US air times have not lengthened

BTS AirTime (wheels-up to wheels-down), every published month from January 1995 through December 2025. Headline comparisons use complete years 1995 and 2025.

Headline findings

- On 1,286 airport pairs flown in both 1995 and 2025 (at least 30 flights each year), the median change in median air time was +2 minutes. 71.7% of those city-pairs (922 of 1,286) stayed within 3 minutes; 88.1% (1,133) stayed within 5 minutes.
- Treating those same 1,286 city-pairs as a constant basket, the median of their route-level median air times was 96 minutes in 1995 and 97 minutes in 2025. The basket never left a 96–100 minute range in any year of the panel.
- Air minutes per 1,000 miles — the ratio of the systemwide median AirTime to the systemwide median distance, times 1,000 — moved from 144.7 in 1995 to 144.3 in 2025.
- The raw systemwide median air time did rise, from 79 minutes to 100 minutes. That tracks a longer typical flight (median distance 546 miles to 693 miles), not a slower trip over the same ground. Flights under 500 miles fell from 46.8% of the file to 33.6%.
- From 2010 to 2025, 1,827 continuing city-pairs show a median change of +0 minutes, and 85.6% stayed within 3 minutes. On flights of 2,000 miles and up, median air time rose from 283 to 296 minutes (+13).
- By network model, air time still did not lengthen. Hub-and-spoke continuing route-airline cells (American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, United Airlines) had a median air-time change of +2 minutes from 1995 to 2025; point-to-point (Southwest Airlines) +1; hybrid (Alaska Airlines) 0.

Scheduled block time — BTS CRSElapsedTime, the airline CRS scheduled gate-to-gate time in the public On-Time file (industry term: block time; ActualElapsedTime is the measured counterpart; OAG schedule is not in the public file and is not used) — is covered in a companion report. This page is actual air time only: wheels-up to wheels-down. Gate departure/arrival definitions: BTS Technical Directive No. 40.

The same city-pairs, thirty years later

This is the cleanest test of the claim that flights take longer in the air than they used to. It holds the set of city-pairs fixed, so a shift toward longer-haul flying cannot move the line.

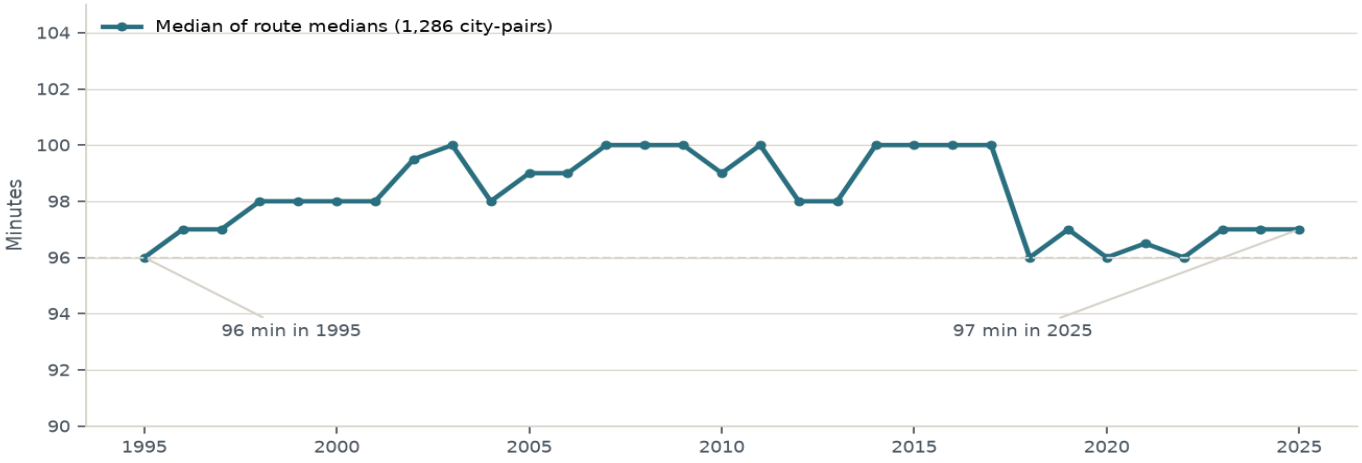


Figure 1. Each year is the median of the median AirTime values of city-pairs flown in both 1995 and 2025 (1,286 pairs). A pair enters a given year only if that year had at least 30 flights with AirTime. Source: BTS AirTime, all months.

The panel high is 100 minutes. From the late 2010s through 2025 the basket sits at 97 minutes, one minute above 1995.

