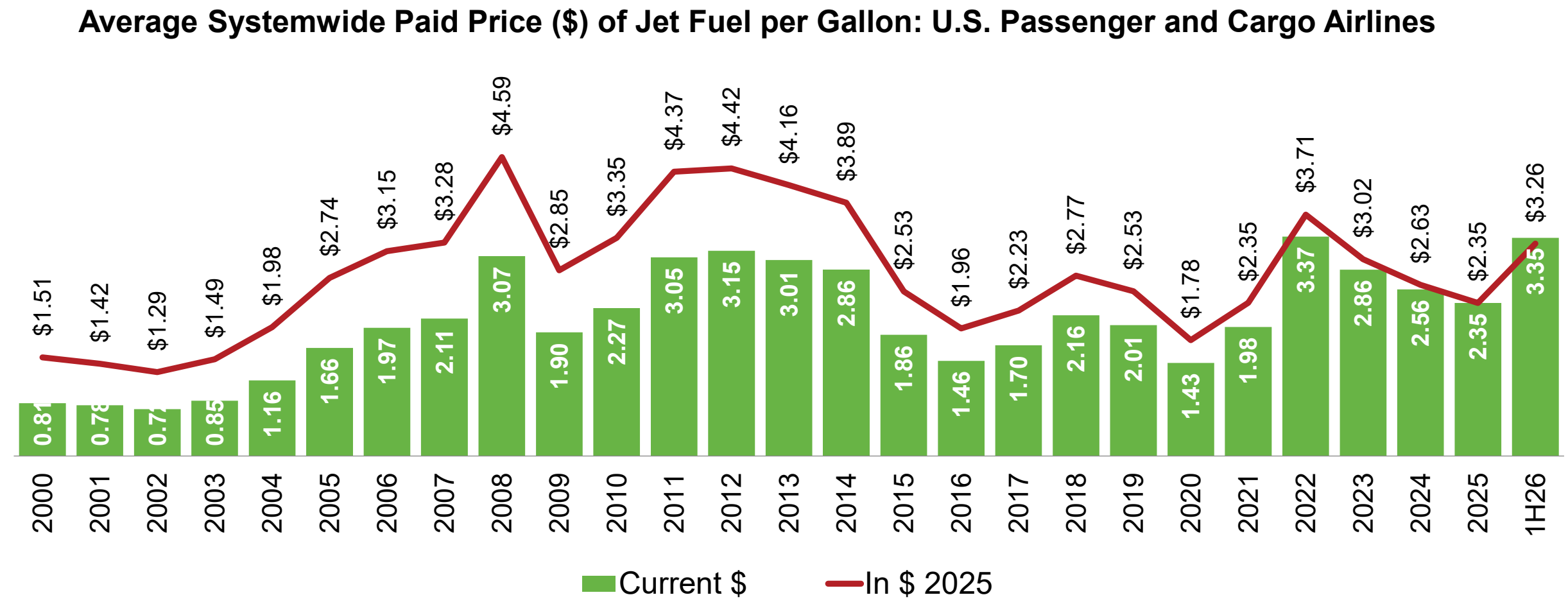
Air Travel Constituted Approximately 30% of GSA SmartPay Travel Expenditures



Source: U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) SmartPay® travel program

In Nominal Terms, Annual Jet-Fuel Prices for U.S. Airlines Reached an All-Time High in 2022

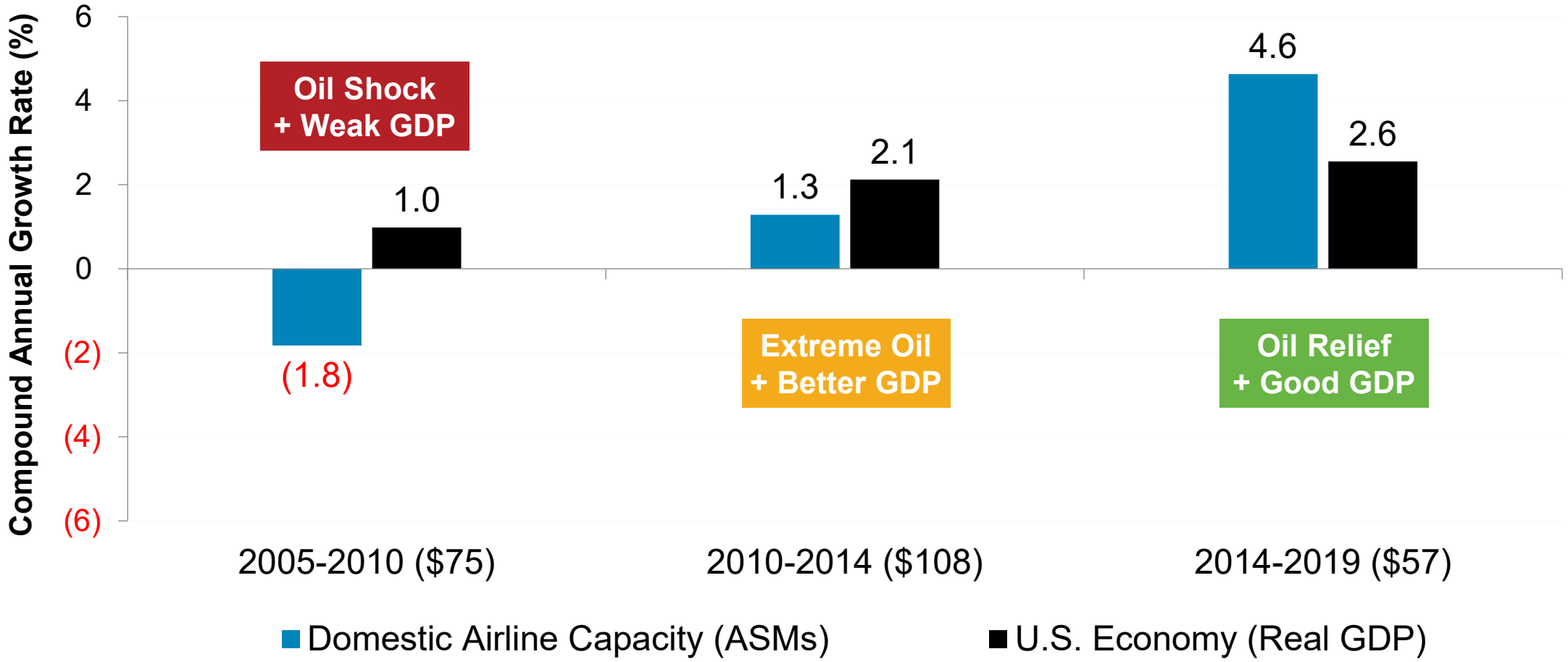
The Inflation-Adjusted Peak Occurred in 2008



Source: Bureau of Transportation Statistics (all U.S. carriers, systemwide scheduled and nonscheduled services)

For U.S. Airlines, the Price of Oil* Is a Significant Determinant of Capacity Growth

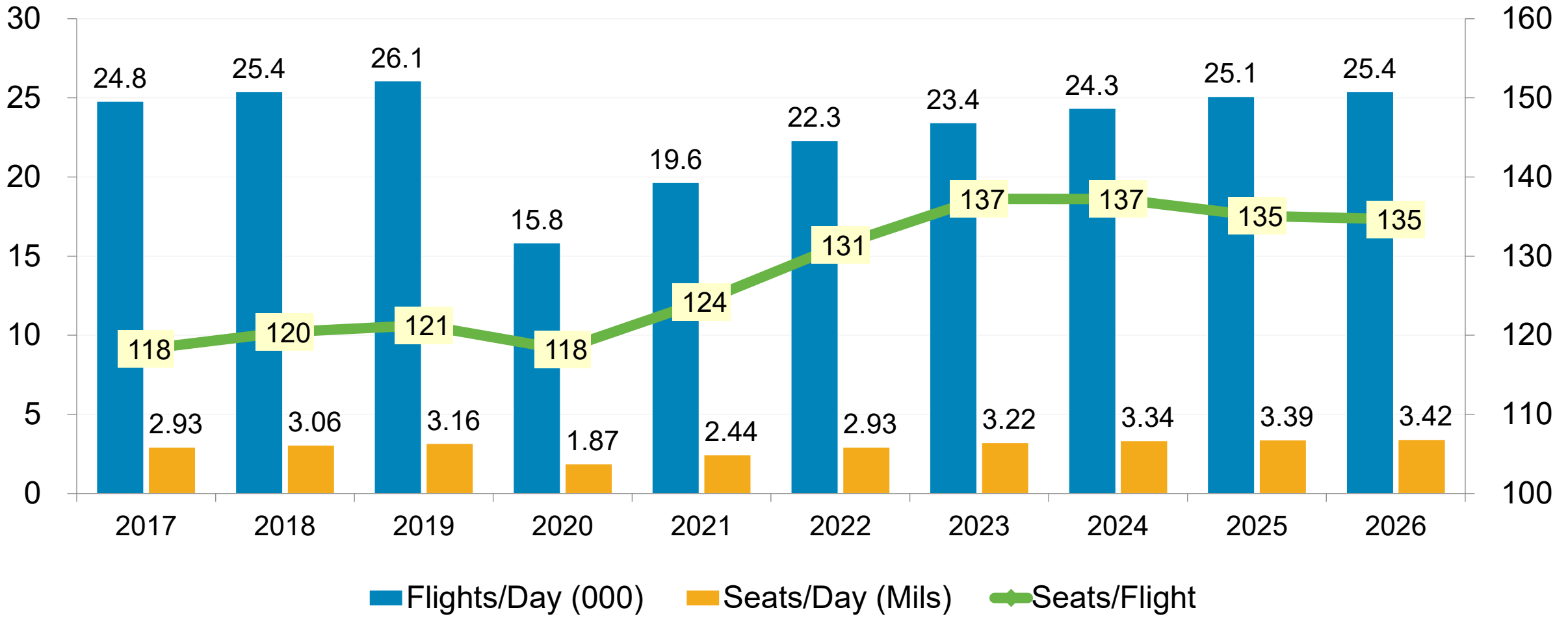
When Fuel Costs Decline and Finances Improve, Growth Accelerates



Sources: Bureau of Economic Analysis, Energy Information Administration, IHS Markit® and Cirium

* Brent crude oil in dollars per barrel, in parentheses

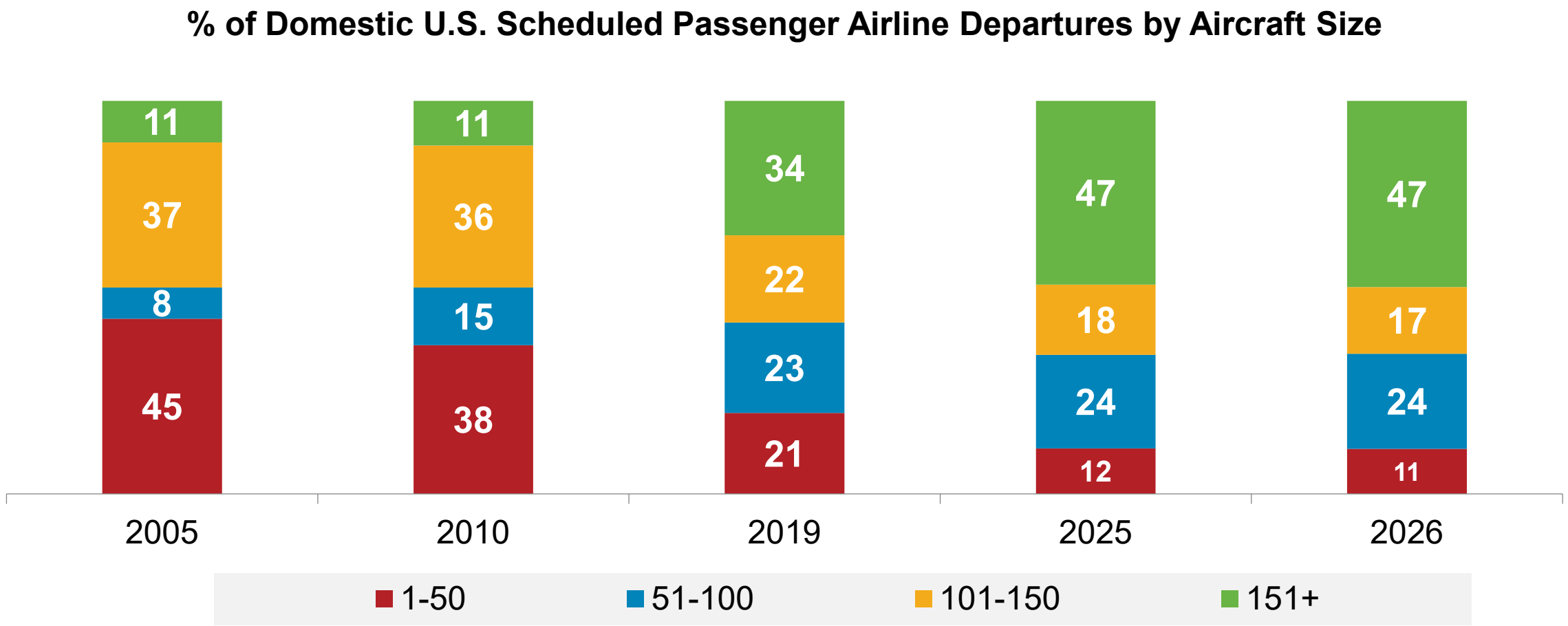
U.S. Airports Are Seeing an All-Time High Supply of Scheduled Seats Despite 3.8% Fewer Flights Than in 2019; Passenger Flights Are Averaging 135 Seats—Up 11% From 2019



