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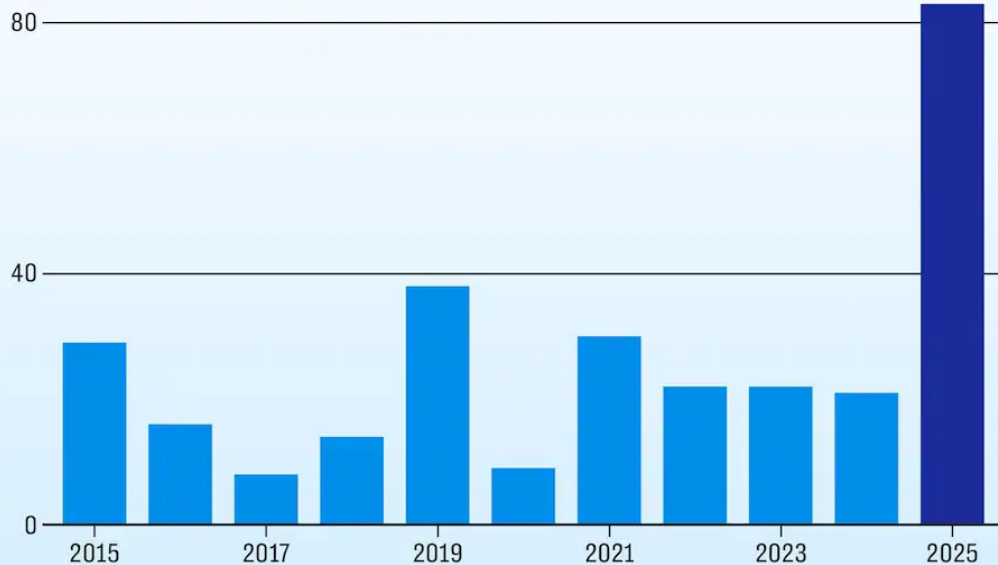
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Has flying in America become more dangerous?

With 29pc of Americans thinking it is unsafe to travel by plane, data analysis reveals such concerns are not entirely unfounded

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Annual civilian airliner fatalities in US



Ollie Corfe

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Just over 100 days in, 2025 is already the deadliest year for US aviation since 2001 – forever etched in memory by the 9/11 terror attacks.

In January, American Airlines Flight 5342 collided with an army Black Hawk in

Washington DC killing all 64 on board, the first major commercial passenger flight to crash in the US in over a decade.

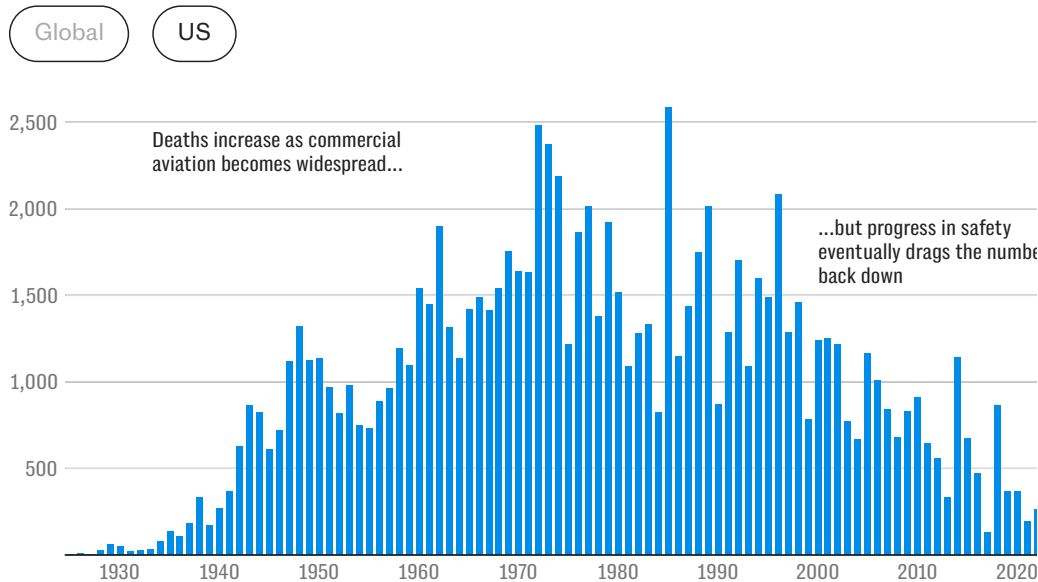
A spate of aviation disasters followed, with a tourist helicopter plummeting into the Hudson river in New York last week, claiming the lives of the six people on board, including three children.

Fear of flying has spiked with 29 per cent of Americans now thinking it is unsafe to travel by plane, according to a recent CBS News/YouGov poll.

Telegraph analysis of Aviation Safety Network (ASN) data reveals such concerns are not entirely unfounded. While the 21 accidents recorded up to April 10 are lower than the 24 recorded by this point last year – the number of aviation fatalities in 2025 exceed that of the past 15 years combined.