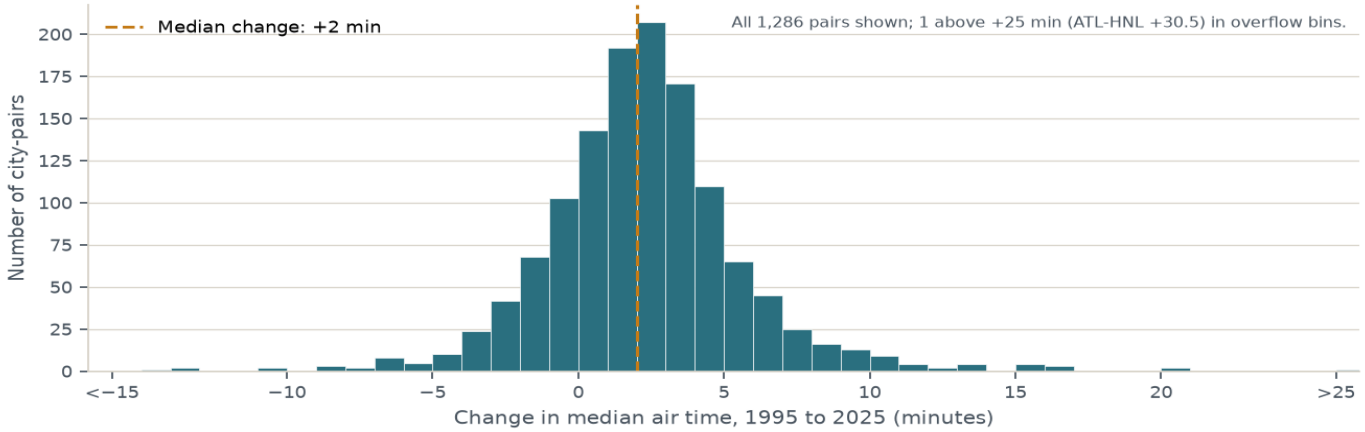


Figure 2. Distribution of the 1995-to-2025 change in median air time across 1,286 continuing city-pairs, in 1-minute bins from -15 to +25. One pair (ATL-HNL, +30.5) sits in the >+25 overflow bin; none sit below -15. Median +2 minutes; mean +1.77 minutes. Source: BTS AirTime, all months.

The mean change across those 1,286 pairs is +1.77 minutes. 307 pairs lengthened by more than 3 minutes and 57 shortened by more than 3 minutes. The 10th-to-90th percentile range of the change is -2 to +5.5 minutes. Among 738 route–airline cells present in both years, the median change is +2 minutes and 70.6% stay within 3 minutes.

Unit	From	To	Cells	Median change	Flat ±3 min	Flat ±5 min
City-pairs	1995	2025	1,286	+2 min	71.7%	88.1%
City-pairs	1995	2019	1,316	+1 min	73.6%	89.1%
City-pairs	2000	2025	1,361	+1 min	79.8%	92.9%
City-pairs	2010	2025	1,827	+0 min	85.6%	94.6%
Route–airline	1995	2025	738	+2 min	70.6%	86.2%

Table 1. Continuing cells with at least 30 flights with AirTime in each endpoint year. Source: BTS, all months.

Distance, not pace, moved the raw median

If every flight is thrown into one pot, median AirTime rises from 79 minutes in 1995 to 100 minutes in 2025. Over the same span the median reported Distance rose from 546 miles to 693 miles. Flights under 500 miles were 46.8% of the 1995 file and 33.6% of the 2025 file; flights of 1,000 miles or more rose from 21.4% to 30.0%.

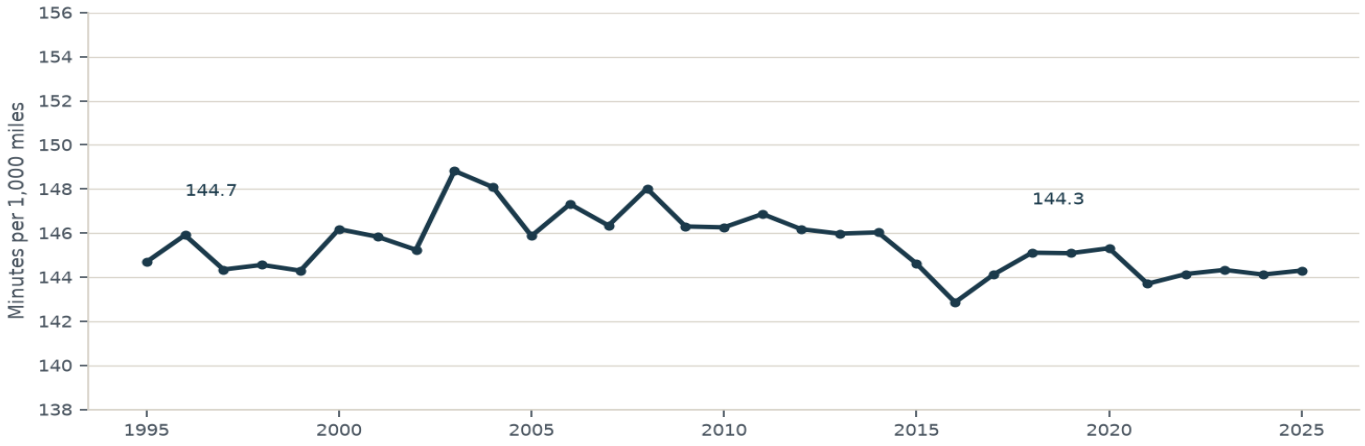


Figure 3. Systemwide median AirTime divided by systemwide median distance, times 1,000. The series moves from 144.7 in 1995 to 144.3 in 2025. Source: BTS, all months.