Sources: Cirium published schedules (Aug. 21, 2026) for all U.S. and non-U.S. airlines operating scheduled passenger service

Aircraft Exceeding 150 Seats Now Constitute 47% of Domestic Scheduled Passenger Flights

And 68% of Regional Airline Domestic Flights Exceed 50 Seats per Departure

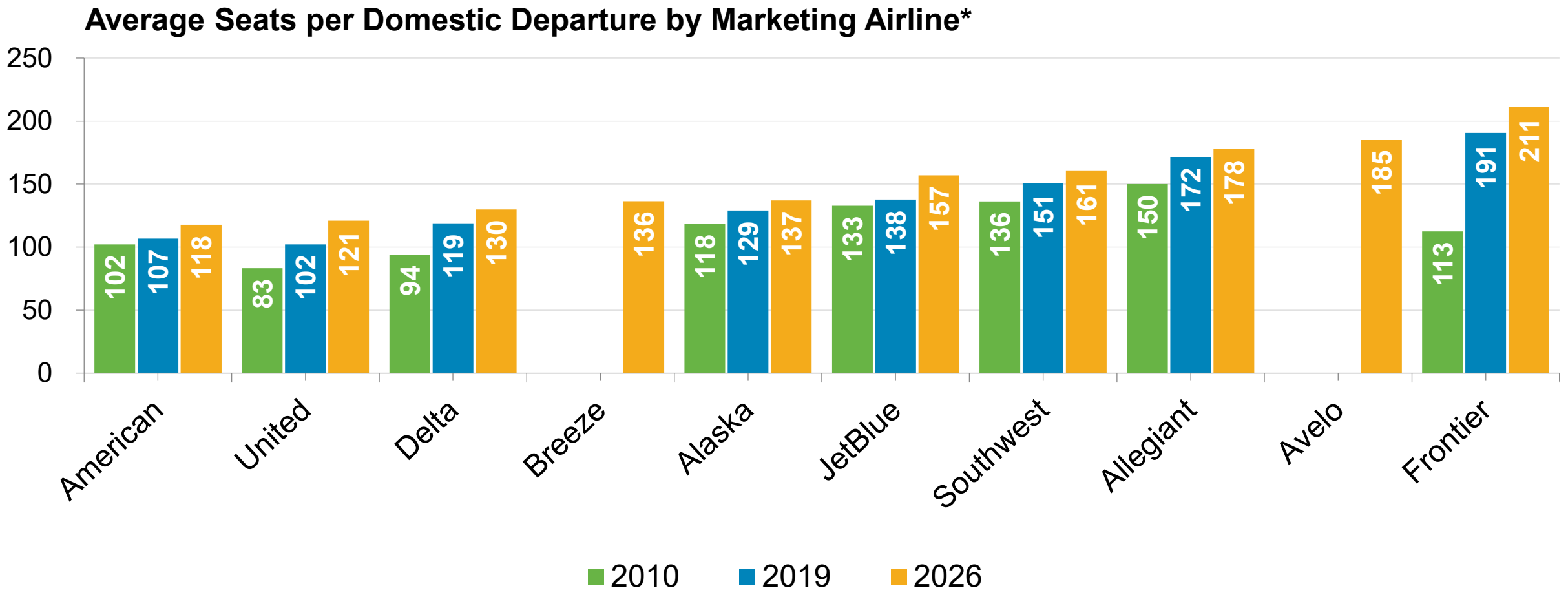


Source: Cirium published schedules (July 17, 2026)

Note: Numbers may not add to 100 due to rounding

All U.S. Airlines Have Migrated to Larger (or Denser) Aircraft Domestically

Global Network Carriers Tend to Have Fewer Seats per Domestic Flight, ULCCs the Most

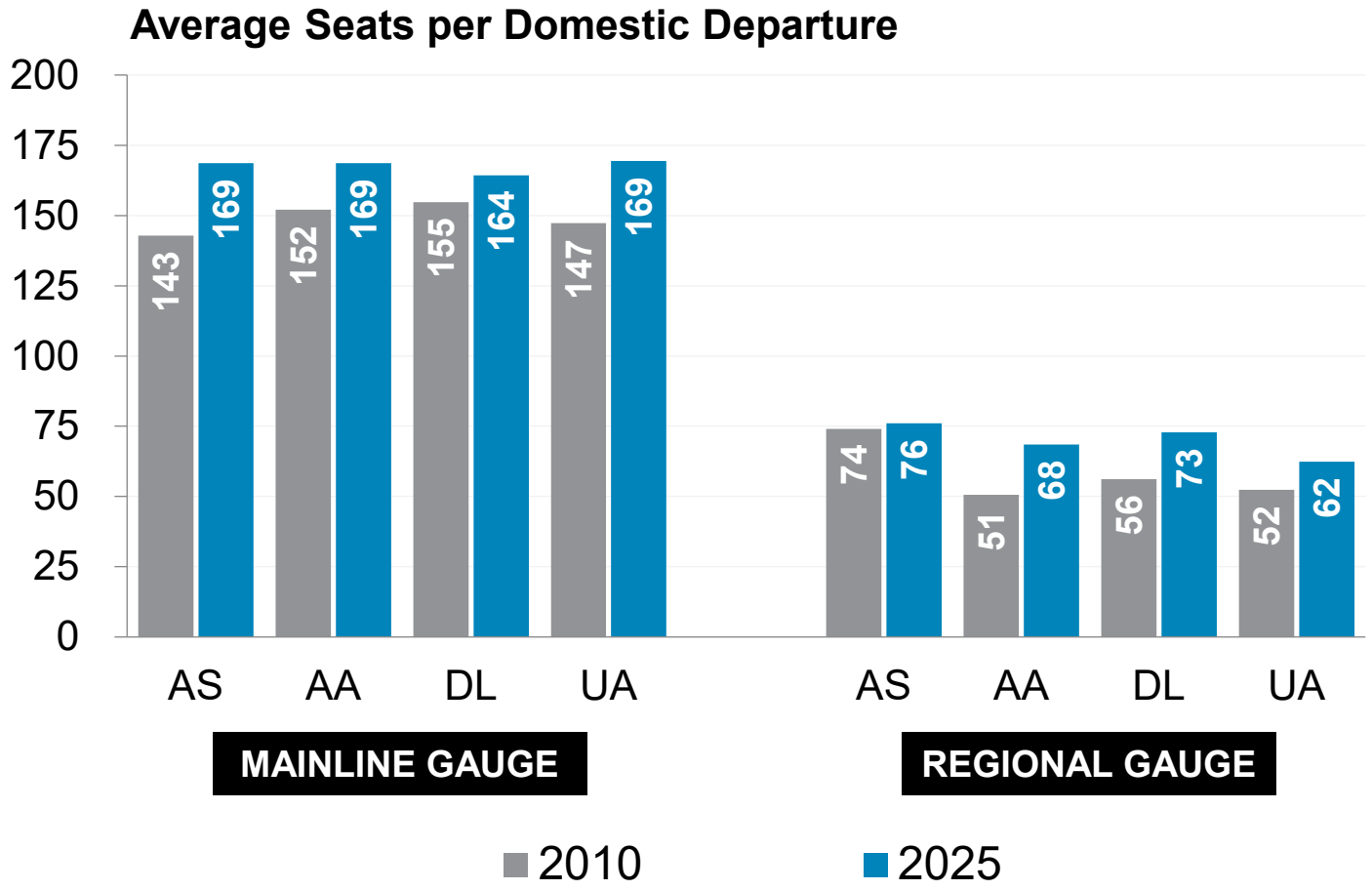


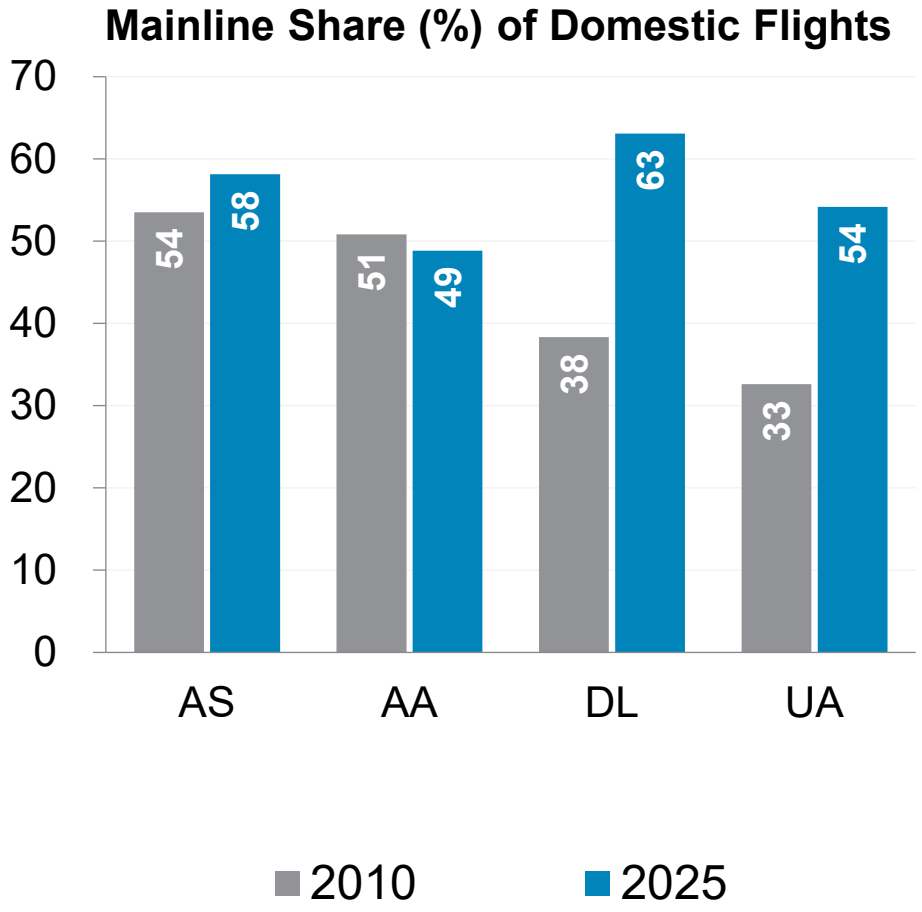
Source: Cirium schedules (June 26, 2026) for selected marketing airlines

* Includes flights operated by regional/express airline partners; Alaska includes Hawaiian; Allegiant includes Sun Country

Domestically, Network Carriers Have Up-Gauged Mainline *and* Regional Operations

Delta and United Have Significantly Boosted the Share of Mainline Flying





Source: Cirium published schedules (Jan. 9, 2026)

Competition in Sample City Pairs: Airline Share of O&D Passengers in 2025 vs. 2007

More Diversity of Business Models and Change in Distribution of Market Share*

LA (BUR/LAX/LGB)-Seattle (PAE/SEA)

2007		2025	
Alaska	67.4	Alaska*	58.5
JetBlue	15.1	Delta	21.8
Southwest	7.2	United	6.5
American	5.6	Frontier	5.0

Boston-Cleveland (CAK/CLE)

2007		2025	
Continental	62.6	JetBlue	46.4
AirTran	30.2	Delta	35.9
		Frontier	8.7

Rochester, NY-South Florida (FLL/MIA)

2007		2025	
AirTran	33.9	Spirit	36.4
US Airways	22.8	American	21.7
Delta	18.5	Southwest	16.9
JetBlue	14.7	Delta	16.4
		United	5.6

Chicago (MDW/ORD)-Sacramento

2007		2025	
United	44.8	United	47.5
Southwest	41.9	Southwest	35.2
US Airways	5.1	American	11.2

Memphis-Orlando (MCO/SFB)

2007		2025	
Northwest	60.1	Southwest	38.3
AirTran	21.6	Spirit	31.3
Frontier	9.8	Delta	11.0
Delta	5.7	Allegiant	10.9
		American	7.6

Austin-Raleigh/Durham

2007		2025	
American	62.1	Southwest	47.0
Southwest	19.0	Delta	39.1
Delta	7.4	American	9.3
Continental	5.8		

