



The American Consumer Institute

PICKING UP THE TAB:
*The Impact of Airport Fees
on Ridesharing Consumers*

By Justin Leventhal & Steve Pociask

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Executive Summary

Airport authorities across the country are imposing fees onto ridesharing services, specifically pick-up fees and occasionally drop-off fees. As with any toll or fee, ridesharing companies routinely pass these fees to customers in the form of higher fares. As fares increase, some consumers are dissuaded from using rideshare services, which reduces consumer choice.

The reason behind why ridesharing companies, also referred to as *transportation network companies*, are being levied fees defies clear logic.¹ One justification is that the increase in ridesharing trips reduces airport revenue from parking, taxis, and rental car services. However, since ridesharing services do not benefit or use these services, there is no reason for passengers using ridesharing services to bear these costs.

Another explanation is that rideshare vehicles are causing wear and tear on the airport access roads. However, so do private cars, which do not pay these fees. In some cases, airports provide ridesharing vehicles with designated waiting/staging areas at the airport, but taxis and limousines also use these services often without being subject to the same fees. In fact, with some exceptions, taxis and limousines do not pay any fee or, when they do, they generally pay lower fees than ridesharing companies pay.

Seemingly, the only explanation for these fees is that they represent a growing source of easy revenue for airport authorities, who can levy these fees and do so without the consent of taxpayers, voters, or consumers. This report examines the fees issued by U.S. airport authorities

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¹ The airport authority vernacular often uses the term *transportation network companies* or TNC fees when referring to those charges imposed by airport authorities upon ridesharing companies.

and measures the impact these fees have on consumers. Overall, this report finds that eliminating airport drop-off and pick-up fees would:

- Increase consumer welfare by one billion dollars per year;
- Increase household earnings by a half billion dollars per year, while creating 17,000 new jobs in the economy; and
- Generate total downstream economic benefits of \$1.7 billion dollars per year.

Because the current fee system is asymmetrically applied across vehicles and generally unjustified, it results in higher consumers prices and reduced consumer choice. This report finds that eliminating these fees would produce clear economic benefits to consumers and workers, and it recommends that policymakers revisit the *carte blanche* ability of airport authorities to levy fees that single out ridesharing consumers.

Picking Up the Tab: The Impact of Airport Fees on Ridesharing Consumers

Background

Ridesharing has become a common means for consumers to travel, frequently to and from airports, providing increased convenience and sometimes lower prices compared to other forms of transportation. For instance, ridesharing is often priced competitively or lower priced than taxis and limousine services. Similarly, airline passengers can save by using a ridesharing service instead of parking their personal vehicles at airport parking lots for an extended period of time.

However, U.S. airports are regularly levying fees onto ridesharing providers for dropping off and picking up passengers – fees that are reflected in rideshare fares. In effect, the drop-off and pick-up fees imposed by airport authorities are, dollar-for-dollar, passed through to consumers in the form of higher fares. As a result, these fees indisputably reduce consumer welfare.

Moreover, these fees are usually imposed asymmetrically. For example, fees are not imposed on private vehicles that drop-off and pick-up friends or relatives, despite these trips being functionally the same as an Uber or Lyft trip to the airport. Commonly, airport authorities impose fees on ridesharing companies that are often significantly more than those imposed on higher priced competitors, specifically taxi and limousine companies.

The impact of these fees influences consumer choice. By charging asymmetric and discriminatory fees, consumers are discouraged from ridesharing, and consumer choice is reduced with little economic explanation for why some vehicles pay more, while others pay less or nothing at all.

How Airport Ridesharing Fees Are Set

Ground transportation to and from airports has traditionally consisted of private vehicles, taxis, and rental cars. Today, ridesharing companies have joined this list and have quickly grown in popularity. As the volume of ridesharing increases, airports have begun imposing fees on rides to and from airports.

Virtually all airports are publicly owned either directly or through a quasi-governmental organization. The structure for establishing ridesharing fees varies and may be set by a government authority, or directly by the airport. For example, the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, headed by a politically appointed board, is a public organization that sets the fees for Reagan National and Dulles International Airports.² Similarly, the state of Texas delegates its fee-setting authority to airports for drop-offs and pick-ups.³

Regardless of who sets the rates, three primary approaches are used to determine ridesharing fees at airports: cost recovery, market-based pricing, and legislation.⁴ While not all airports responded when asked about their cost-setting methods, 42 percent of large airports reported using a cost recovery approach of fee setting. This method sets ridesharing fees based on the costs of maintaining facilities that the ground transportation operators directly use.

Market-based pricing is the second most often used method, with 32 percent of large airports employing it. This method attempts to set ridesharing fees based on the perceived benefit that the airport provides to ridesharing drivers. The rationale is that the airport creates business for drivers as a destination and pick-up location, so the airport considers the volume of ground transportation provided by ridesharing services in setting the fee. Despite being called “market-based” there is no market mechanism at play to determine the fee; fees are set at governmental discretion.

² “New Rules for Uber, Lyft, and Limousine Services Began November 1,” Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, November 2, 2015, <https://www.mwaa.com/news/new-rules-uber-lyft-and-limousine-services-began-november-1>.

³ “Justification for Administrative Rule Adoption,” Texas Department of Licensing & Regulation, November 7, 2017, <https://www.tdlr.texas.gov/tnc/tncjust.htm>.

⁴ Craig Leiner and Thomas Adler, “Impact on Airports Operations,” in Transportation Network Companies (TNCs): Impacts to Airport Revenues and Operations – Reference Guide, (Washington, DC: National Academies of Sciences), p. 18, <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/25759/chapter/5>.