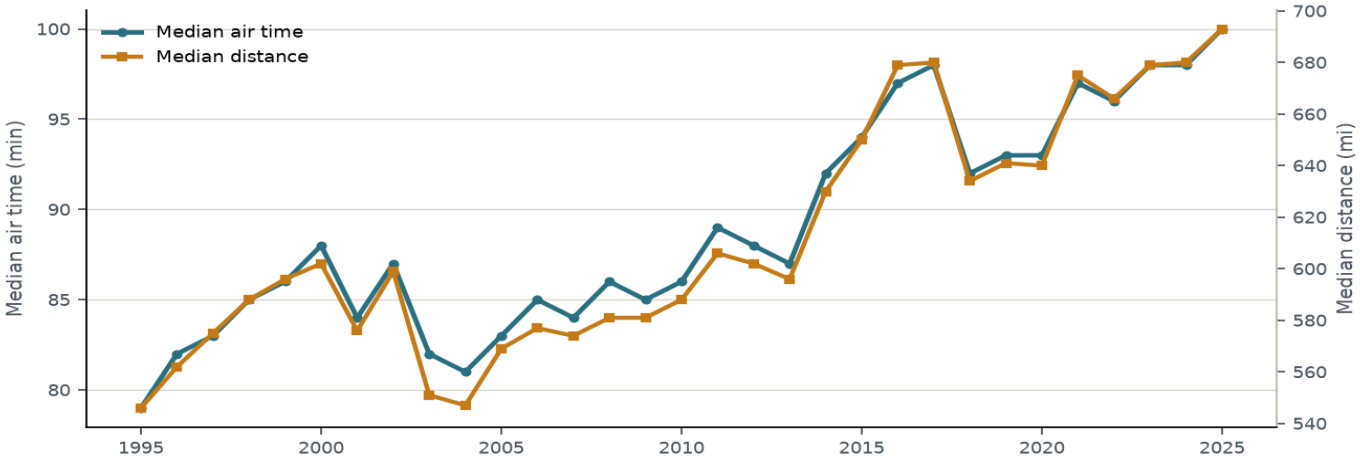


Figure 4. Raw systemwide median air time (teal) and median reported distance (amber). The two series rise together. Source: BTS, all months.

Seasonality: Air Times are essentially constant for all seasons

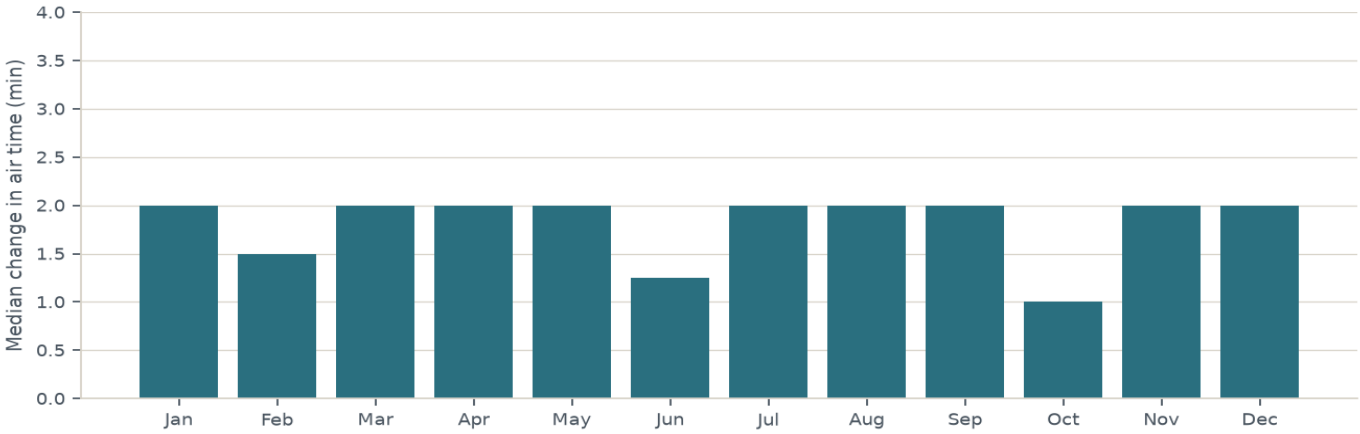


Figure 5. Median 1995-to-2025 change in route-level median air time, comparing the same calendar month in each year. Source: BTS, all months.

Month	City-pairs	Median Δ air	Air flat ±3 min
January	1,131	+2	62.2%
February	1,122	+1.5	63.0%
March	1,131	+2	61.9%
April	1,125	+2	66.7%
May	1,118	+2	65.0%
June	1,130	+1.25	69.9%
July	1,121	+2	69.8%
August	1,125	+2	66.3%
September	1,104	+2	68.4%
October	1,103	+1	68.2%
November	1,099	+2	66.2%
December	1,116	+2	64.0%

Table 2. Same-month comparison, 1995 versus 2025. Every month's median air-time change is between +1 and +2 minutes. October is +1 minute. Source: BTS, all months.