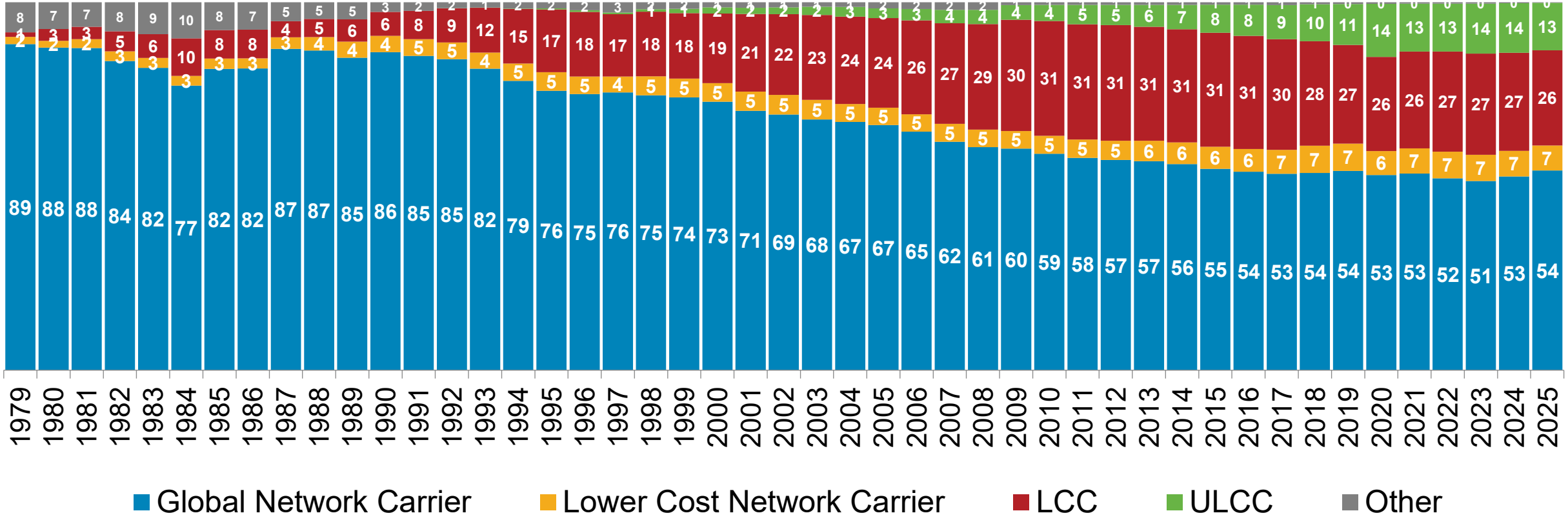
Source: DOT O&D survey data (nondirectional data) via Cirium

* Showing only those airlines with at least 5% of O&D share in each year; Alaska 2025 market share includes Hawaiian Airlines

Global Network Carrier Share of Domestic Passengers Fell From 73% in 2000 to 54% in 2025

In 2025, LCCs and ULCCs Carried 39% of Domestic O&D Passengers

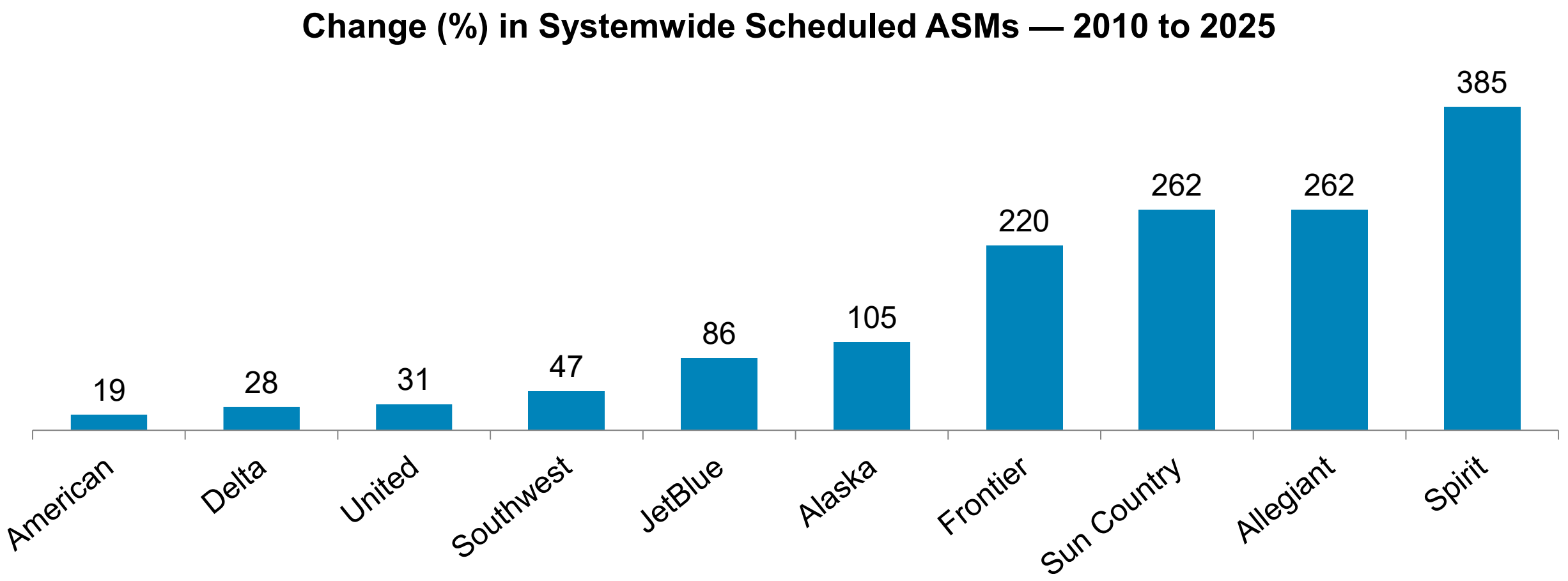
Share (%) of U.S. Domestic O&D Passengers by Airline Business Model



Source: Econic Partners analysis of DOT O&D data. Global network carriers (GNCs) include AA/DL/UA and predecessor airlines (e.g., US Airways, America West, TWA, Northwest, Continental) and defunct legacy network carriers (e.g., Eastern, Braniff). Low-cost carriers includes Southwest, JetBlue, Breeze, Reno Air, Midway, Pro Air, Kiwi International, AirTran, Accessair, Independence, Eastwind, National, ValuJet, ATA, Skybus, People Express, Vanguard, Virgin America, Western Pacific, Air South, and Morris Air). Lower cost network carriers include Alaska, Hawaiian and Aloha. Ultra low-cost carriers (ULCCs) include Allegiant, Frontier, Spirit, Sun Country, and Avelo.

Among U.S. Airline Brands, Lower-Cost Carriers Grew the Fastest From 2010 to 2025

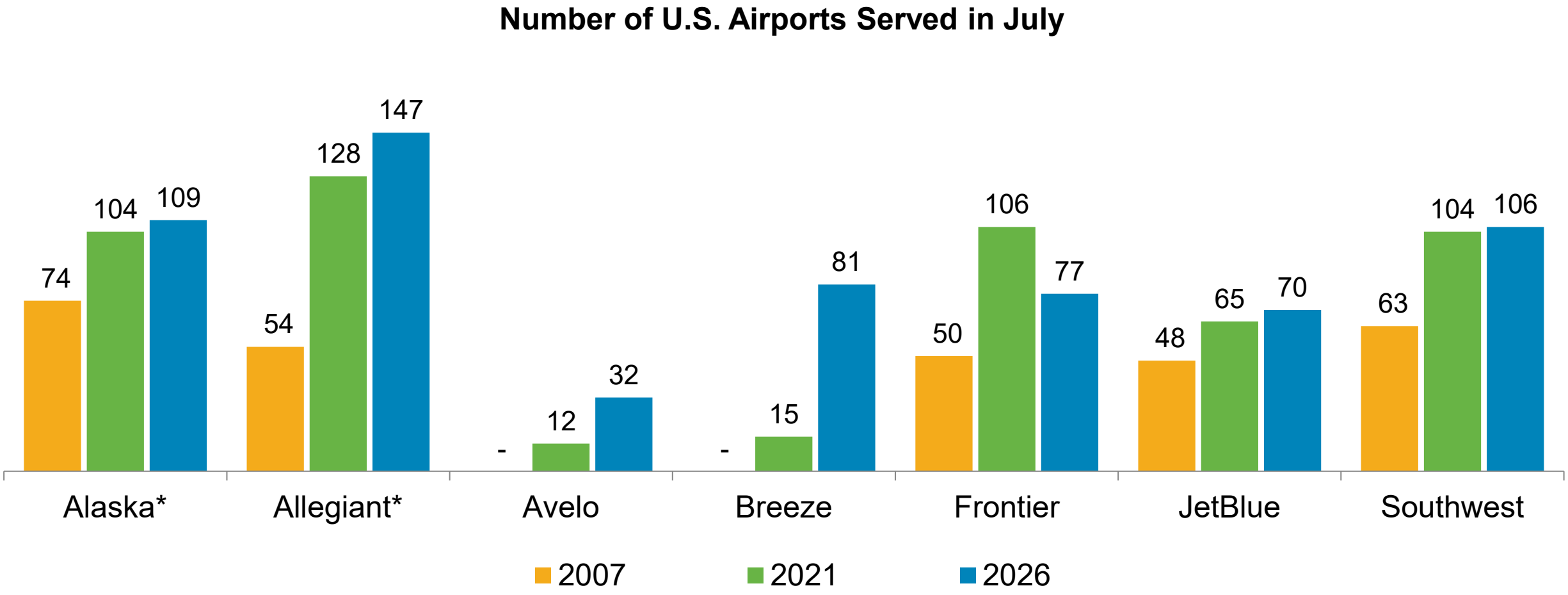
Spirit Airlines Grew Almost Five-Fold



Source: Cirium schedules (April 10, 2026) for selected marketing airlines including merged/acquired predecessors

Lower-Cost U.S. Carriers Have Significantly Expanded Their U.S. Footprint

They Have Established a Multimarket, Nationwide Competitive Presence

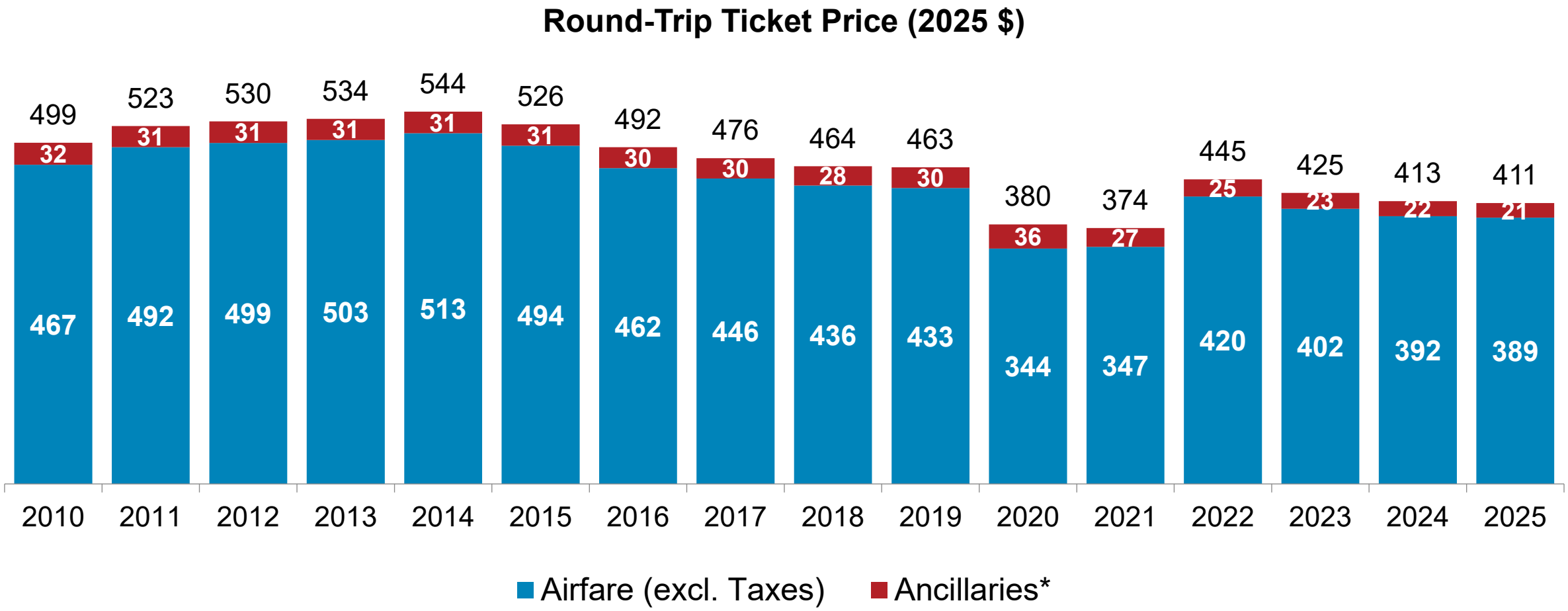


Source: Cirium published schedules (July 17, 2026) for selected marketing airlines

* Alaska counts include Hawaiian Airlines eff. 2025; Allegiant counts include Sun Country Airlines eff. 2026