100 years of aviation: The long arc of technological improvement

Global civilian airliner fatalities per year



Commercial and corporate aircraft capable of carrying at least 12 people with recognised nationality markings (standardised in 1928 so figures prior may be skewed). Does not include secondary fatalities on the ground | Source: ASN Safety Database, FAA

Some 40.6 million commercial flights took to the skies in 2024 carrying around five billion passengers, the latest report from the International Air Transport Association (IATA) shows.

The ASN Safety Database contains descriptions of all accidents involving fixed-wing aircraft capable of carrying at least 12 people since 1919. The figures show that as civil aviation took off, the number of fatalities worldwide soared.

From the mid-1980s, however, the trend began to nose downwards.

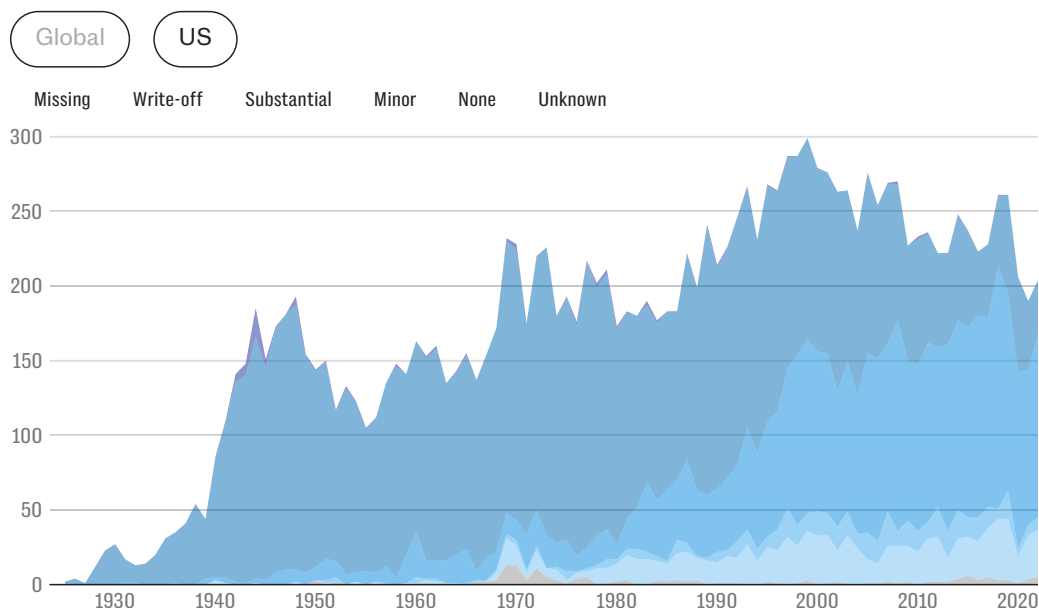
This has been attributed to increasingly strict regulatory frameworks, including requirements for rigorous pilot and air traffic controller training, as well as technological advancements in navigation systems, fail-safes and, in particular, airframe construction.

This is plain to see in the diminishing severity of accidents over time: whereas “hull loss”, when the plane is damaged beyond repair, used to account for the vast majority of outcomes, it makes up for a fraction today.

So is the US bucking the trend in 2025?

Accidents remain high but tend to be less serious

Global civilian airliner accidents by severity per year



Commercial and corporate aircraft capable of carrying at least 12 people with recognised nationality markings | Source: ASN Safety Database, FAA

There have been 83 fatalities on civilian airliners in the US so far this year, making up 63 per cent of the global total of 131. And this is not inclusive of helicopter crashes, so the overall aviation total is even higher.

The rate of fatalities per month is, as such, 10 times higher in 2025 relative to 2024.

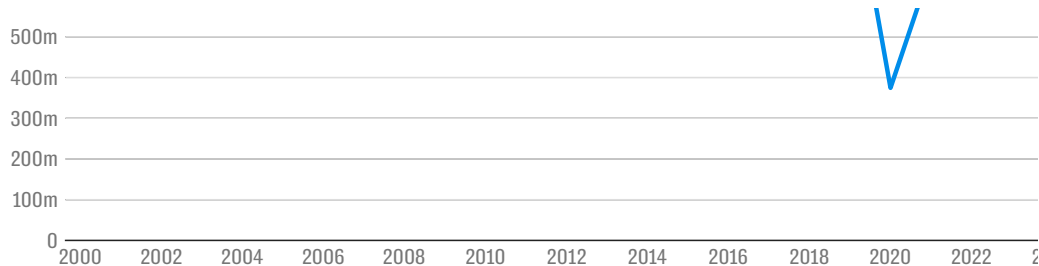
Restricting the sample to passenger airliners only – dropping private, cargo and medical flights, sightseeing tours and parachuting trips – shows 79 accidents resulting in at least one death since 2000, for a total of 987 fatalities.

