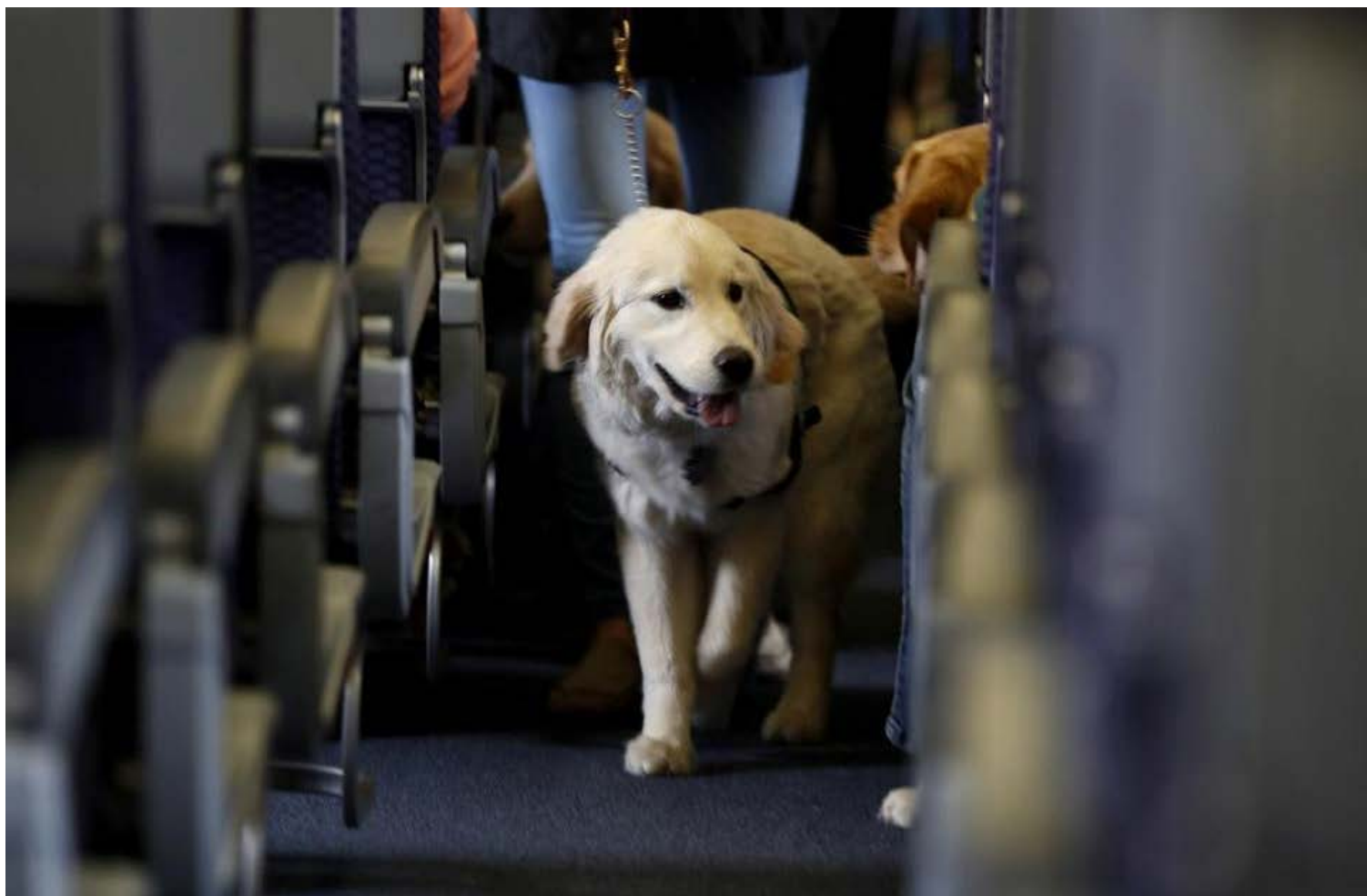




There were 85 pet deaths on flights in 3 years. United had 41 of them



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In this 2017 file photo, a service dog strolled the aisle inside a United Airlines plane at Newark Liberty International Airport. The recent death of a puppy on a United flight has raised questions about the safety of animals on the carrier.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

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The [recent death of a puppy aboard a United Airlines flight](#) — the latest in a series of animal deaths and other concerning incidents aboard the company's planes — has raised questions about whether the carrier is somehow less safe than other airlines when it comes to transporting animals.

Over the past three years, the rate of dogs, cats, and other pets either dying or being injured has been noticeably higher when they are traveling with United compared to any other major domestic carrier, federal transportation [data](#) show.

But experts caution that the statistics do not necessarily mean that United has been less safe for animals than other airlines.