U.S. DOT Data Show That Inflation-Adjusted Fares/Fees Have Trended Down Since 2014

Including Fees, Average Domestic Price Down 11% From 2019 and 18% From 2010

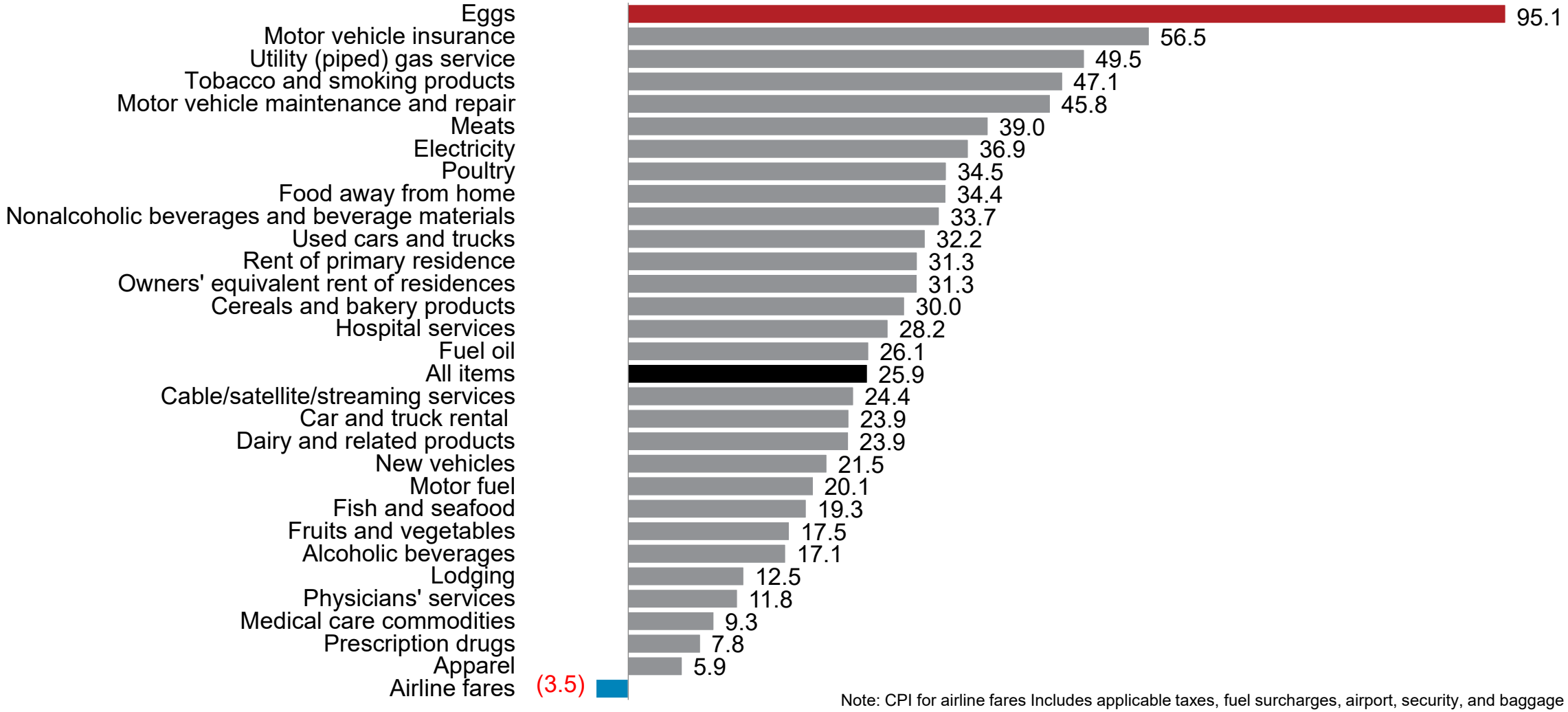


Source: A4A analysis of DOT O&D survey data and DOT Form 41 via Airline Data Inc.

* Fees for reservation changes and transport of bags

From 2019-2025, Airline Fares *Fell* 3.5% While Overall Consumer Prices *Rose* ~26%

Change (%) in Selected U.S. Consumer Price Index (CPI) Components — 2025 vs. 2019

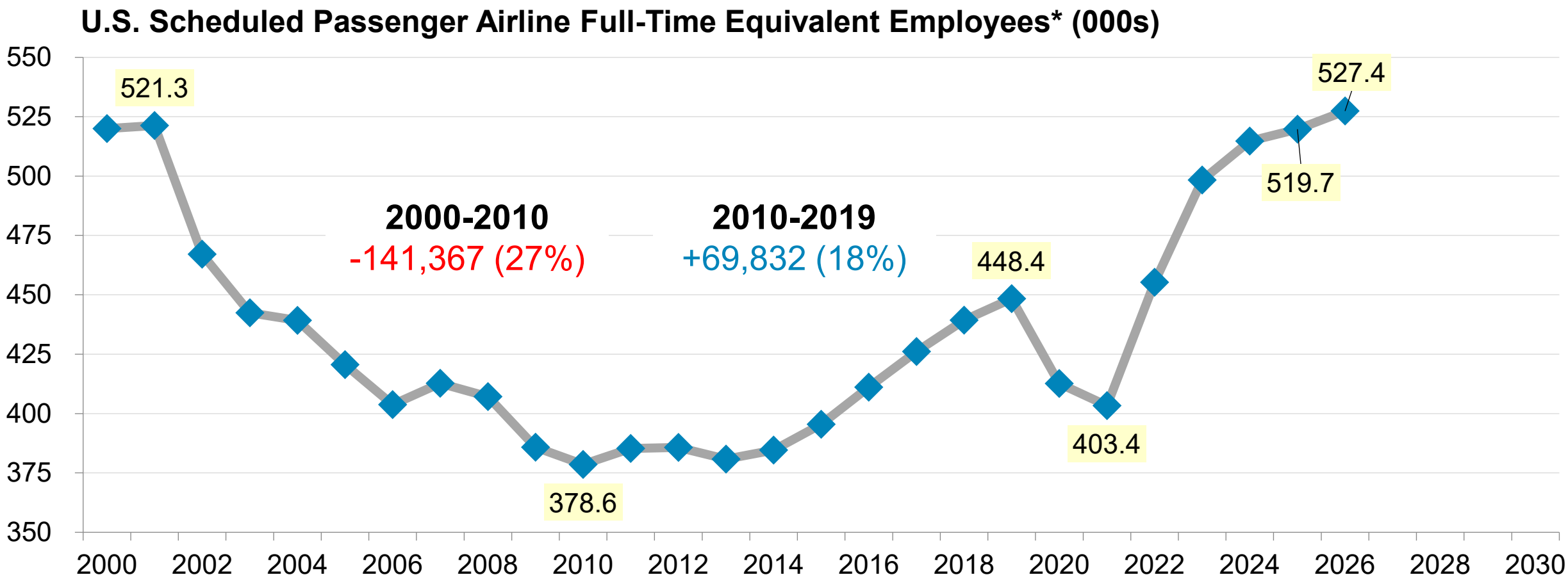


Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Note: CPI for airline fares Includes applicable taxes, fuel surcharges, airport, security, and baggage fees (for first checked bag). Excludes frequent flyer discounts, intra-Alaska trips and trips designated as business travel.

U.S. Passenger Airlines Added 5K More FTEs in 2025, Reaching Largest Workforce Since 2001

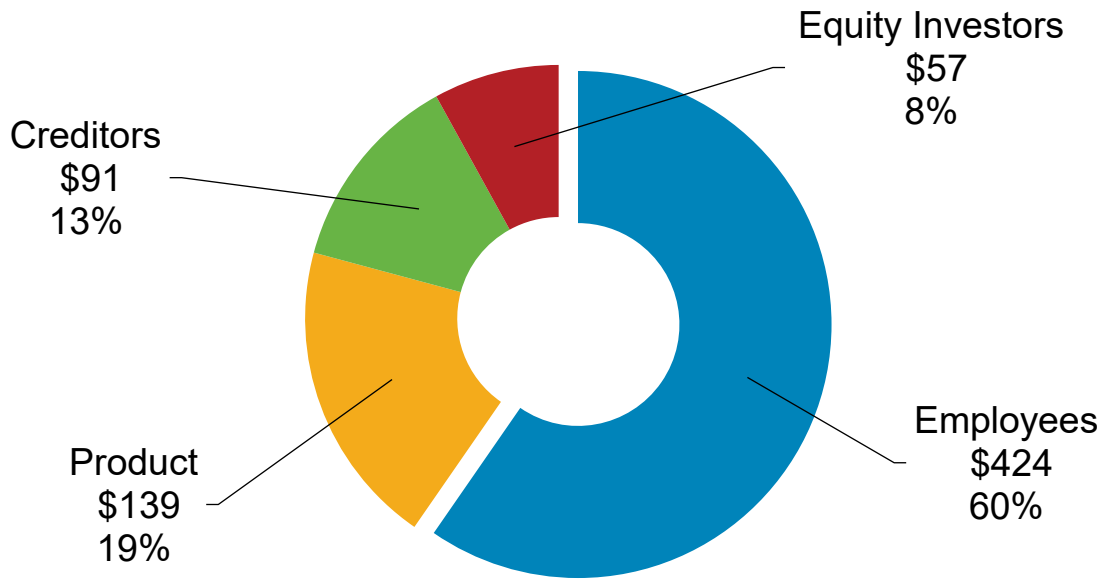
Average FTEs Rose More Than 71,000 From 2019 to 2025



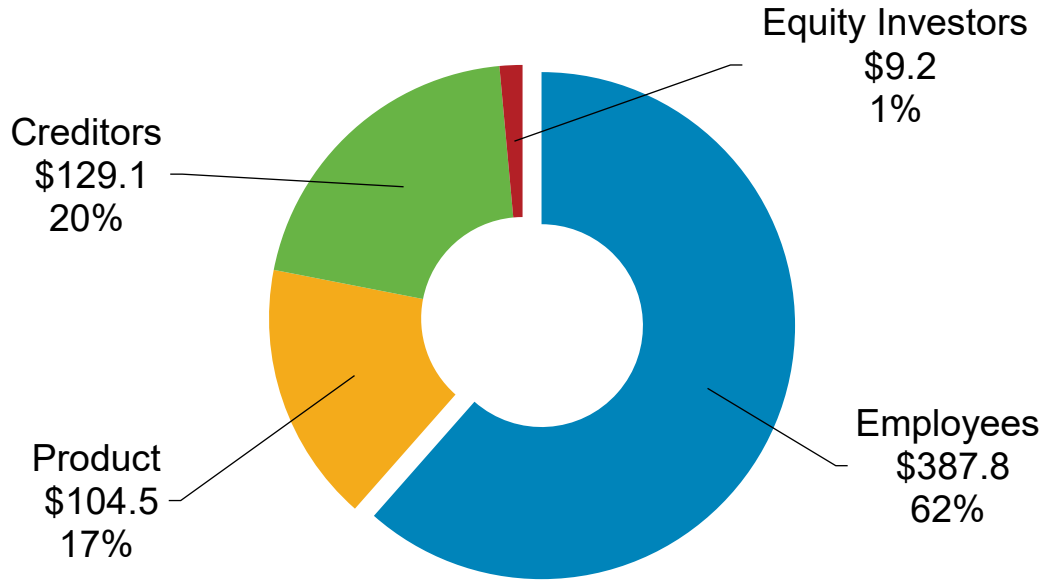
Source: Bureau of Transportation Statistics for scheduled U.S. passenger airlines

By Far, U.S. Passenger Airlines Allocate the Most Capital (> 60%) to the Workforce, Followed by Customers (Product Reinvestment), Creditors (Debt Reduction) and Equity Investors

Allocation of Capital to Major Stakeholders
2010-2019 ($ Billions)



Allocation of Capital to Major Stakeholders
2020-2025 ($ Billions)

