

# Rules when flying the unruly skies

OPINION By Michael Cintron



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Incidents of unruly behavior in flight are making news yet again. Before we start asking to ban seats that recline or go full pitchforks and torches on the airlines, a little perspective is needed.

Unruly behavior on an airliner is dangerous, costly and unacceptable. It is also a difficult matter not fully understood since it not only involves passengers, but in rare instances, members of the flight crew. Airlines, rightly so, are adopting a zero tolerance approach for dealing with those who pose a danger to themselves, other passengers or the safety of the flight. Fortunately, they are a small minority but the upward trend in incidents is worth noting.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA), the trade association that represents 240 airlines around the world, states that between 2007 and 2013 there were over 28,000 reported incidents of unruly passengers aboard flights. IATA and its member airlines have established guidelines and training to deal with unruly airline passenger behavior but the industry is also seeking changes to international protocols that would give more power to airlines and governments to handle unruly passengers, including the ability to prosecute and recover the costs associated with an incident. The aviation body of the U.N., the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), has adopted enhanced enforcement measures against unruly passengers that will take effect once the new protocols are ratified. IAPA strongly supports these efforts.

However, punishing unruly behavior is only part of the solution.

Recognizing and stopping the potential for disruptive and dangerous behavior

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is paramount. There are many contributing factors. Though often cited are the levels of discomfort in a typical economy class cabin, don't forget that incidents occur in premium cabins as well.

There is more at play than just discomfort. Consider the airport environment, which can be tense. Think about the hurdles a typical traveler must cross just to get situated into an airline seat. From road traffic to long check-in lines, to anxiety-inducing security checkpoints – they all combine to raise stress levels. Add a few emotionally trying events to a person's day, including long delays and cancellations, and you just might have a fuse waiting for a spark.

Except for the small space they occupy, passengers are in control of very little during a flight. This makes some nervous and frustrated and, unfortunately, a few choose artificial means like drugs or alcohol to ease this discomfort. Airline employees need to continue to refine their training to be ever-cognizant of the potential for unruly behavior.

In addition to training and awareness, we strongly encourage airlines to periodically revisit their beverage service policies involving alcohol, especially on long flights. Airlines must also adapt procedures that make it more clear to passengers that unruly behavior will lead to prosecution and that ignoring crew member instructions falls under that definition, regardless of the circumstances leading up to it. Just as with the use of personal electronic devices, there must be clear guidelines for the use of external devices that could potentially alter the workings of a certified piece of equipment, such as a seat back.

We at IAPA are encouraged that the industry is taking steps to reverse the worldwide increase in disruptive and dangerous behavior by airline passengers. While we support the duties of the flight crew to do all possible to ensure the safety and security of all on board, we must also insist on bringing aboard some common sense and courtesy.

As passengers, we must realize that another person — especially one we may never see again — should never be worth risking so much. Try asking a crew member for help with a seat or space issue before engaging another passenger directly. But keep your emotions in check. Members of the flight crew have full discretion over what is considered a threat.

In dealing with airlines we should expect competency, courtesy and respect. The other half of the bargain is ours to uphold.

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