By distance band

Cutting every flight into a distance band holds stage length nearly constant inside each slice. Median air time in 2025 is within 4 minutes of 1995 in every band except the longest domestic flights (2,000 miles and up), where the median rose +13 minutes, from 283 to 296. That band grew from 3.5% of flights in 1995 to 6.4% in 2025. Likely contributors to the air-time rise are noted in the box below.

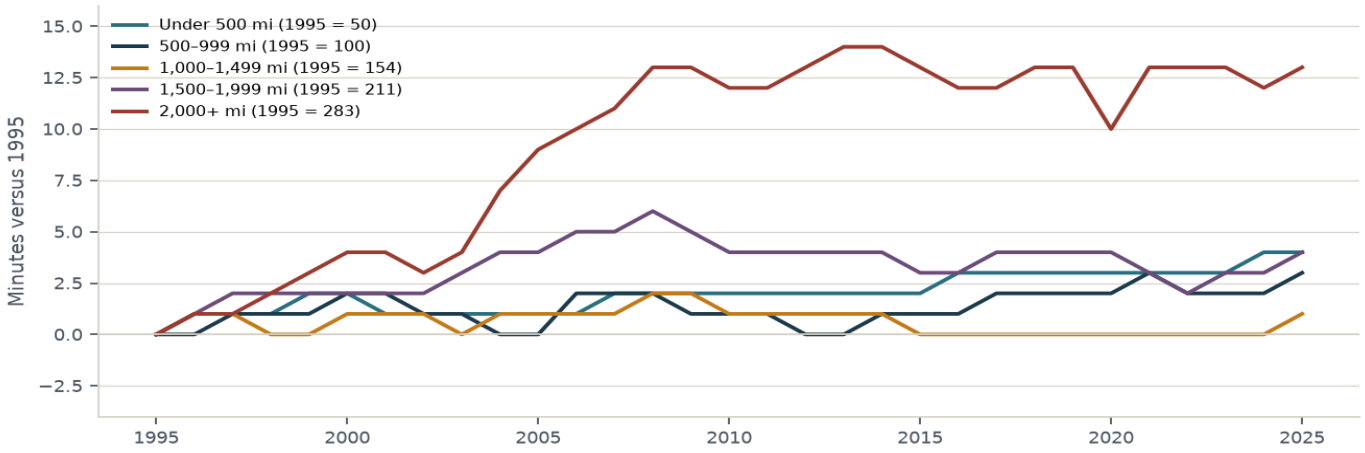


Figure 6. Median AirTime in each distance band, shown as the difference from that band's 1995 median so the series share a scale. Source: BTS, all months.

Band	Air 1995	Air 2025	Change	Min/1,000 mi 1995	Min/1,000 mi 2025	Dist. 1995	Dist. 2025
Under 500 mi	50	54	+4	163.9	170.9	305	316
500–999 mi	100	103	+3	143.5	141.5	697	728
1,000–1,499 mi	154	155	+1	131.1	133.2	1175	1164
1,500–1,999 mi	211	215	+4	124.1	126.2	1700	1703
2,000+ mi	283	296	+13	117.9	122.4	2401	2419

Table 3. Flight-level medians inside each distance band. Minutes per 1,000 miles is the ratio of that band's median AirTime to its median Distance, times 1,000. Source: BTS, all months.

Why the 2,000+ mile band rose (+13 min, 283 to 296, or 4.6%). Almost all of that median increase arrived between 2004 and 2008 (290 in 2004, 296 in 2008), then plateaued through 2025. A 4.6% rise in the pooled median is not a 4.6% slowdown on the same routes.

Same routes: +6.1 minutes. Seventy-seven city-pairs over 2,000 miles were flown in both 1995 and 2025 (at least 30 flights each year; 168,329 flights in 1995 and 285,192 in 2025). Weighted by 1995 flights, their route-median air times rose 6.1 minutes (2025 weights: +6.3; the unweighted median of the 77 changes was +5.0). Minutes per 1,000 miles on those pairs — each pair's median air time divided by its median distance, times 1,000 — rose from 119.9 to 122.3 under 1995 weights. The 11 continuing Hawaii pairs (HNL, OGG, KOA, LIH, ITO) rose 14.0 minutes; the 66 mainland pairs rose 4.7 minutes.

Slower cruise accounts for about 3 minutes of that same-route rise, not the full +13. A 2014 NEXTOR II study for the FAA measured a 1.1% weighted-average cruise-speed reduction between 2004/05 and 2011 for seven U.S. airlines (26% of 2004 U.S. available seat-miles), based on filed ground speed for aircraft types flown in both periods, while jet-fuel prices rose 91% (NEXTOR II Oil Impact, 2014). A 1.1% speed cut adds about 3.1 minutes to a 283-minute flight. An Associated Press report of 1 May 2008 described the practice: Southwest Airlines projected $42 million in fuel savings that year by extending each flight by one to three minutes, and JetBlue Airways about $13.6 million by adding just under two minutes on average (CBS News / AP). About 3 minutes of the 6.1-minute same-route rise is unexplained by that speed cut.