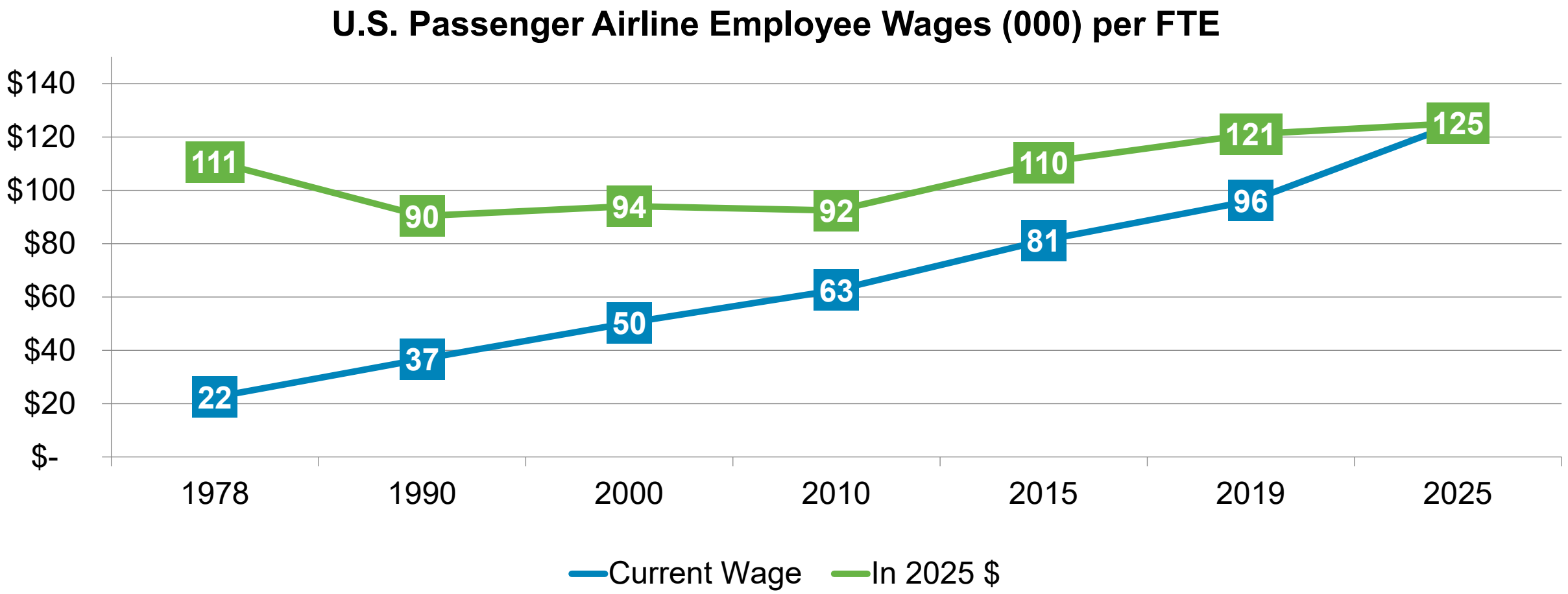


Sources: BTS Form 41 and company SEC filings

* Employees = salaries/wages/benefits; product = fleet/GSE/facilities/apps/other; creditors = debt retirement; equity investors = dividends/share repurchases

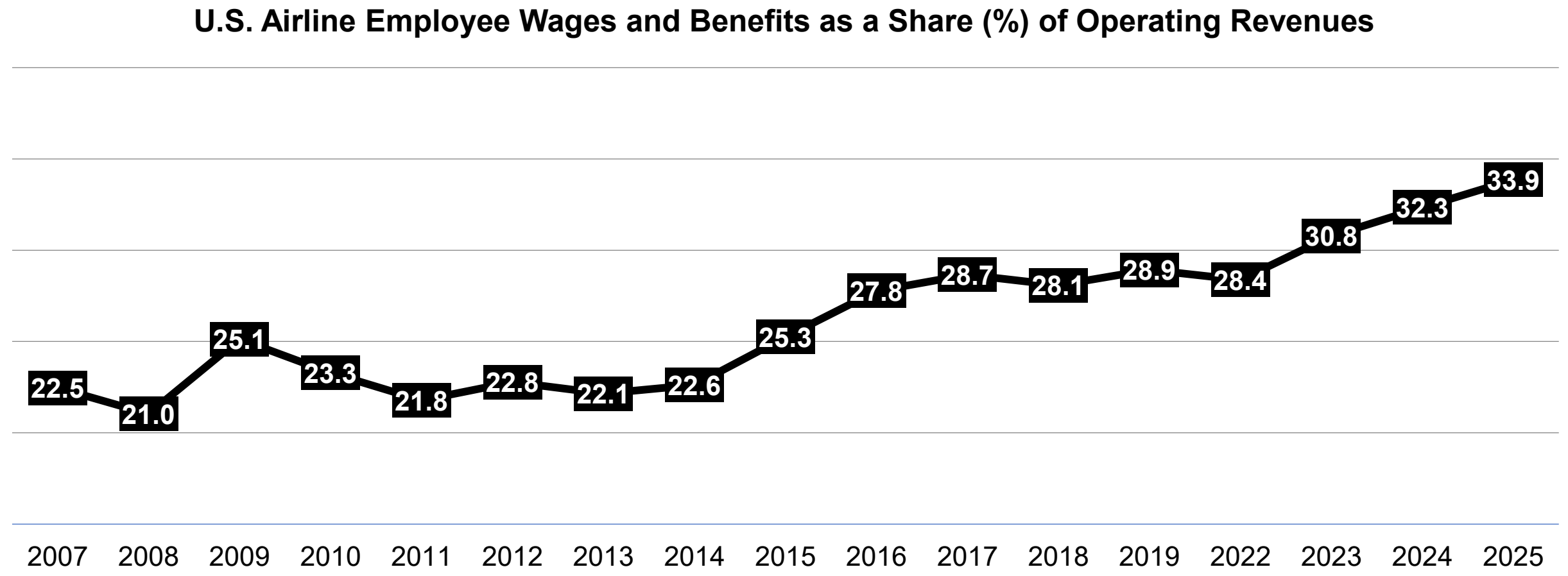
Average Compensation per Employee Reached and All-Time High in 2025

In Real Terms, Up 35% Since 2010, 13% Since 1978



Source: A4A Passenger Airline Cost Index

Firmer Financial Footing Has Enabled Airlines to Re-Invest in Their Employees

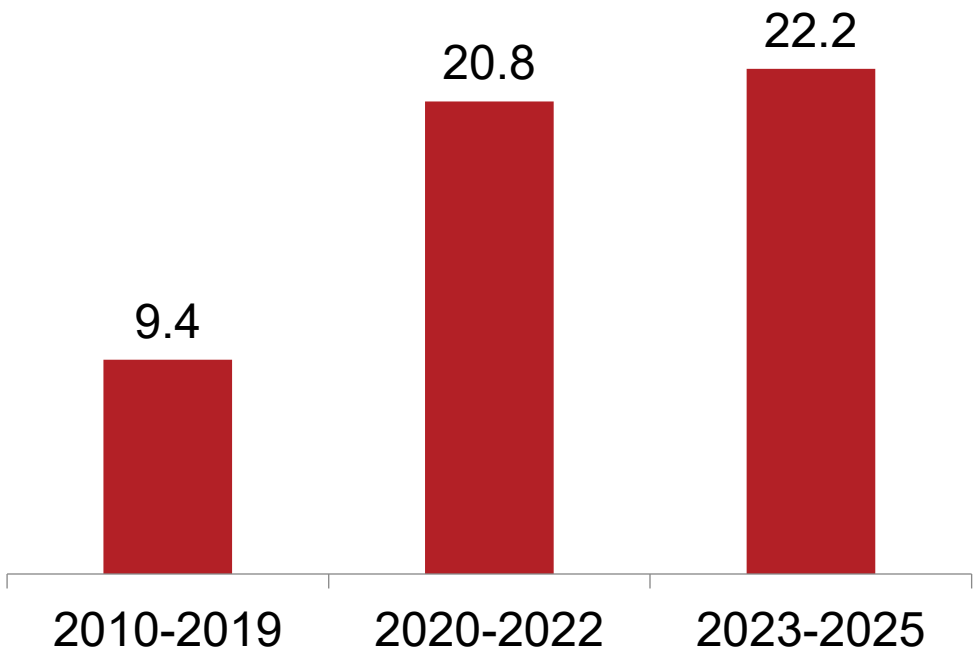


Source: A4A Passenger Airline Cost Index

From 2023-2025, U.S. Passenger Airlines Retired ~$67B in Debt — More Than $22B Annually

Returns to Shareholders Have Been Substantially Slimmer Post-Pandemic

Average Annual Retirement* of Long-Term Debt ($ Billions)

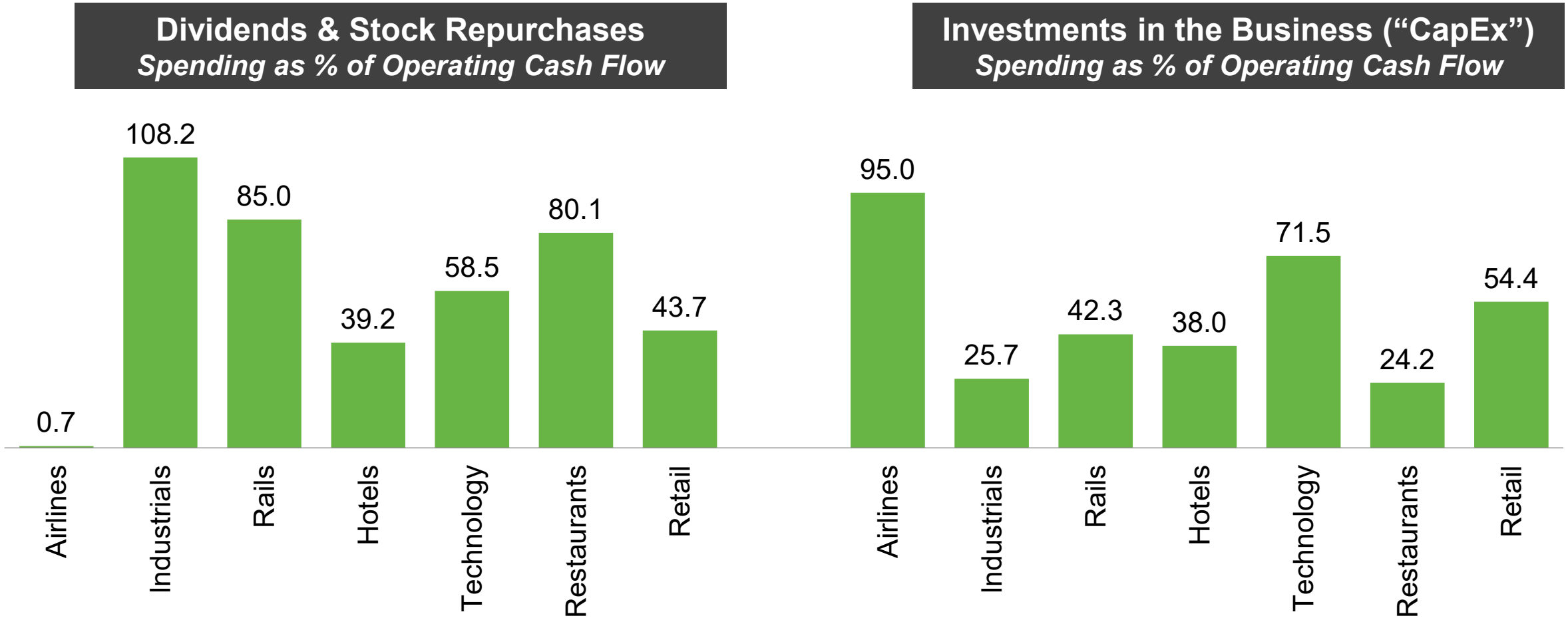


Average Annual Returns to Shareholders ($ Billions)

Source: SEC filings of AAL/ALGT/ALK/DAL/HA/JBLU/LUV/SAVE/SNCY/UAL/ULCC/RJET/SKYW and merged predecessors

* Payments on long-term debt and capital lease obligations

In 2021-2023, Relative to Other U.S. Industries, Airlines Reinvested Far More Cash Into the Business (via "Capital Expenditures") Than They Spent on Shareholders ("Capital Returns")



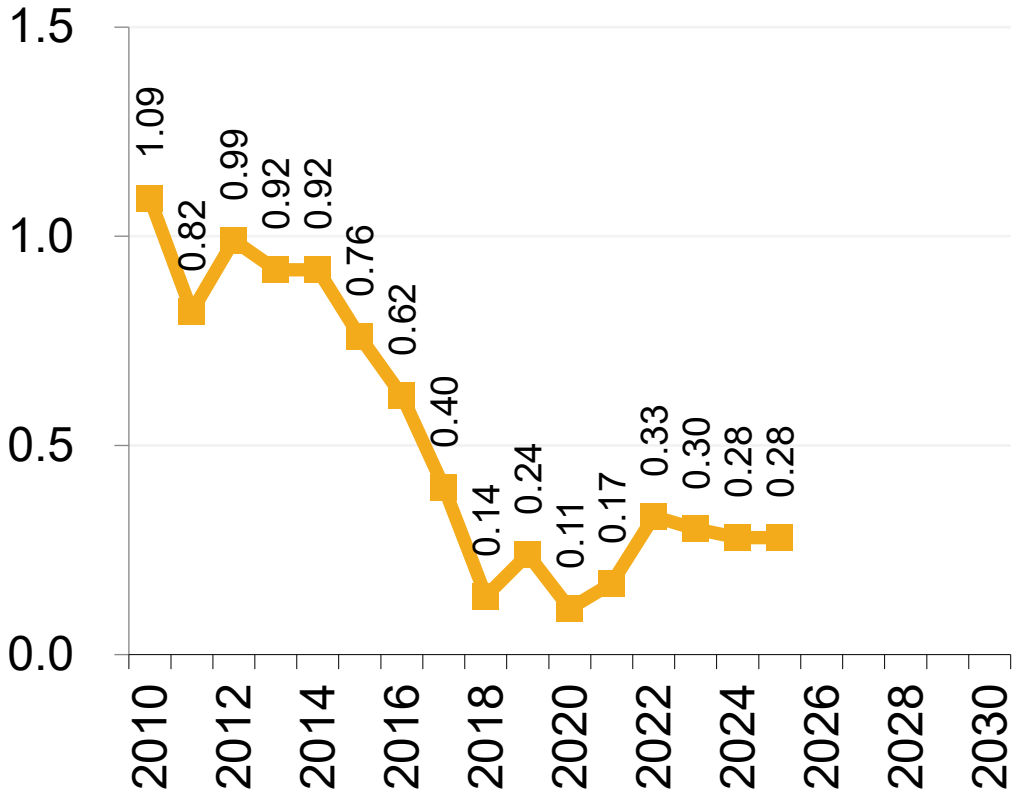
Source: Goldman Sachs, "Cash Flow Benchmarking by Sector" (March 2024), with data from Factset and Bloomberg

Note: CapEx includes R&D expense for technology companies.

