

An analysis of on-the-job injuries for airport workers and pilots in Idaho



Therese Schumacher, M.S., research analyst senior
Idaho Department of Labor
Research and Analysis Bureau

July 2024

IDAHO
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
BRAD LITTLE, GOVERNOR
JANI REVIER, DIRECTOR

Contents

Executive summary 2

Introduction..... 3

National Transportation Safety Board data..... 3

Workers’ compensation data..... 5

Occupational Safety and Health Administration data..... 7

Conclusion 8

Sources..... 9

Figures

Figure 1: National Transportation Safety Board data, accidents by year 4

Figure 2: Workers’ compensation data, accidents by year 6

Tables

Table 1: Injury nature 7

Executive summary

The purpose of this report is to investigate how work-related injuries for airport workers in Idaho compare to the United States as a whole. Data was collected from the National Transportation Safety Board, workers' compensation data from the Idaho Industrial Commission and Occupational Safety and Health Administration citation data. The analysis found Idaho experienced an upward trend from 2018 to 2022 in airport-related injuries, similar to the rest of the nation. The year with the most injuries was 2022 and the year with the fewest injuries was 2018. There was a dip in injuries in 2023, but more data is needed to know if this is the start of a downward trend.

Introduction

On August 15, 2023, Benjamin Katz of The Wall Street Journal released the article, "More Workers Are Getting Hurt on the Tarmac. 'It Was Really Frightening.'" In the article, Katz examined Occupational Safety and Health (OSHA) data and interviewed multiple airport employees and companies. According to Katz's findings, there has been a significant increase in work-related injuries for airport workers since the Covid-19 pandemic as a result of worker fatigue, inexperience, lack of government oversight, and lack of training. There has also been a significant turnover in the past five years among airport workers, which potentially compounds these risk factors.³ Aside from the Wall Street Journal, other news outlets like The Washington Post, USA Today and The New York Times have called attention to the safety surrounding airport workers and pilots in recent years.^{1,4,2} While the media has been reporting this phenomenon, to our knowledge, no other state agency has investigated their own state data to see if they are also experiencing this rise in injuries.

The purpose of this report is to investigate if Idaho is also experiencing an uptick in airport-related injuries currently being reported across the United States. Accident and incident report data was collected from the National Transportation Safety Board, workers compensation data from the Idaho Industrial Commission, and citation data from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. All data sources were analyzed separately to prevent false inflation of the numbers and double counting.

