

TRANSPORTATION

FAA study finds noise from airplanes, helicopters far more annoying than other sources



By [Lori Aratani](#)

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The first Federal Aviation Administration noise survey in nearly 30 years found more people are bothered by aircraft noise than before, even as planes have gotten quieter.

According to the FAA's [Neighborhood Environmental Survey](#), nearly two-thirds of people reported being "highly annoyed" by aircraft noise — about five times higher than the 12.4 percent who reported the same level of annoyance during a 1992 review. Those surveyed considered noise from aircraft far more annoying than that from other sources, including cars, trucks and their neighbors.

The agency noted that the findings come as far fewer people live with "significant" exposure to noise from airplanes, the result of quieter aircraft and efforts to reduce populations in areas with excessive aircraft noise. According to the FAA, just over 400,000 people live in such areas, compared with more than 7 million in the 1970s. Advances in engineering have made today's aircraft far less noisy than their predecessors.

But there is significantly more air traffic than when the previous study was conducted.

"The FAA's Neighborhood Environmental Survey tells us what we already knew loud and clear: Our communities are ravaged by aircraft noise," said Rep. Thomas Suozzi (D-N.Y.), a vice chair of the Quiet Skies Caucus.

The survey of more than 10,000 people who live near one of 20 U.S. airports found "a substantial increase in the percentage of people who are highly annoyed by aircraft noise over the entire range of aircraft noise levels considered, including at lower noise levels."

While nearly two-thirds of those who responded said they were "highly annoyed" by noise at levels the government considers objectionable, 49 percent reported being bothered by aviation noise at any level.

The report said the findings mirror other recent reviews that found that aircraft noise “often results in higher levels of annoyance compared to the same level of noise from ground transportation sources.” The findings also raise questions about the tools the FAA has relied on to measure the effect of noise on communities — something researchers acknowledged in the report.

The FAA’s findings are probably no surprise to those who live along flight paths, including many residents in the Washington region. Over the years, the number of noise complaints has skyrocketed near the region’s three major airports: Washington Dulles International, Reagan National and Baltimore-Washington International Marshall.

In a [letter](#) to FAA Administrator Stephen Dickson this month, members of the Quiet Skies Caucus — a group of House lawmakers representing districts where aircraft noise has been a perennial concern — wrote that FAA measures to gauge the effects of aircraft noise have “outlived their usefulness.”

Legislators also expressed frustration that the study relies on years-old data. The data was collected in 2015 and 2016, but the report wasn’t released until this year.

“This is an unacceptable lag time between data collection and publication,” they wrote. “The FAA must collect and release data on noise complaints and annoyance levels on a regular basis if we are to create and implement effective policy solutions.”

In a statement, the FAA called the survey “an important step in seeking public input as the FAA undertakes a review of its existing noise policy. The FAA will continue to engage directly with members of the Quiet Skies Caucus to address their inquiries.”

Rep. Stephen F. Lynch (D-Mass.) said in a statement that he was displeased with the FAA’s lack of effort to address aircraft noise but hoped the report would lead to action.

Added D.C. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D): “The FAA has a responsibility to help reduce and mitigate noise in impacted communities, and the FAA’s failure to recognize these concerns speaks volumes about why our communities feel slighted and shows a lack of willingness to make the necessary improvements.”

The survey’s findings will be used to guide the agency as it moves forward on efforts to understand the effects of aircraft noise in neighborhoods and potentially develop strategies for mitigating it.

In 2015, researchers began to survey about 10,000 people. More than 2,000 were contacted for follow-up phone interviews to answer more detailed questions.

Individuals were asked questions about various noises or disturbances they might experience at home, including from cars, trucks and their neighbors. But researchers found that respondents overwhelmingly identified airplane noise as the most annoying.

The FAA is [inviting the public to comment](#) on its findings through April 14. More than 2,300 comments have been submitted

Among those who have weighed in is D.C. Attorney General Karl A. Racine (D), who urged the FAA to update its policy for measuring the effect of noise on the public and to use research to craft updated noise policies.

“Because of the FAA’s outdated and inconsistently applied policy, District residents have their sleep disturbed and their work and school interrupted by aircraft noise every day,” he said. “Decades of research has shown that exposure to noise can interfere with children’s ability to learn and harm human health.”

The 20 airports were selected because they were considered to be a representative sample, the study’s authors said. They included Albuquerque International; Albany International; Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International; Austin–Bergstrom International; Bradley International (Conn.); King County International (Wash.); Billings Logan International (Mont.); Des Moines International; Detroit Metropolitan; Las Vegas McCarran International; Los Angeles International; LaGuardia (N.Y.); Clinton National (Ark.); Memphis International; Miami International; Chicago O’Hare; Savannah/Hilton Head (Ga.); San Jose International; Syracuse Hancock (N.Y.); and Tucson International.

How to submit public comment:

Comments can be submitted online at [regulations.gov/document/FAA-2021-0037-0001](https://www.regulations.gov/document/FAA-2021-0037-0001) or by mail: Docket Operations, M-30; U.S. Department of Transportation, 1200 New Jersey Avenue SE, Room W12-140, West Building Ground Floor, Washington, D.C. 20590-0001. Comments also can be sent via fax to Docket Operations at (202) 493-2251. Individuals should include the docket number: FAA-2021-0037.