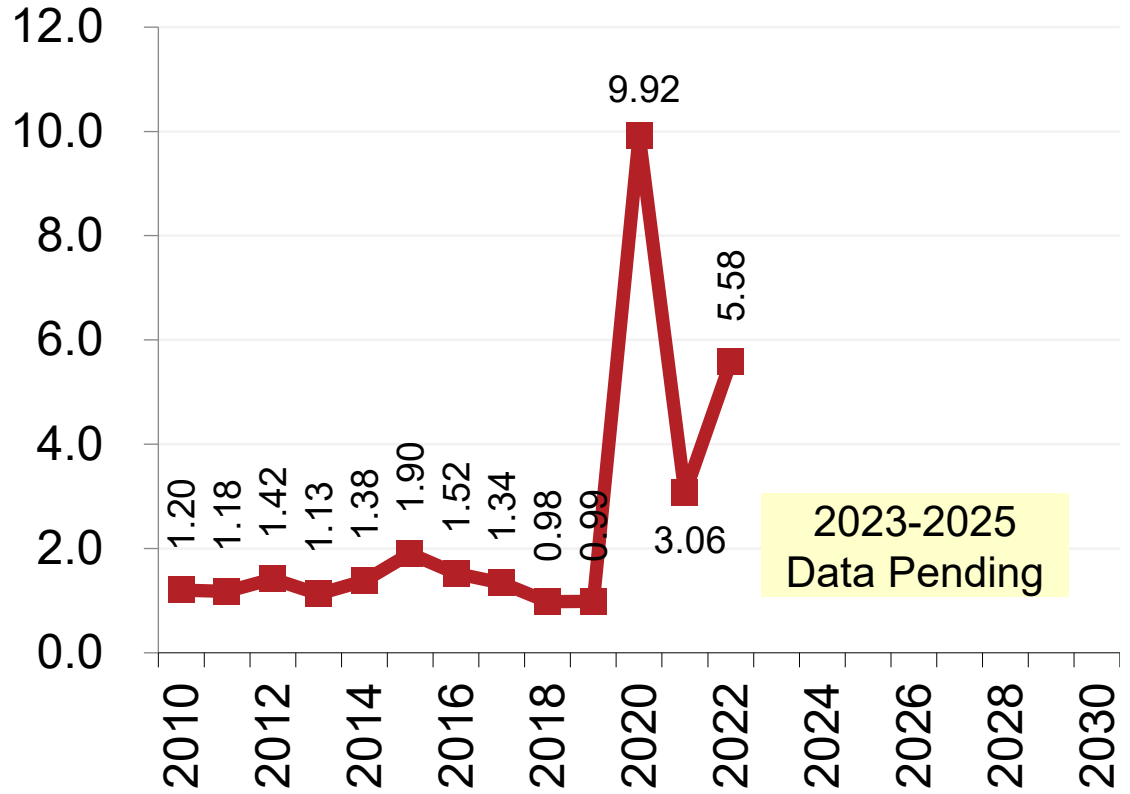
Involuntary Denied Boardings Have Plunged

Grounding of B737 MAX Largely Responsible for Anomalous 2019 Increase in Denied Boardings

Involuntary Denied Boardings per 10K Pax*

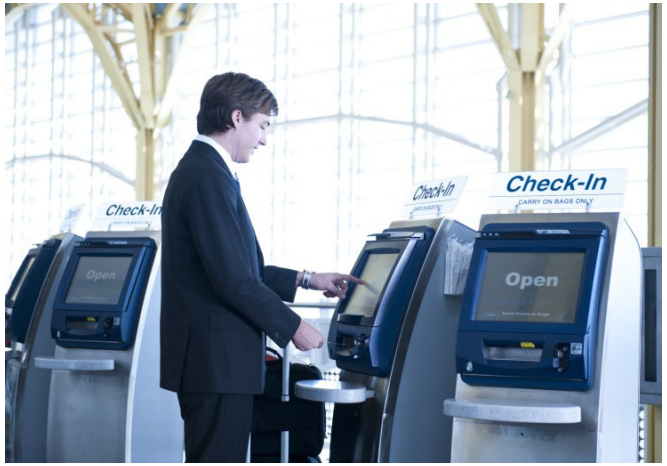


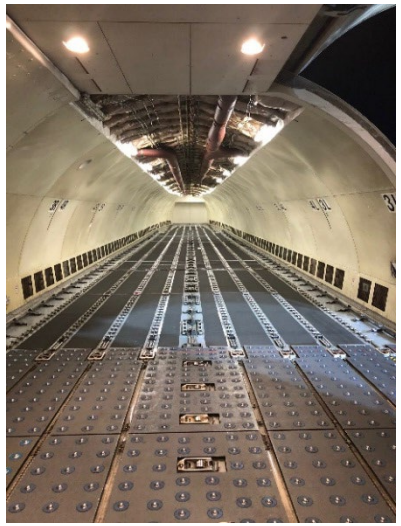
DOT Customer Complaints per 100K Pax*

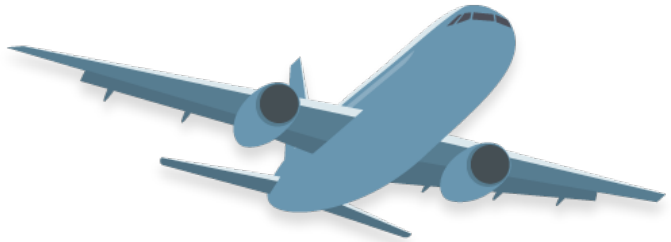


Source: DOT *Air Travel Consumer Report (*http://www.dot.gov/airconsumer/air-travel-consumer-reports)

* U.S. passenger airlines

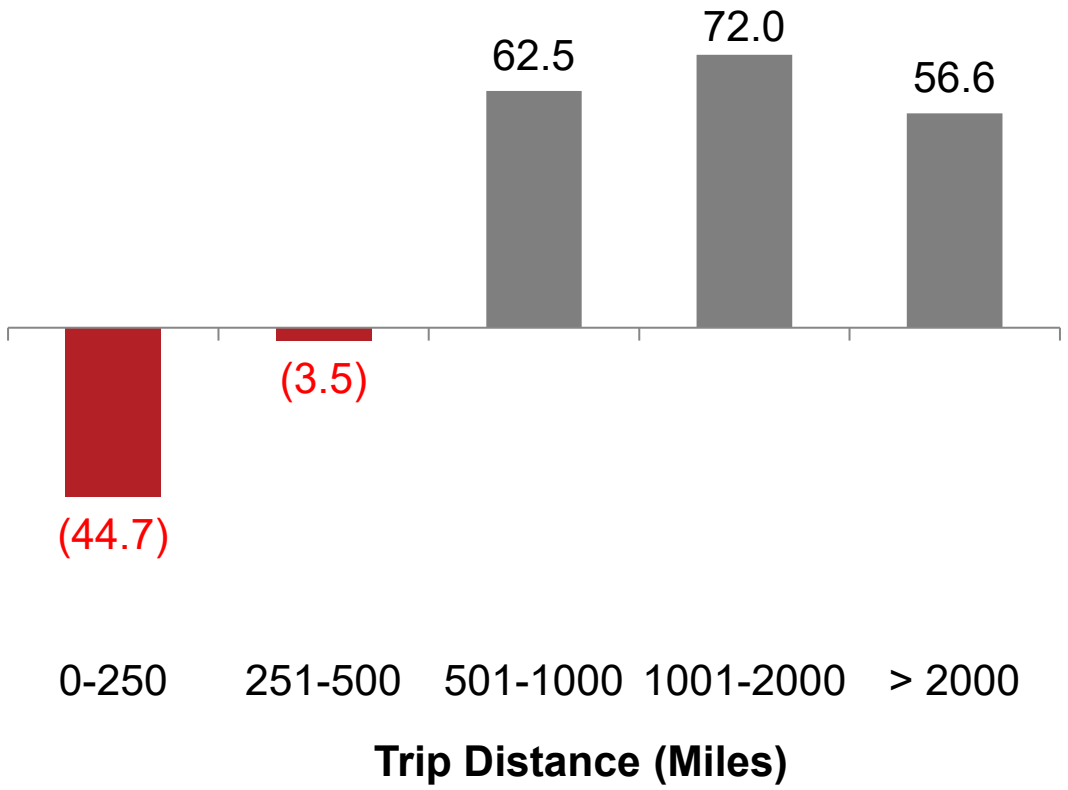

Check-In
Open



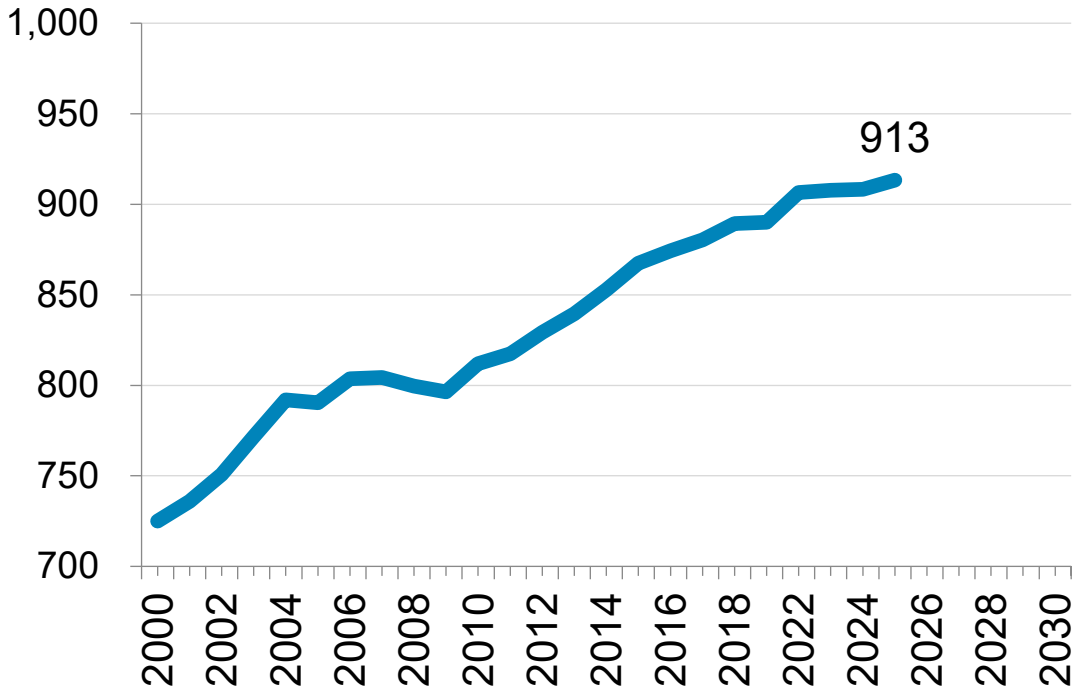


After 9/11, Domestic Passengers Avoided Air Travel on Shorter Distances; Airlines Adjusted Their Networks Accordingly, Aided by Aircraft Advances, to Increase Average Seat Distance

Change (%) in Domestic O&D Passengers by Distance Band (Miles) — Pre-9/11* to 2025