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"It can be difficult to figure that out with the information we have," said Christopher Berry, staff attorney at Animal Legal Defense Fund, an anti-animal-cruelty organization that [pushed](#) for requirements that airlines report animal injuries and deaths to the Department of Transportation.

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Records show that across all airlines from 2015 through 2017, there were 151 animal-related incidents — 85 deaths, 62 injuries, and four lost animals — out of about 1.57 million animals transported.

United accounted for more of those incidents than any other carrier: 77 altogether — 41 deaths and 36 injuries — though it also transported 344,483 animals during that span, more than any other carrier.

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Incident reports submitted to the federal transportation department provide insight into animal-related incidents on airplanes.

The statistics show that United logged 2.2 incidents per 10,000 animals transported, the highest rate among airlines. The next highest rate was Hawaiian Airlines at 1.4 incidents per 10,000, followed by

Delta Air Lines at 1.3.

Looking just at deaths alone, United's rate of about 1.2 deaths per 10,000 animals transported was second to Hawaiian's rate of 1.4.

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But as concerning as some of those numbers may seem, “there are some important caveats to the data,” to take into consideration, Berry said.

For starters, reports of animals dying, getting hurt, or going missing are rare, regardless of the airline, meaning that there's a fairly small sample size to try to draw conclusions from.

And a closer inspection of individual cases shows that the reported reasons for why animals wind up injured or dead are usually not due to obvious mistakes or negligence by the airlines or their workers.

The [United flight puppy death in the news this week](#) was highly unusual for two reasons: the animal was in the plane's cabin, and a flight attendant's insistence that the dog be stored in an overhead bin appears to have contributed to its death.

More often, animals, perhaps stressed by the unfamiliar noises and sensations of flying, were reported to have injured themselves in cages in the cargo area of planes, or they died from preexisting medical conditions, perhaps triggered by anxiety, according to the data. In other cases, officials couldn't determine a cause.

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Specialists said additional factors may skew the data. Some airlines may operate a higher share of long-duration flights, or they may fly more frequently to and from cities with big swings in temperature and other weather conditions.

There may also be differences in how each airline interprets the federal requirements about which

incidents involving animals are required to be reported, and which aren't.

United spokesman Charlie Hobart said the company is diligent in reporting cases.

"If we notice a dog has little cut on his paw or a chipped toe nail, we report that," he said.

While major airlines have been required to file reports about cases in which a dog, cat, or other pet died, was injured, or was lost during air travel since 2005, only since 2015 have they been required to report the total number of animals that traveled on their flights.

That has provided some way to account for the fact that certain airlines carry many more animals than others.

But even with those additional statistics, "It's very challenging to draw conclusions from this data," said Jol A. Silversmith, a partner at the Washington, D.C., law firm Zuckert, Scoutt & Rasenberger who specializes in aviation industry legal issues and has [closely studied](#) the data about animal incidents on airlines.

He said the main takeaway for pet owners is that deaths and injuries to animals while flying are rare, and that instances involving airline wrongdoing are even less common. But there is still some risk to putting your pet on an airplane.

"Overall, even with the best of care from airlines, sending an animal by air can be quite a traumatic experience for it," Silversmith said.

The death of a puppy — which has prompted [new airline policies](#) and a [proposal for federal legislation](#) to ban carriers from putting animals in overhead bins — wasn't the only jarring animal-related headline for United this week.

The airline is also investigating how a [Kansas family's dog was mistakenly flown to Japan](#).

While it's hard to pinpoint whether some airlines are better than others at transporting animals, Berry, from the Animal League Defense Fund, urged all carriers and federal officials to take steps to try to improve flying accommodations for animals in the cargo area of a plane.

"The environment of where they're kept is a big factor," he said. "It's a hostile environment for animals to be flying in cargo where there's not someone down there to keep an eye on them."

United officials said they take steps to encourage customers to try — to the extent possible — to prepare their animals for the experience of flying, including by buying the crate they will be traveling in weeks ahead of time so the animal is familiar with it and to put that crate in a car and drive through a car wash to roughly simulate flying.

So, what recourse do passengers have if their pet is hurt or dies aboard a flight?

Silversmith said their legal options may, technically, be quite limited, since generally pets are viewed by the legal system as property.

"The law doesn't treat them as family members, even though many people see them that way," he said. "I suspect that in these cases, the animals, for liability purposes would be treated as — and I hate to say it

— luggage.”

He said there’s a limit for how much airlines are liable for when it comes to lost luggage: \$3,500.

But Silversmith said he wouldn’t expect airlines to necessarily stick to the letters of the law in pet death cases.

Indeed, United’s spokesman said, “We understand how devastating something like that can be when it occurs, and we’re going to do what we can to help.”

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