Mix accounts for 4.8 minutes of a 10.9-minute rise in the flight-weighted average of route-level median air times (288.2 to 299.1). Of that +10.9, 6.1 minutes is the same-route effect and 4.8 minutes is mix — almost entirely 155 city-pairs that were not flown in 1995, which were 35% of 2025's 2,000+ mile flights, were longer (flight-weighted 2,533 miles versus 2,401 on the continuing pairs), and were 40.6% Hawaii. Hawaii's share of 2,000+ mile flights rose from 14.2% to 22.5%. Reweighting among the 77 continuing pairs subtracted 0.4 minutes. Median distance inside the band moved only from 2,401 to 2,419 miles, which at the 1995 pace would add about 2 minutes. The published +13 is the flight-level median of every 2,000+ mile flight, a different statistic from the 10.9-minute rise in the weighted average of route medians; the two are not added to each other.

By airline

A carrier's raw median air time moves when that carrier's typical hop gets longer or shorter. Southwest Airlines is the clearest case: its median distance rose from 337 miles in 1995 to 669 miles in 2025, and its raw median air time rose from 53 to 95 minutes. Per 1,000 miles, Southwest Airlines went the other way, from 157.3 to 142.0.

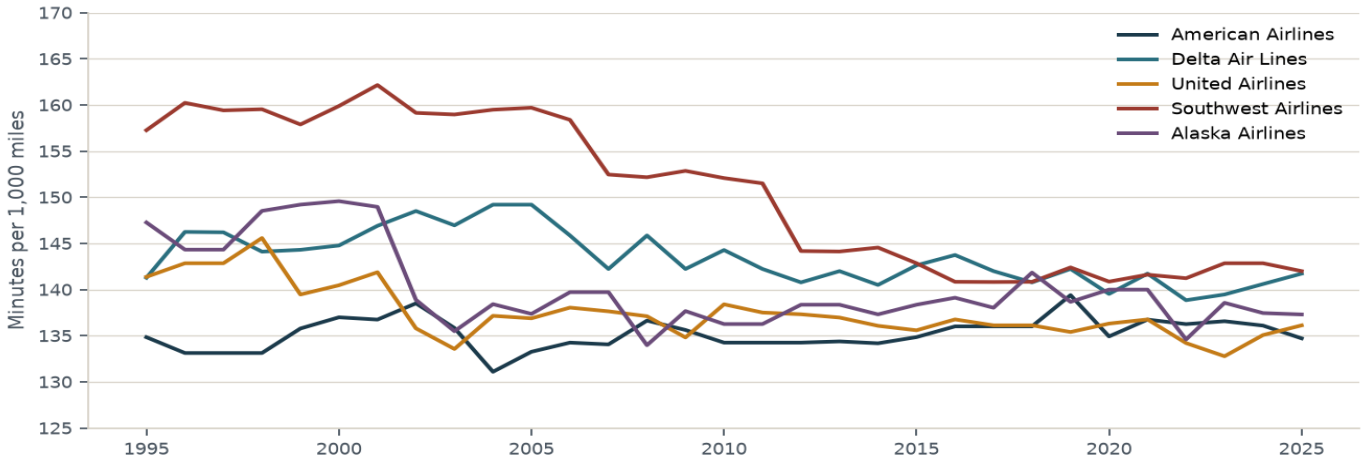


Figure 7. Median AirTime per 1,000 miles (ratio of each carrier's median AirTime to its median Distance, times 1,000) for five mainline carriers present from 1995 through 2025. Source: BTS, all months.

Airline	Air 1995	Air 2025	Change	Min/1,000 mi 1995	Min/1,000 mi 2025	Dist. 1995	Dist. 2025
American Airlines	125	123	-2	134.8	134.7	927	913
Delta Air Lines	77	108	+31	141.3	141.7	545	762
United Airlines	96	130	+34	141.4	136.1	679	955
Southwest Airlines	53	95	+42	157.3	142.0	337	669
Alaska Airlines	100	152	+52	147.3	137.3	679	1107

Table 4. Systemwide medians for each carrier (not a constant city-pair basket). Raw air time tracks stage length; minutes per 1,000 miles do not rise steadily. Source: BTS, all months.

Carriers that do not appear in the 1995 file — including JetBlue Airways, Frontier Airlines, Hawaiian Airlines, and Spirit Airlines — have no 1995 baseline here.

Hub-and-spoke versus point-to-point

Air time stayed flat under every network model. On continuing route-airline cells from 1995 to 2025, hub-and-spoke carriers (American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, United Airlines) had a median air-time change of +2 minutes; point-to-point (Southwest Airlines in that window) +1; hybrid (Alaska Airlines) 0. 63.7 percent, 89.2 percent, and 92.6 percent of those cells, respectively, stayed within 3 minutes of their 1995 air time.