The latest data on passenger numbers from the United States Department of Transportation covers January 2025 only. After the mid-air collision over the Potomac alone that month, this works out to a rate of 0.9 fatalities per million enplanements that month, representing a 1-in-1.1 million chance of death – slightly worse than the 1-in-1.2 million odds in 2001.

Just under a billion people boarded commercial flights in the US last year

US annual domestic and international total enplanements





Source: Bureau of Transportation Statistics

But this is largely the product of having only one month in which there was a major disaster to go on. The 2024 rate was over one in 100 million.

The Flight Safety Foundation is an independent non-profit that promotes the cause of aviation safety, notably through maintaining the ASN Safety Database.

Dr Hassan Shahidi, its president and chief executive, said: “The recent accidents – such as the tragic tour helicopter crash in New York, the small aircraft accident over the weekend, and the military helicopter-airliner collision near DCA – are each deeply saddening.

“It’s important to emphasise, however, that these events are unrelated. Each involves a unique aircraft type, operating environment, and set of circumstances.”

The relative safety of travelling by plane is best illustrated per mile covered.

Preliminary data from the Federal Highway Administration show the fatality rate for cars was 1.2 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles in 2024. The airline equivalent was just 0.79 – a third lower.

However in the same CBS News/YouGov poll, respondents thought flying to be less safe than cars, buses or trains.

“While they are not connected, they understandably raise public concern when seen in close succession,” Dr Shahidi added.

Only a quarter of Americans think flying is "very safe"

Very safe	26%
Somewhat safe	45%
Somewhat unsafe	19%
Very unsafe	10%

March 24th to 26th, 2025 | Source: CBS News / YouGov

Todd Curtis, an aviation risk assessment expert, believes this is down to distorted perception.

“While the level of risk in the aviation system is low and continues to get lower, the perceived level of safety is lower, with the more high-profile events of the last three months driving that change,” he said.

He cited the example of the Hudson River helicopter accident, which killed a Spanish technology executive’s family. The mainstream and social media attention it received was partly a result of the conditions of the crash which occurred in broad daylight, close to the heart of the country’s most populous

...on the morning flight, close to the heart of the country's most populous city, he said.

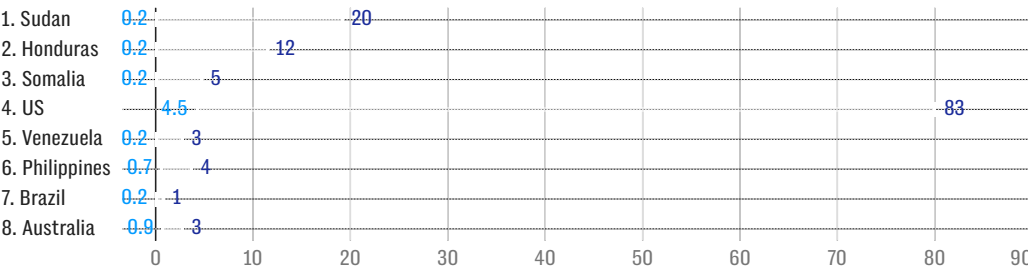
He contrasted this with the helicopter crash that killed a Nigerian billionaire and his family at night in the deserts of southern California last February, which he deemed garnered far less attention.

Just three countries have seen a steeper rise in commercial aviation fatalities this year than the US relative to their 2014 to 2024 average by mid-April: Sudan, Honduras and Somalia.

The unusually large US proportion of global fatalities in 2025 means aviation safety has rarely had more exposure – or been the source of more debate.

Only 3 countries have seen a steeper increase in fatalities than the US

Average annual fatalities **between 2014 and 2024** and **in 2025**, first 100 days of the year, ranked by percentage change



Commercial and corporate aircraft capable of carrying at least 12 people with recognised nationality markings | Source: ASN Safety Database

Some have tied the trend to downsizing at the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) at the behest of Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency (Doge).

No official tally exists, but Sean Duffy, the secretary of transportation, rejected such claims, insisting less than 400 FAA employees had been let go in mid-February, out of a 45,000 total – all of which he claimed were probationary, meaning they had been hired less than a year ago, and none of which were air traffic controllers or “critical safety personnel”.

They instead included maintenance mechanics, aeronautical information specialists, aviation safety assistants and management and program assistants, according to the Professional Aviation Safety Specialists (PASS) union. “These are positions that are vital to supporting public safety,” a spokeswoman said.

Testifying before Congress last month on the state of the US Air Traffic Control system, David Spero, national president of PASS told lawmakers that “haphazardly eliminating positions and encouraging resignations” were both “demoralising” the workforce and constituted a “distraction for employees performing safety-critical duties”.

“The FAA manages the world’s safest and most complex aviation system,” the agency said. “On an average day, we serve more than 45,000 flights and 2.9 million airline passengers across more than 29 million square miles of airspace.”

It added: “The FAA’s priority is to advance the safety of the nation’s aviation system. We are continuously proactive, consistent, and deliberative in executing our responsibilities to the American public.”

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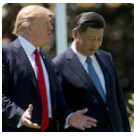
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