National Transportation Safety Board data

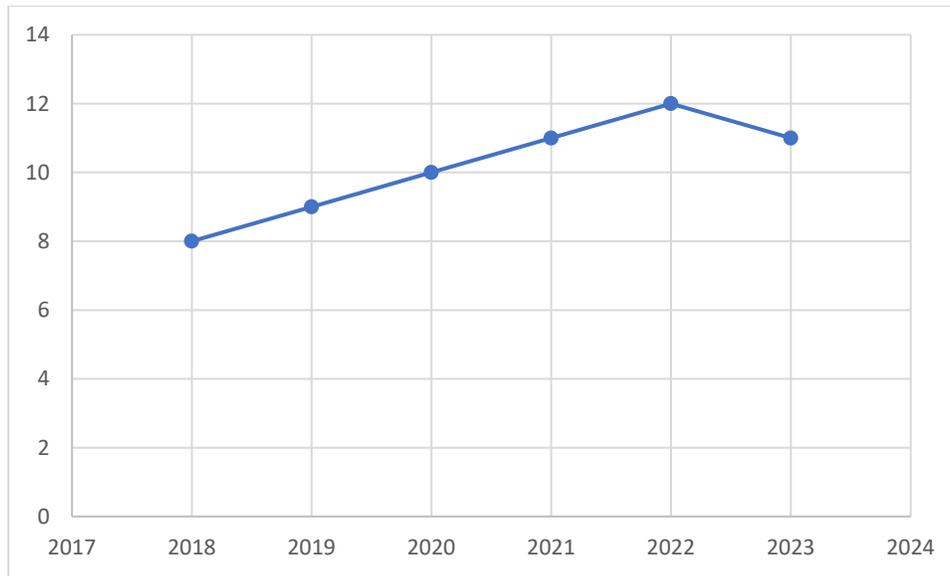
Data collection and cleaning

Data for accidents and incidents involving pilots and airplanes were taken from aviation reports available on the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) website. The collection date was selected to be from 01/01/2018 to 12/31/2023. Idaho was selected for the state and the United States for the country. This query produced 191 records. During data cleaning, all blanks and accidents/incidents that did not result in an injury were removed. This left 61 records to be examined. Additionally, some of the 61 accidents had multiple people hurt and multiple levels of injuries in the same accident. Therefore, the number of accidents and the number of injuries will not be equal. All the data used was classified as an accident by the NTSB and not an incident.

Results

The National Transportation Safety Board data showed there was a significant increase in accidents each year until a peak in 2022, followed by a slight decrease the next year. From 2018 to 2023, there were 61 accidents and 100 injuries related to planes. Specifically, there were 39 fatal injuries, 22 serious injuries and 39 minor injuries. The year with the most accidents was 2022, which had a total of 12 accidents and 20 people injured. Of the 20 people injured, 11 were fatally injured and the remaining nine experienced minor injuries.

Figure 1: National Transportation Safety Board data, accidents by year



Source: The National Transportation Safety Board’s data in accordance with the Federal Aviation Administration.

However, 2020 was the year with the most injuries. It had a total of 21 injuries but only 10 accidents. There were 11 fatal injuries, two serious injuries and eight minor. The high number of injuries in this year was mainly due to one accident in which eight people died as a result of two planes crashing into each other. Both 2020 and 2022 had 11 fatal injuries, which is the most fatal injuries for a year recorded between the 2018 to 2023 time frame.

Additionally, the cities with the most accidents were Stanley, Coeur d’Alene and Yellow Pine, all of which had three accidents each between 2018 to 2023. The cities with the second most accidents were Emmett, Cascade, Warren, Caldwell, Hayden, American Falls, Howe and Lewiston. These cities all had two accidents each. There were an additional 36 cities that each had one accident, which included Nampa, McCall, Mountain Home and Idaho City. Boise was not listed as having any accidents during this time frame.⁵

Workers' compensation data

Data collection and cleaning

The data from this section was requested from the Idaho Industrial Commission. Reports were requested pertaining to businesses with the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) code of 488119 (other airport operations), 488190 (other support activities for air transportation), 481212 (nonscheduled chartered freight air transportation), 481219 (other nonscheduled air transportation) and 481211 (nonscheduled chartered passenger air transportation). NAICS codes for commercial airports were not requested in order to keep the sample size manageable and to reduce the chance of an incident happening in the air but being reported in Idaho. The NAICS code 488119 should cover the majority of workers for commercial airlines that are working in Idaho.

Additionally, reports were requested for positions that had the following National Council on Compensation Insurance (NCCI) manual classification code of:

- 7421 (Aircraft or helicopter: transportation of personnel in conduct of employer's business - flying crew).
- 8810 (Air traffic controller).
- 7431 (Aircraft or helicopter air carrier - commuter - flying crew).
- 7403 (Aircraft or helicopter air carrier - scheduled or supplemental - all other than flying crew).
- 7425 (Aircraft or helicopter operation).
- 7405 (Aircraft or helicopter air carrier - scheduled or supplemental - flying crew).
- 7422 (Aviation – NOC - Other than Helicopters - Flying Crew)