Classification rule. Hub-and-spoke (legacy): American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, United Airlines, and predecessors present in the panel (Continental Airlines, Northwest Airlines, US Airways, Trans World Airlines, America West Airlines). Point-to-point / low-cost: Southwest Airlines, JetBlue Airways, Spirit Airlines, Frontier Airlines, Allegiant Air, AirTran Airways, Virgin America, Sun Country Airlines, and Breeze Airways. Hybrid: Alaska Airlines and Hawaiian Airlines. Regionals that mainly feed

hubs are omitted from the model headlines. The rule follows each carrier's published network model. A data check supports the split: in 2025 the three hub-and-spoke mainline carriers put 34–35 percent of departures through their top-three origin airports; Southwest Airlines put 17.9 percent through its top three. Limits: the 1995–2025 point-to-point row is Southwest Airlines only (139 cells); JetBlue Airways and Frontier Airlines enter in the 2010–2025 window.

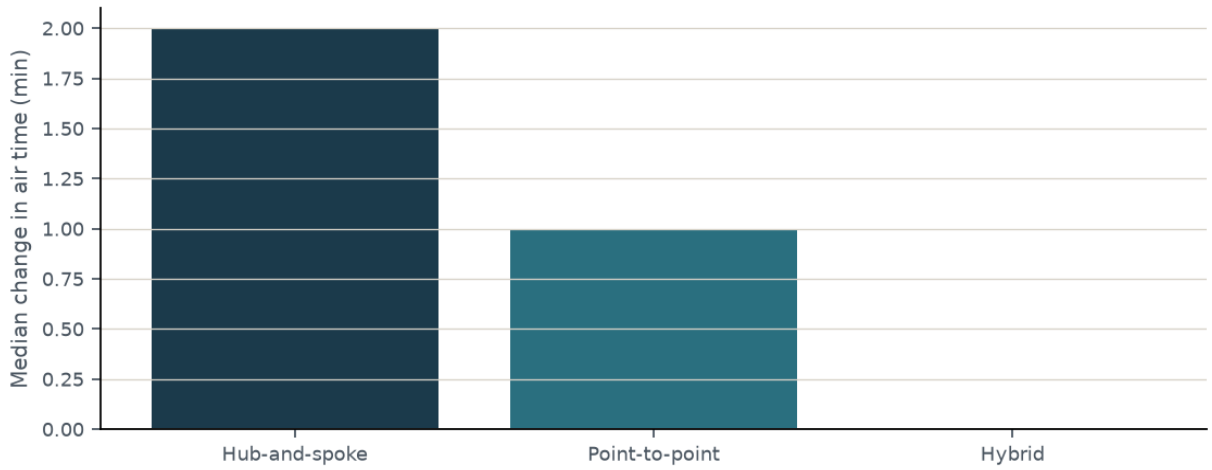


Figure. Median 1995-to-2025 change in median air time by network model, continuing route-airline cells (at least 30 flights with AirTime each year). Source: BTS AirTime.

Network model	Cells	Median Δ air	Within 3 min	Air 1995	Air 2025
Hub-and-spoke (legacy)	545	+2	63.7%	116	117
Point-to-point / low-cost	139	+1	89.2%	64	66
Hybrid	54	0	92.6%	97.5	97

Table. Continuing route-airline cells, 1995 to 2025. Typical air times are the median of cell medians. Source: BTS AirTime, all months.

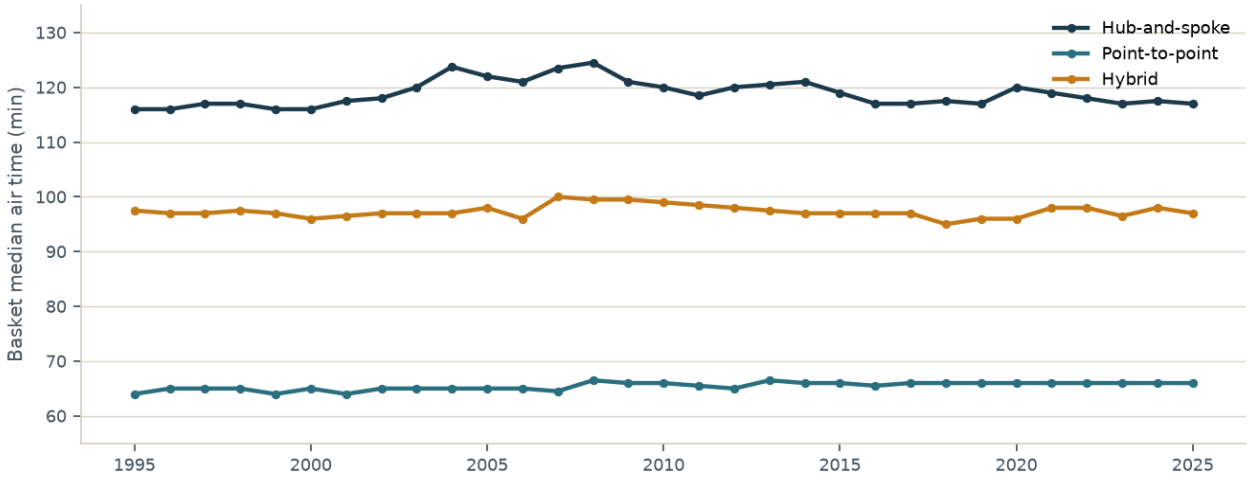


Figure. Basket median air time for the continuing 1995–2025 route-airline cells of each network model. Source: BTS AirTime, all months.

