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2011 shaping up as 'safest ever' for fliers

by [Charisse Jones](#) on Dec. 28, 2011, under [USA Today News](#)

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It appears 2011 may end up as the safest year on record for fliers.

So far, there's been one fatality for every 7.1 million passengers traveling on a commercial or charter flight somewhere around the globe, according to an assessment by Ascend, an aviation industry consulting firm based in London.

That compares with the previous record of one passenger death per 6.4 million fliers in 2004.

"It's the safest ever," says Paul Hayes, Ascend's director of safety, noting that the report did not count deaths that resulted from terrorism or other acts of violence. "Fortunately, the airlines are getting safer, quicker than they're expanding."

The global numbers reflect a recent safety trend by U.S. airlines, which haven't experienced a passenger death in a crash in four of the last five years. The exception was 2009, when a Colgan Air turboprop crashed near Buffalo on Feb. 12, leaving 50 dead.

"Even if you took frequent flights (in the USA), as business travelers do, the chance that sooner or later you'll encounter a crash is extremely low," says Arnold Barnett, a statistics professor at MIT's Sloan School of Management who closely studies aviation. "We have an extraordinary record here in the past five years. It's unlike anything that preceded it."

"When people talk about how flying is so miserable now — they don't serve you meals — this, you can argue, is secondary to the fact that there are very few calls to the next of kin compared to the numbers there used to be," he says.

U.S. airlines had 17 fatal accidents from 2000 through 2009, including the four planes lost during the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, says the U.S. industry trade group Airlines for America. That's in comparison with 44 fatal accidents throughout the 1970s.

Better technology and improved training of crews have helped make flying less hazardous, travel experts say. But better sharing of information across the airline industry has also been key.

"With the increased amount of data and sharing of data, we can now anticipate potential risk areas better than we ever had before," says Steve Lott, Airlines for America spokesman. "We can make improvements long before we have any sort of incident."

Although U.S. carriers are “at the safest point that we’ve ever been,” Lott says, “it doesn’t mean we can take a break or rest on that strong record.”

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