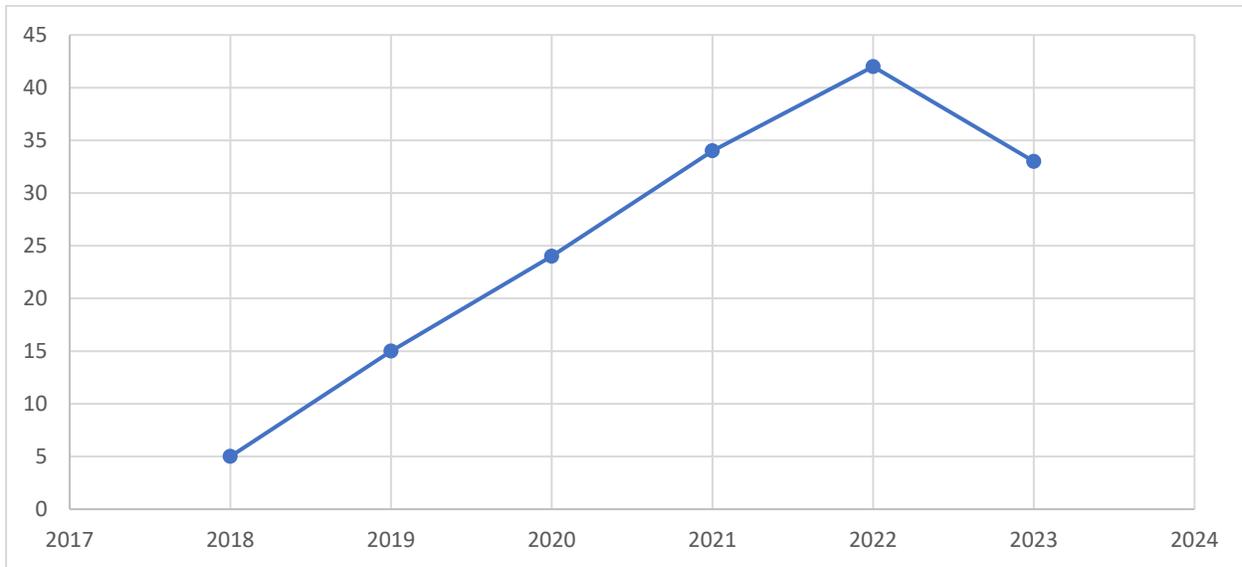
Reports for the above NAICS and NCCI codes were requested from 2018 to 2023, which returned 153 records. There was no additional cleaning that needed to be done to the data.

Results

The data shows that Idaho is experiencing a rise in airport-related accidents, with a slight decrease in 2023. There were 153 accidents in total between 2018 and 2023. Most of the accidents were either medical (118 workers) or indemnity (33 workers), meaning the worker missed work because of their injury and received payment for the days they missed; however, two of the accidents in 2022 were fatalities. In addition to these fatalities, 2022 also had 42 accidents — the most accidents out of the six-year time frame. After the peak in 2022, there was a significant decrease in accidents in 2023 (33 injuries). More data is needed before a conclusion can be made on the direction of the trend line after 2023. The graph below also shows an

increase in accidents in Idaho from 2018 to 2019, which cannot be contributed to the pandemic and may suggest another factor at play.

Figure 2: Workers' compensation data, accidents by year



Source: Idaho Industrial Commission.

Additionally, the NCCI job classification with the most accidents was 7403 (Aircraft or helicopter air carrier - scheduled or supplemental - all other than flying crew). This group experienced 125 accidents in the total time period, or 81% of all injuries. The year with the most accidents, 2022, saw 36 accidents for occupation 7403, which accounts for 86% of total accidents. Interestingly, neither of the two fatalities in 2022 were related to occupation 7403, suggesting that despite it being more prone to injuries, it is not more prone to fatal accidents.

The second largest group to receive injuries was occupation 8810 (air traffic controllers), with seven accidents between 2018 and 2023. The group with the fewest accidents was occupation 7421 (Aircraft or helicopter: transportation of personnel in conduct of employer's business - flying crew), with only two injuries reported in the six-year time frame.