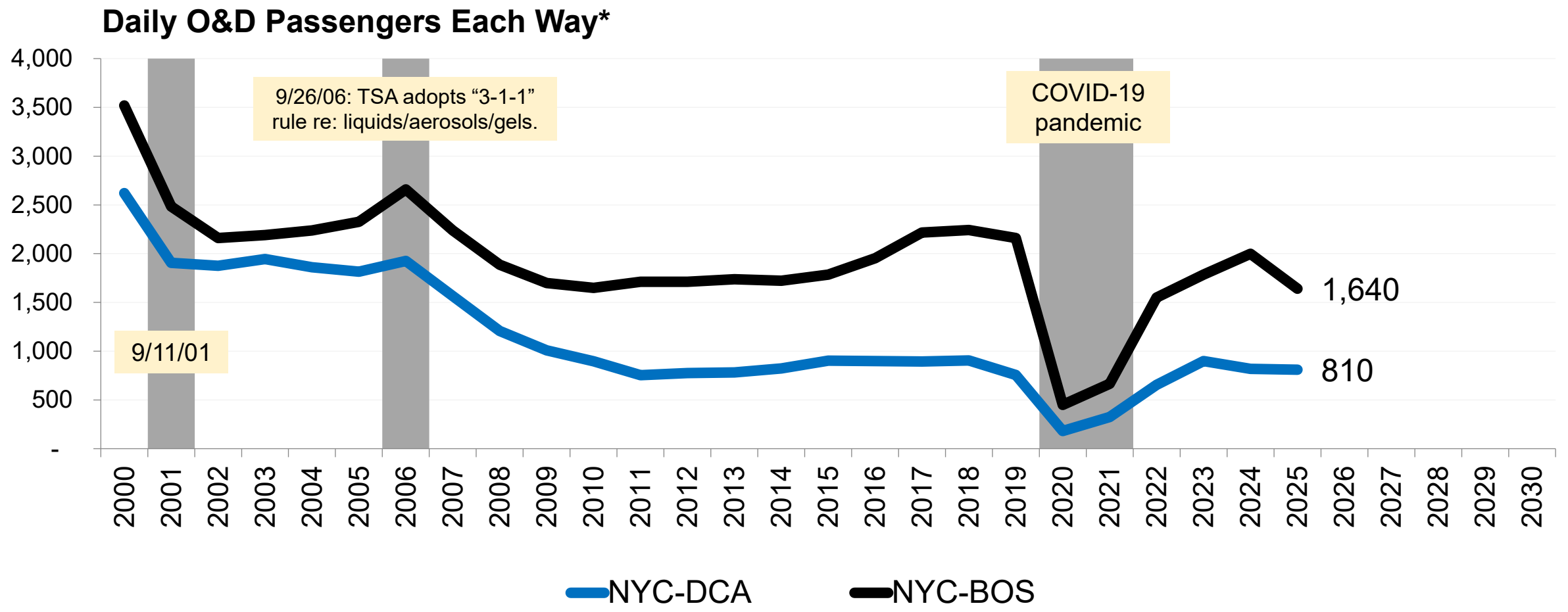
Average Miles per Domestic Scheduled Seat



Source: DOT O&D Survey data and Cirium published airline schedules (April 10, 2026)

* Four quarters ending June 2001

Air Passenger Volumes Between New York and Boston/Washington Have Fallen Sharply Since 2000, Due Largely to Changes in Security Requirements and Improved Alternatives to Flying

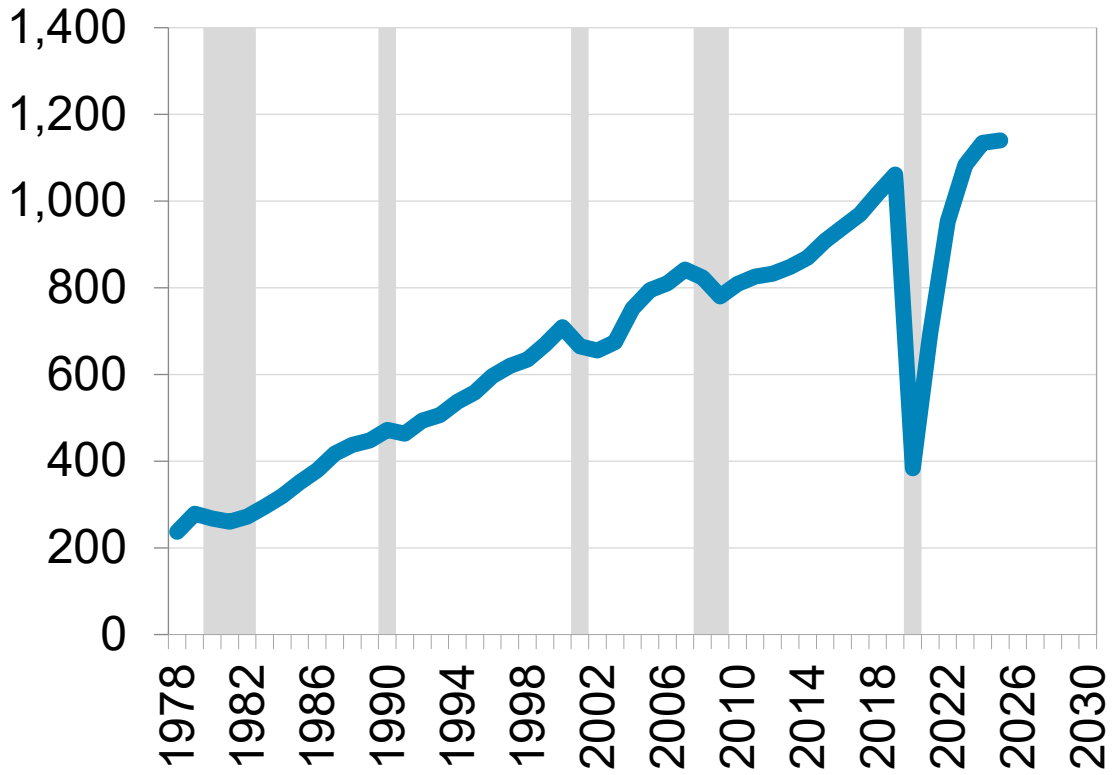


Source: DOT O&D Survey data

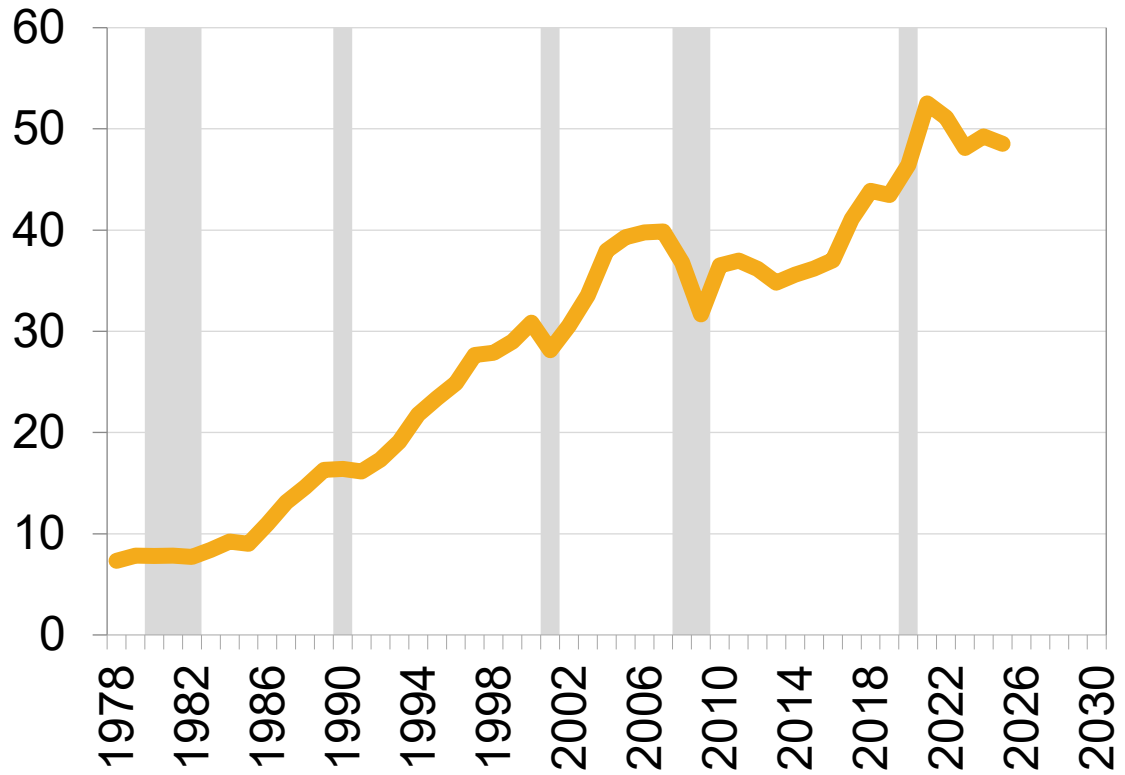
* NYC includes EWR/JFK/LGA airports

U.S. Airlines Have Continued to Move More People and Goods Over Longer Distances

Revenue Passenger Miles (Billions)



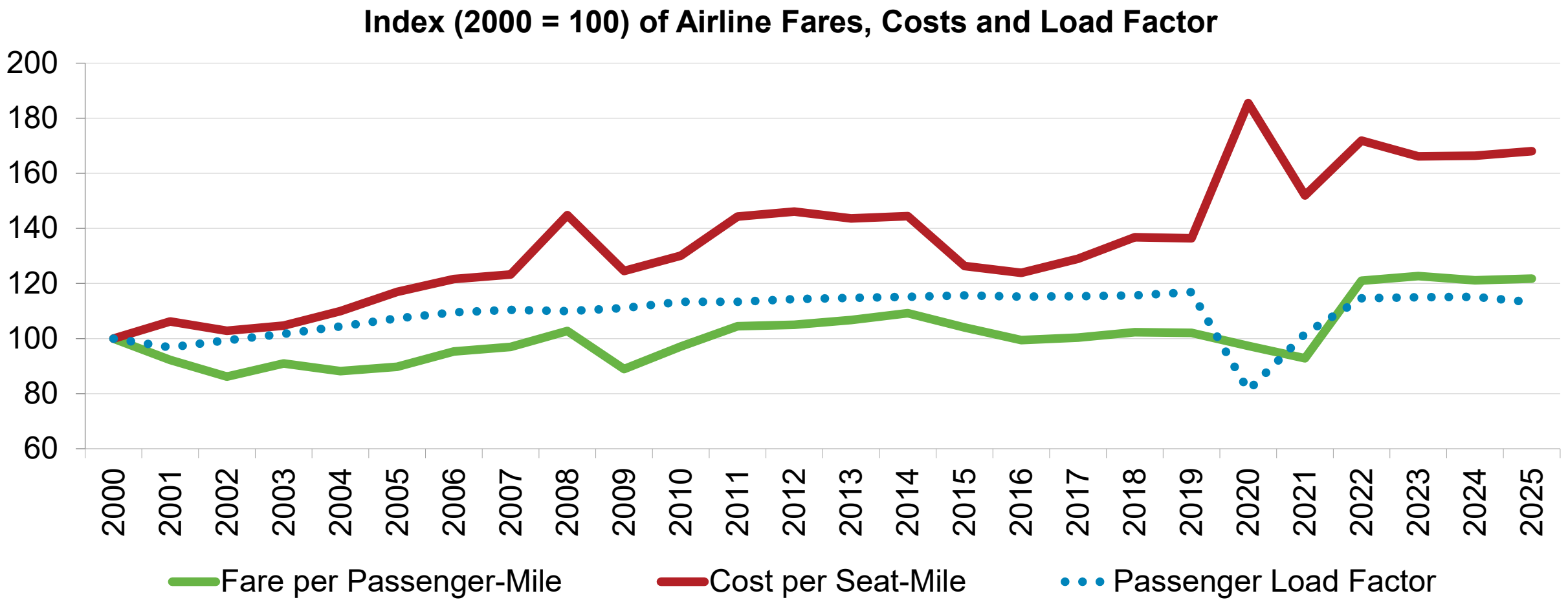
Cargo Revenue Ton Miles (Billions)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics (T1 systemwide for U.S. airlines – all services)