From 2010 to 2025, with JetBlue Airways and Frontier Airlines in the point-to-point group, the median air-time change is 0 minutes on 635 hub-and-spoke cells, −1 on 519 point-to-point cells, and 0 on 101 hybrid cells. Hub-and-spoke carriers schedule connecting banks at hubs (FAA, New Connecting Hub Airports Study, 1990); point-to-point carriers publish mostly nonstop origin-destination flying (Cook and Goodwin, JAAER, 2008). That contrast is about scheduling on the ground, not wheels-up to wheels-down air time. This section does not measure taxi, connecting time, or GoScore Total Ground Time.

Busiest city-pairs

Among the 50 city-pairs with the most combined 1995 and 2025 flights, the median air-time growth is +2.6%. 39 of those 50 stayed within 3 minutes; 11 lengthened by more than 3 minutes; 0 shortened by more than 3 minutes.

City-pair	Air 1995	Air 2025	% change	Flights 1995	Flights 2025	Distance (mi)
LAX-SFO	54	55	+1.9%	32,296	21,582	337
LAS-LAX	42	43	+2.4%	34,273	17,415	236
LAX-PHX	57	59	+3.5%	30,447	15,183	370
LGA-ORD	102	107	+4.9%	22,072	22,382	733
MSP-ORD	56	59	+5.4%	28,121	12,288	334
LAS-PHX	43	44	+2.3%	24,611	12,601	256
JFK-LAX	297	307	+3.4%	16,227	20,267	2475
DFW-IAH	41	44	+7.3%	23,428	11,245	224
LAX-ORD	216	219	+1.4%	20,051	13,969	1745
SEA-SFO	97	100	+3.1%	18,642	13,700	679
DFW-ORD	110	111	+0.9%	19,235	13,056	802
BOS-ORD	118	122	+3.4%	17,025	14,324	867
EWR-ORD	102	104	+2.0%	19,631	11,681	719
LAX-OAK	54	55	+1.9%	26,700	4,456	337
BOS-DCA	67	70	+4.5%	12,765	17,642	399
DAL-HOU	41	44	+7.3%	22,346	7,964	239
DCA-ORD	86	91	+5.8%	16,881	13,111	612
ATL-DFW	103	103	+0.0%	16,866	12,898	732
SAN-SFO	66	68	+3.0%	16,447	13,225	447
LAX-SEA	130	131	+0.8%	14,792	14,643	954
ATL-ORD	88	89	+1.1%	17,083	12,115	606
DFW-LAX	157	159	+1.3%	15,428	12,901	1235
ANC-SEA	185	185	+0.0%	14,596	13,614	1449
DEN-PHX	84	85	+1.2%	9,882	17,903	602
DEN-DFW	90	91	+1.1%	15,878	11,754	641

Table 5. The 25 continuing city-pairs with the most combined 1995 and 2025 flights. Air columns are median AirTime in minutes; % change is the 1995-to-2025 percent change in that median. Source: BTS, all months.

Where air time did move

The claim is not that no route changed. Long domestic sectors — transcontinental flights and Hawaii — show the largest increases. On the 77 city-pairs over 2,000 miles flown in both 1995 and 2025, air time rose 6.1 minutes when weighted by 1995 flights. A 1.1% slower cruise would account for about 3 of those minutes; about 3 minutes on the same routes is unexplained. Mix — new, longer, more Hawaii-heavy pairs — accounts for 4.8 minutes of the 10.9-minute rise in the flight-weighted average of route medians (see note).

City-pair	Air 1995	Air 2025	Change	Flights 1995	Flights 2025	Distance (mi)
ATL-HNL	489.5	520	+30.5	492	751	4502
HNL-SAN	297.5	318	+20.5	224	3,166	2614
ATL-SEA	251	271	+20	1,805	6,433	2182
OGG-SFO	268	284	+16	1,362	2,965	2338
LAX-OGG	283	299	+16	1,071	3,743	2486
ATL-PDX	251	267	+16	1,329	3,148	2172
DFW-HNL	417	432	+15	2,135	1,117	3784
HNL-LAX	289	304	+15	9,956	10,574	2556

Table 6. Largest increases in median air time among continuing city-pairs. Source: BTS, all months.