The most common injury was a strain or tear, accounting for 49 injuries or 32% of the total. The second and third most common injuries were contusions and lacerations, respectively. The least common injuries were burns, myocardial infarctions and dermatitis, with only one recorded injury each.³

Table 1: Injury nature

<i>Injury Nature</i>	<i>Number of Injuries</i>
<i>Strain or Tear</i>	49
<i>Contusion</i>	21
<i>Laceration</i>	14
<i>Sprain or Tear</i>	12
<i>Fracture</i>	11
<i>Crushing</i>	8
<i>All other specific injuries, not otherwise classified</i>	6
<i>Rupture</i>	5
<i>Dislocation</i>	5
<i>Multiple Physical Injuries Only</i>	4
<i>Inflammation</i>	4
<i>Foreign Body</i>	3
<i>Puncture</i>	3
<i>Hearing Loss or Impairment</i>	3
<i>Hernia</i>	2
<i>Dermatitis</i>	1
<i>Myocardial Infarction</i>	1
<i>Burn</i>	1

Source: Idaho Industrial Commission.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration data

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) citation data was obtained for this report but due to the limitation of the data collected, it was not able to fully answer if Idaho is also experiencing an increase in airport related accidents. However, the Idaho Department of Labor discovered that in 2021, an airport in Idaho received a citation from OSHA not related to an injury. In 2022, OSHA gave out two citations to Idaho airports; yet, it is not known the nature of these citations. Lastly, there was one citation in 2023 for an Idaho airport that was not related to an injury.⁶ While this is not enough data to make any meaningful conclusions, it does potentially support the previous data that shows Idaho had the largest number of injuries for airport workers in 2022.

Conclusion

Overall, the data suggests that Idaho is also experiencing a rise in accidents related to airports. Both the National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB) and the Idaho Industrial Commission's workers' compensation data showed that 2022 had the most accidents in Idaho, with OSHA's data also potentially supporting this finding. The data also suggests that there might be a downward trend coming in the next few years, but more data is needed before that conclusion can be made.

An interesting finding is that the rise of airport related accidents started in 2019, which was before the pandemic. The workers' compensation data had a significant increase between 2018 and 2019 and the NTSB data had a slight increase between that same time frame. This suggests that while the pandemic could have had some effect on injuries, it cannot account for the increase completely. It could be that the high turnover rate and lack of training for airport workers started before the pandemic and was simply exacerbated by it. However, more research would need to be done to identify an exact cause.

Additionally, the NTSB data showed there is no singular city in Idaho that is experiencing the majority of these plane crashes but rather they are spread out across the state. While this does make it harder to pin down ways to reduce instances, it does imply that after an accident happens the airport is taking steps to reduce the chance of it happening again. However, it could also be related to the amount of air traffic a city experiences.

For more information on air travel in Idaho, please see the [Idaho Intrastate Passenger Air Service Study](#) from the Intrastate Commercial Air Service Committee or visit the Federal Aviation Administration's [website](#).

Sources

- ¹ Compton, N. (2022, Aug. 29). Airline labor problems aren't going away: Major carriers are staffing up, but strains on workers could disrupt your travel plans beyond the summer. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2022/08/29/airline-labor-problems/>
- ² Ember, S. & Steel, E. (2023, Aug. 21). Airline Close Calls Happen Far More Often Than Previously Known. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/08/21/business/airline-safety-close-calls.html>
- ³ Idaho Industrial Commission, Workers' Compensation, requested via email
- ⁴ Katz, B. (2023, Aug. 15). More Workers Are Getting Hurt on the Tarmac. 'It Was Really Frightening.' As travel rebounds, understaffed ground crews are getting injured. *The Wall Street Journal*. https://www.wsj.com/business/airlines/airport-ground-workers-safety-airlines-c98e3216?mod=hp_lead_pos7
- ⁵ National Transportation Safety Board
- ⁶ Occupational Safety and Health Administration, requested via email
- ⁷ Wichter, Z. (2023, Aug. 22). Low staffing, more close calls: FAA responds to increased scrutiny on aviation safety. *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/airlinenews/2023/08/22/aviation-close-calls-faa-response/70652601007/>



A proud partner of the  **americanjobcenter** network

The text "A proud partner of the" is followed by the American Job Center logo, which consists of the word "american" in a lowercase sans-serif font, a stylized star above the letter "j", and the word "jobcenter" in a lowercase sans-serif font. This is followed by the word "network".

This publication is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor for SFY24 as part of the Workforce Information Grant (48%) and matched/dedicated funds (52%) totaling \$704,259. The Idaho Department of Labor is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. Reasonable accommodations are available upon request. Dial 711 for Idaho Relay Service.

July 2024