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Can Airline Seating Get Any Worse? ‘A New Form of Torture Chamber’

Passengers have flooded the FAA with complaints about narrow seats and scant legroom; ‘It’s literally painful to fly today’

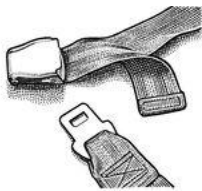
By *Joseph De Avila* [Follow](#)

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Like nearly everyone who boards a commercial airliner these days, Tina Dixon hates the tiny, uncomfortable seats. At 6-foot-6, she has a point.

“They are a new form of a torture chamber,” said Dixon, 62 years old, from Blackshear, Ga. “I don’t have a folding femur. Most people don’t.”

Passengers have been sounding off for years about airline seating—no legroom, thin cushions, too narrow. Now politicians are listening. A bill introduced in Congress last month to update aircraft evacuation standards would compel federal regulators to study seat sizes and spacing.



Tight squeeze

Tito Echeverria, who used to travel frequently as a plant manager for a manufacturing company, has had too many awkward interactions with other squished travelers. “You end up having to consistently rub legs with someone, even though you’re not really trying to,” said Echeverria, 32, from Ontario, Calif. “You’re just freaking there next to them.”

U.S. regulations cover aisle width and the number of seats allowed on planes, but not minimum seat sizes. The Federal Aviation Administration has said in court it isn’t required to set seat standards unless it finds they are necessary to protect passenger safety. In late 2019 and early 2020, it simulated emergency evacuations and found seat size and spacing didn’t adversely affect the process.

Last year, the FAA sought public feedback on whether seat sizes posed safety issues, and it got an earful. More than 26,000 public comments poured in over a three-month stretch.

“Airplane seat sizes are appalling,” one commenter wrote. “They are built for people from the ’40s and ’50s. They cannot remotely accommodate a person over 6 feet or 200 pounds. It’s literally painful to fly today.”



Southwest Airlines technicians installing seats in 2013. The carrier offers plus-size travelers a second seat at no additional cost. PHOTO: JOHN MONE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“I’m 5 feet tall and even I feel too confined in these seats,” wrote another. “I feel badly for those people of normal size.”

The FAA said it is reviewing the thousands of comments it received.

Airlines for America, an association representing the U.S. airline industry, said its members are investing in technologies to maximize personal space, comfort and safety.

In March, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia denied a petition that would have required the FAA to stipulate minimum seat sizes and spacing. The court said FlyersRights.org, the advocacy group that filed the petition, didn’t prove that seat-size regulations are necessary for passenger safety.

The court did agree with one point. “To be sure, many airline seats are uncomfortably small,” it wrote. “That is why some passengers pay for wider seats and extra legroom.”

Victoria Carter, 37, said the price of regular coach seats is already too high—that airlines are asking her to pay Hilton Hotel prices for a Motel 6 quality seat. She said she tries to fly exclusively with Southwest Airlines because they offer plus-size travelers a second seat at no additional cost. A spokesperson for the airline said the policy is meant to accommodate all customers who purchased a ticket for a flight.



Dayana Duncheva said she thinks the cramped spacing between seating rows would make evacuations dangerous. PHOTO: JOSEPH DE AVILA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Dayana Duncheva, 39, said she doesn’t think she would be able to exit a plane safely in the event of an emergency, given the cramped space between the rows and bags sticking out from under seats.

“If you get caught on something, you are going to fall and you probably don’t even have space to fall,” said Duncheva, who lives in Martha’s Vineyard, Mass. “And somebody is going to step on you.”

Michael Rodgers, 36, an engineer who flies about 80,000 miles a year, said he gets irritated when people seated in his row just try to squeeze by him. “It’s crazy how small that space is

that they're trying to get through, and it becomes really awkward," he said. "Like, let me know and I'll get up."

Matt Conner, 34, from Medford, Mass., said "the most annoying thing is definitely when somebody leans their seat back. It immediately hits my knees every single time."

Conner, who is 6-foot-3, said he nearly swore off flying coach two years ago after a flight from Boston to Dublin. A large, tall person in front of him reclined for the entire flight. "My knees were destroyed after that flight," he said.

Barry Umbs, a 6-foot-9 retiree from Milwaukee, said he has gotten into heated exchanges with passengers in front of him who try to recline.

"I hate to say it, but when I get on a plane, I jam my knees into the back of the seat until they give up trying to recline," said Umbs. "I've had people call the flight attendant and say that I'm not allowing them to recline. And the flight attendant will look around to the back of the seat and say, 'You can't recline because the person's knees are jammed in already.'"

Jack Rogosin, 27, said he is always shocked when the person in front of him has the gall to recline. "I feel like, 'Wow, are you serious?'" said Rogosin, who lives in Brooklyn. "I just roll my eyes."

Matt Cronin, 53, said he tries to take a middle ground on the reclining question. "I only recline halfway," said Cronin, who lives in Appleton, Wis., and flies about 200 times a year working for a medical-device company. "I'm very conscious about the back."



Liddy Cotter said airlines should try harder to provide better seating. PHOTO: JOSEPH DE AVILA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Liddy Cotter, 25, said carriers should put more effort into making seating more pleasant, even if they have to sacrifice some profits.

“I understand they’ve got to make money,” said Cotter, who lives in Manhattan. “But at the same time, where is the humanity?”

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