City-pair	Air 1995	Air 2025	Change	Flights 1995	Flights 2025	Distance (mi)
MSP-SJU	313	298	-15	83	342	2404
CLE-SEA	261	247	-14	382	893	2021
ATL-ELP	172.5	159	-13.5	58	1,410	1282
ATL-STX	215	204	-11	60	246	1638
PDX-STL	222	211	-11	1,913	67	1708
CLT-SAN	262	253	-9	402	3,131	2077
SJC-STL	225	216	-9	1,424	37	1716
CLE-SFO	274	265	-9	1,083	1,289	2161

Table 7. Largest decreases in median air time among continuing city-pairs. These tails sit well away from the +2-minute median of the full 1,286-pair set. Source: BTS, all months.

What this file covers

Data provenance. Publisher: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS), Reporting Carrier On-Time Performance via Transtats PREZIP (https://transtats.bts.gov/PREZIP/). 1995-1999 also from Harvard Dataverse Data Expo 2009 (doi:10.7910/DVN/HG7NV7). Fields used here: Year, Month, Reporting_Airline, Origin, Dest, Distance, AirTime. CRSElapsedTime is the companion report's scheduled CRS field in the public On-Time file; OAG is not used. Filters: not cancelled, not diverted, Distance at least 50 miles, usable AirTime positive and under 800 minutes. Panel: Jan 1995-Dec 2025 (372 months); 189,225,468 flights after filters; 189,223,380 with AirTime. City-pairs undirected; at least 30 AirTime flights per year for comparisons. Not used: OAG, taxi, ActualElapsedTime, on-time percentages, block-minus-air.

The only flight-time field used here is BTS On-Time Performance AirTime: wheels-up to wheels-down, in minutes. Taxi, gate-to-gate elapsed time, on-time percentages, and scheduled block are out of scope. Flights are kept if they were not cancelled, not diverted, had a positive AirTime under 800 minutes, and a reported Distance of at least 50 miles. The panel is every month from January 1995 through December 2025 — 372 consecutive months, 189,223,380 flights with AirTime. AirTime is blank in BTS before 1995, so the series cannot start earlier. Years 1995–1999 come from the Harvard Dataverse copy of the same BTS series (Data Expo 2009, doi:10.7910/DVN/HG7NV7). Years 2000–2025 come from BTS PREZIP files. We also cross-checked a sample of BTS AirTime records against Spire satellite ADS-B in-air times and confirmed that the BTS data reflects reality. City-pairs are undirected (ATL–ORD pools both directions).

Year	Flights with AirTime	Median air (min)	Mean air (min)	Median miles	Min / 1,000 mi
1995	5,219,473	79	97.4	546	144.7
1996	5,205,639	82	99.8	562	145.9
1997	5,298,222	83	101.3	575	144.3
1998	5,223,264	85	103.0	588	144.6
1999	5,356,880	86	104.8	596	144.3
2000	5,477,897	88	106.5	602	146.2
2001	5,721,595	84	103.3	576	145.8
2002	5,196,080	87	105.8	599	145.2
2003	6,355,695	82	101.1	551	148.8
2004	6,968,238	81	101.5	547	148.1
2005	6,977,919	83	102.8	569	145.9
2006	6,990,741	85	103.7	577	147.3
2007	7,266,676	84	102.9	574	146.3
2008	6,851,443	86	104.1	581	148.0
2009	6,341,756	85	103.5	581	146.3
2010	6,319,595	86	103.9	588	146.3
2011	5,954,054	89	107.3	606	146.9
2012	6,004,109	88	107.7	602	146.2
2013	6,258,454	87	107.0	596	146.0
2014	5,677,534	92	111.4	630	146.0
2015	5,713,148	94	113.5	650	144.6
2016	5,537,225	97	116.5	679	142.9
2017	5,578,543	98	117.5	680	144.1
2018	7,070,938	92	111.5	634	145.1
2019	7,266,197	93	111.6	641	145.1
2020	4,398,469	93	109.1	640	145.3
2021	5,877,336	97	113.2	675	143.7
2022	6,530,723	96	112.8	666	144.1
2023	6,742,552	98	114.8	679	144.3
2024	6,964,367	98	115.0	680	144.1
2025	6,878,618	100	116.9	693	144.3

Table 8. Systemwide figures for every complete year from 1995 through 2025. Minutes per 1,000 miles is the ratio of that year's median AirTime to its median Distance, times 1,000. The smallest year is 2020, during the pandemic traffic drop. Source: BTS, all months.

How to read these numbers

BTS Distance is the scheduled or great-circle mileage, not the miles actually flown. If airways became more circuitous, that would appear here as more AirTime per reported mile. The per-mile series did not rise over the full span. The file is US domestic reporting carriers only. The set of reporting carriers expanded over time, notably around 2003 and again in 2018. Fleet mix is not separately held constant. Distance bands and minutes per 1,000 miles absorb stage-length mix; they do not isolate aircraft type. City-pairs are undirected, so each pair pools outbound and inbound flights. None of this speaks to time on the ground. Gate-to-gate time, taxi, and scheduled block are different quantities.

Sources

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