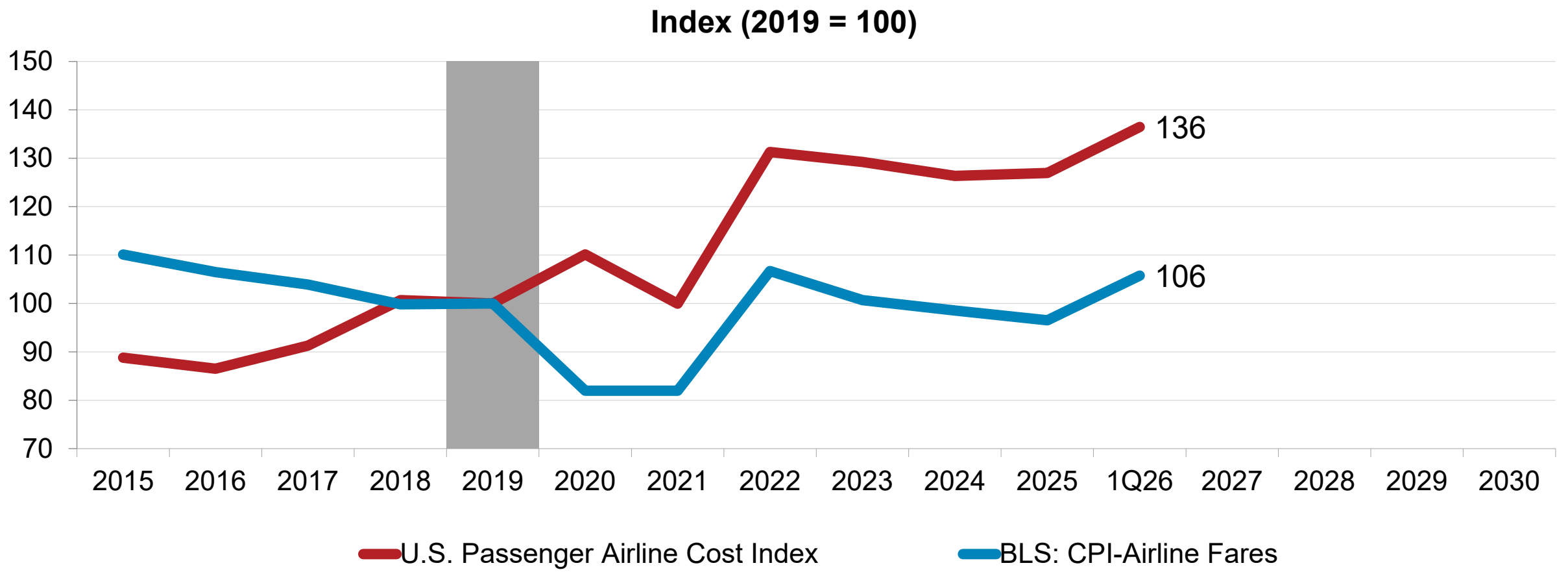
Note: Recessions highlighted in gray

Changes in the Price to Fly a Mile on U.S. Airlines Tend to Move in the Same Direction as Airline Costs But Rarely to the Same Magnitude, Requiring Fuller Planes to Close the Gap



Source: A4A Passenger Airline Cost Index

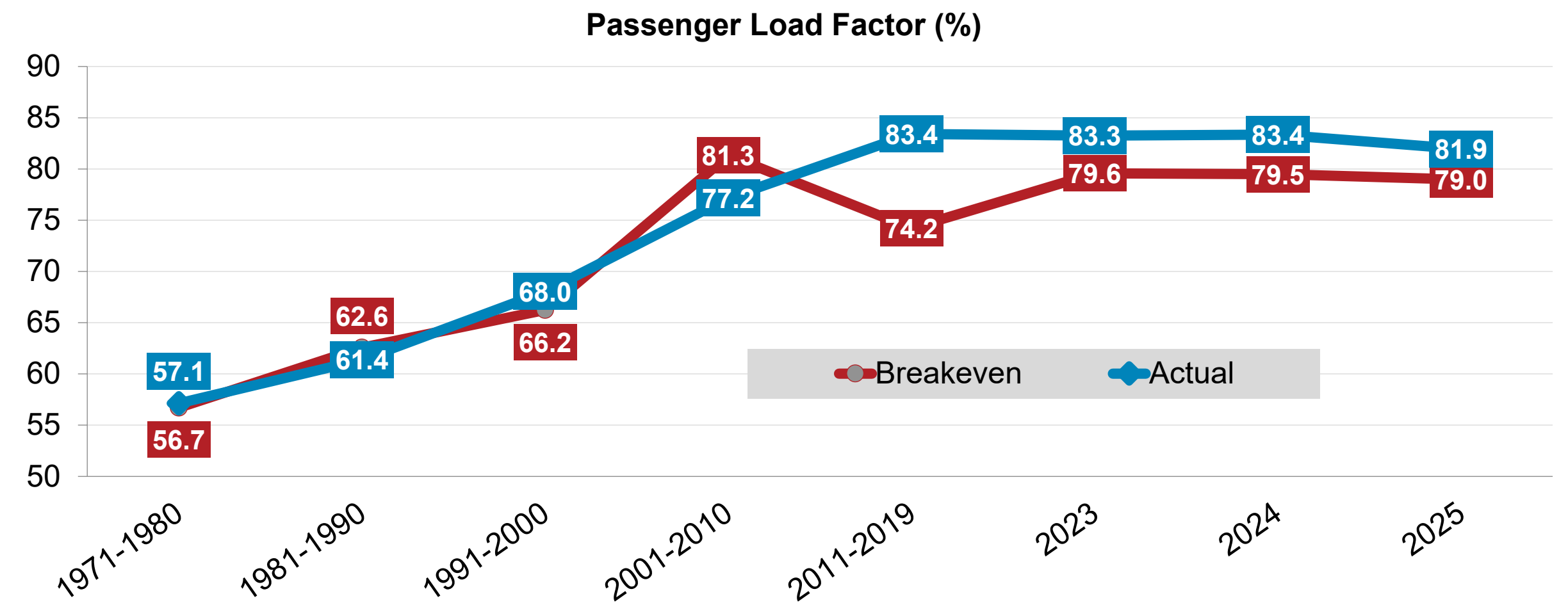
From 2019-1Q 2026, the Costs Faced by U.S. Airlines Rose 36%, While Nominal Fares Rose 6%



Sources: A4A Passenger Airline Cost Index, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and Bureau of Transportation Statistics

* Includes applicable taxes fuel surcharges, airport, security, and baggage fees (for first checked bag)

In 2011-2019 and 2023-2025, Avg. Load Factor Exceeded the Airlines' Breakeven Requirement

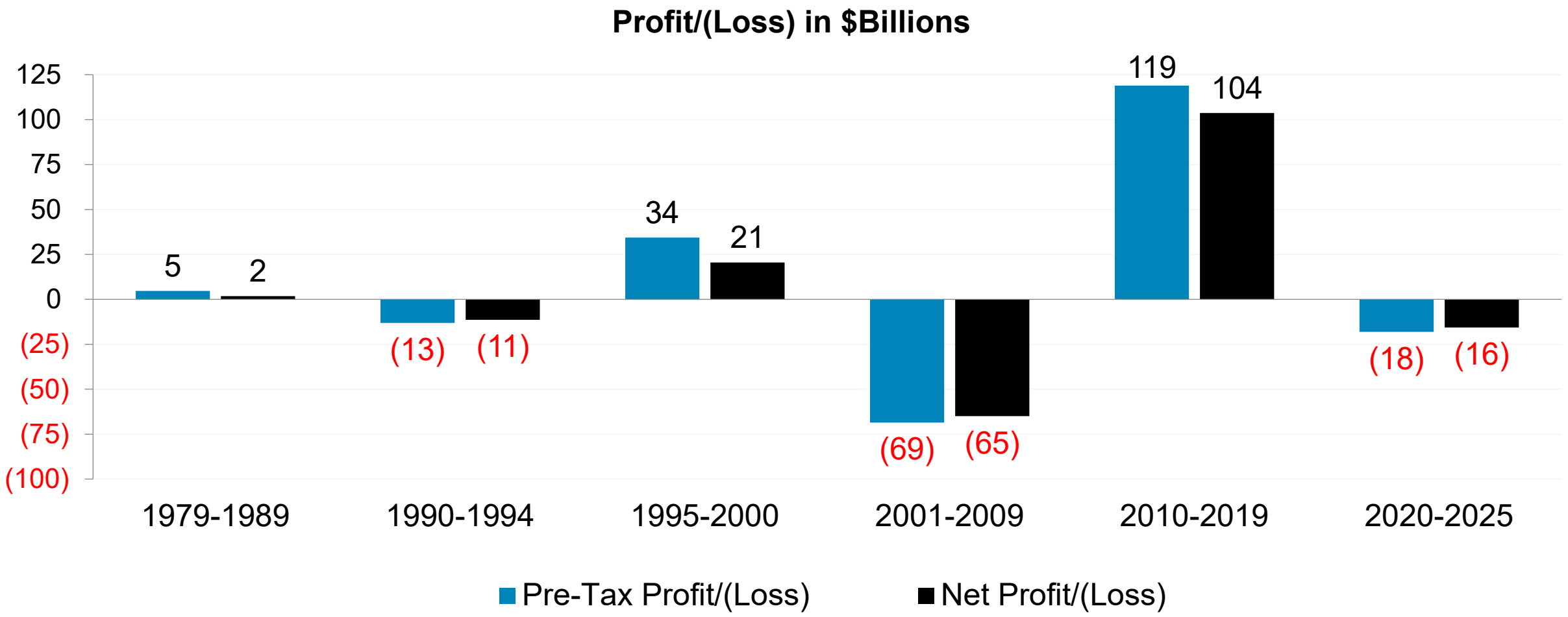


Source: A4A Passenger Airline Cost Index

Note: Load factor = revenue passenger miles (RPMs) ÷ available seat miles (ASMs)

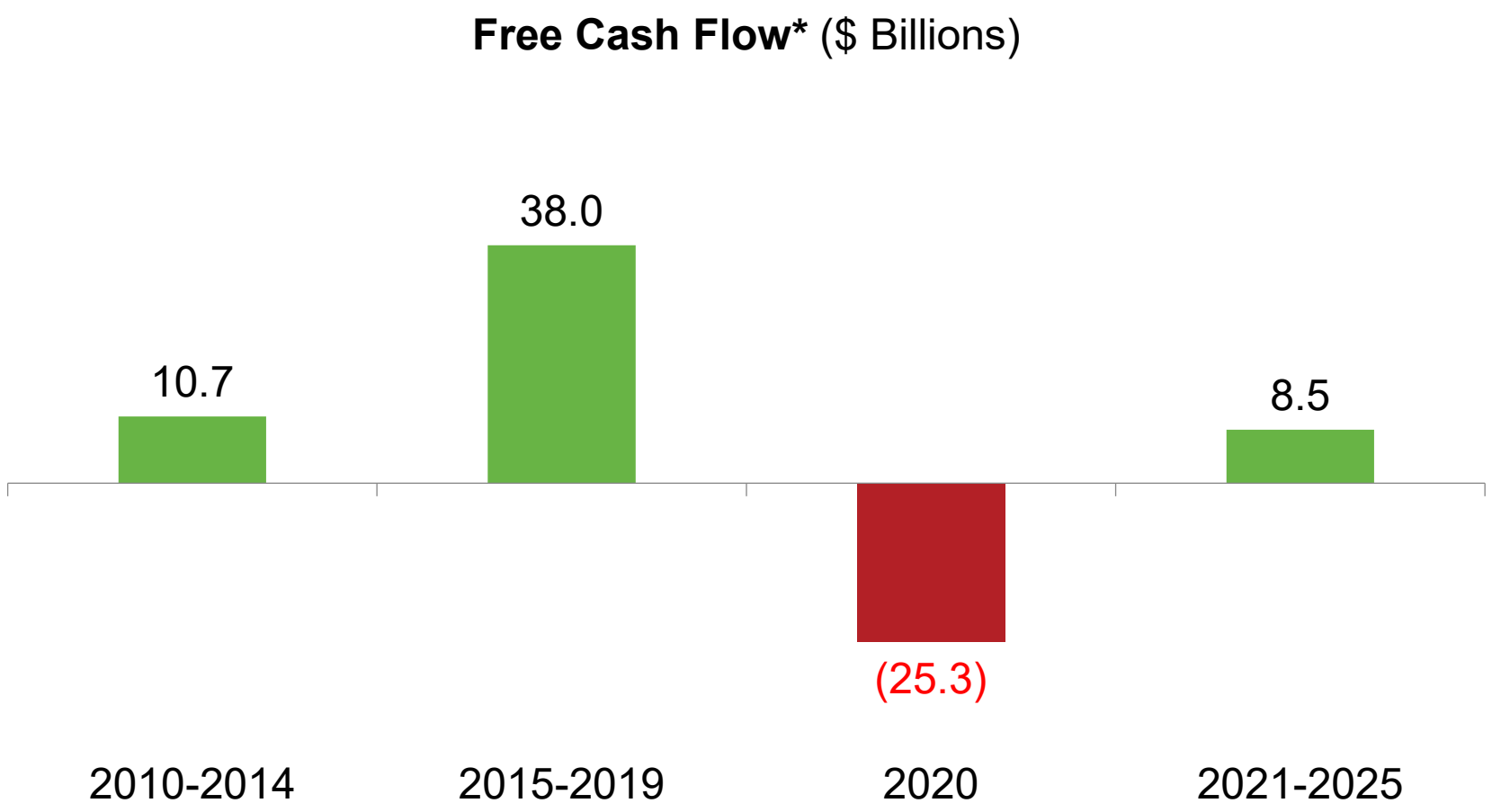
In the Deregulated Period, U.S. Passenger Airline "Earnings" Have Been Cyclical and Volatile

Cumulative Net Profit for 1979-2025 = $34 Billion (0.7 Percent of Revenues)



Source: A4A Passenger Airline Cost Index

With Modest Amounts of Free Cash Flow, U.S. Airlines Can Fund Capital Improvements, Improve Customer Experience, Retain and Attract Workforce Talent and Appeal to Investors



Note: 2020 and 2021 include the effects of the federal Payroll Support Program.

Source: SEC filings of AAL/ALGT/ALK/DAL/HA/JBLU/LUV/SAVE/SNCY/UAL/ULCC/RJET/SKYW and merged predecessors

* Net cash from operations minus capital expenditures

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