Lastly, legislative requirements determine the fees at 15 percent of large airports. While large airports often use the cost recovery model, midsized and small airports use the market-based pricing model most frequently.

Airport Authority Arguments for Ridesharing Fees

Airports primarily provide two justifications for these fees. First, as ridesharing use increases, airports lose revenue per passenger from ground transportation (parking, taxis, and rental cars), often a substantial portion of an airport's revenue.⁵ An early study conducted in 2017 found that due to increases in ride sharing taxi trips decreased 10 to 30 percent, shared-ride vans decreased 18 to 30 percent, private vehicles decreased 10 to 20 percent, parking transactions decreased up to 13 percent, and rental car transactions decreased between 4 and 13 percent.⁶ In response, airports began charging fees to companies like Uber and Lyft to compensate for the decreased revenue from ground transportation.

However, if rideshare passengers do not use these other ground transportation services, why should they be forced to pay for services that they do not want? Instead, other ground transportation services should be self-sufficient and be fully responsible for covering its own costs.

Regarding the drop in other ground transportation services, such as airport shuttles, resulting from ridesharing growth, the amount airports spend to lease, manage, and invest in these ground services should decrease as well. Yet, airports do not appear to be downsizing their ground transportation services to avoid unnecessary costs. Instead, airports are viewing ridesharing fees as a way to supplement and subsidize these less popular services, as well as nonrelated operations and services.

⁵ Art Stadig, "Airport Parking, TNC's and Airport Business," Walker Consultants, October 4, 2018, <https://walkerconsultants.com/blog/2018/10/04/airport-parking-tncs-and-and-airport-business/>.

⁶ Peter Mandle and Stephanie Box, "Summary," Transportation Network Companies: Challenges and Opportunities for Airport Operators (Washington, DC: National Academies of Sciences), p. 1, <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/24867/chapter/2>.

The switch by passengers from private vehicle drop-offs to ridesharing services costs airports nothing, yet fees are still being charged. In fact, an empirical study suggests that, as other ground transportation services have decreased in demand, the revenue from ridesharing fees has more than made up for this shortfall.⁷ Therefore, this evidence shows that drop-off and pick-up fees are simply a generous new source of airport revenue, and not just a way to recover reductions elsewhere.

A second justification for airport ridesharing fees is centered on the rapid increase of ridesharing services at airports.⁸ This has led some airports to blame ridesharing services for a “curbside congestion” problem, which the fees are intended to reduce. However, because rideshare services appears to have a relatively inelastic demand – estimated at -0.55 – the reality is that consumers are not very price sensitive.⁹ In other words, the low elasticity of demand for ridesharing services indicates that increasing fares will do little to reduce congestion, and instead will do more to produce a lucrative revenue stream for airports at the expense of consumers.

This means that most rideshare users will simply pay airports’ additional fees and will continue using their preferred service, while a smaller portion will be pushed from ridesharing entirely into alternative methods of transportation, including the use of personal vehicles, thereby creating a deadweight loss for passengers without any major improvements with curbside congestion.

⁷ Craig Leiner and Thomas Adler, “Impact on Airports Revenue,” in Transportation Network Companies (TNCs): Impacts to Airport Revenues and Operations – Reference Guide, (Washington, DC: National Academies of Sciences), page 25, <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/25759/chapter/6>.

⁸ Shannon Eibert, Ian Girardeau, Jaime Phillips, and Michael Smart, “Addressing Airport Congestion as Traffic Takes Off in the Age of Uber and Lyft,” *Rutgers University*, April 29, 2019 <https://bloustein.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Addressing-Airport-Congestion-as-Traffic-Takes-Off-in-the-Age-of-Uber-and-Lyft.pdf>.

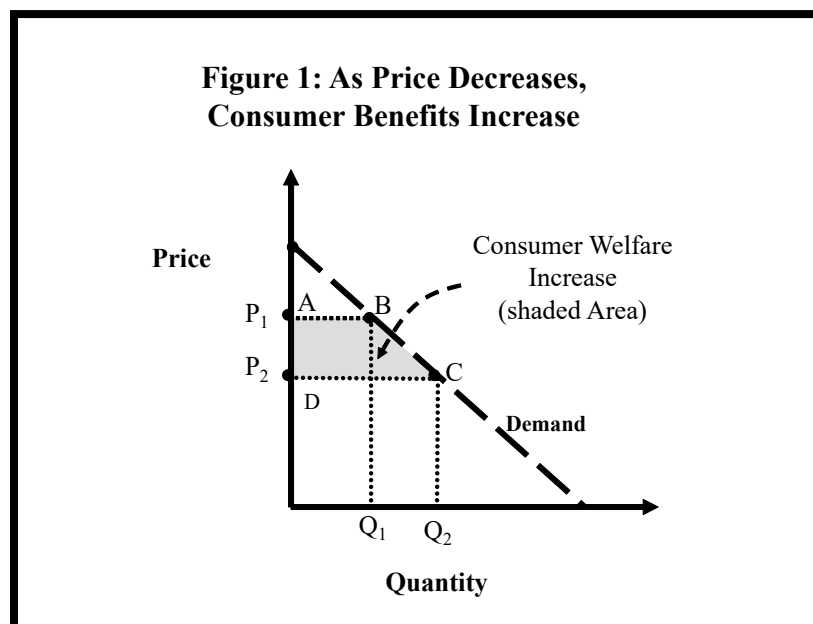
⁹ One study estimated the elasticity of demand for ridesharing services to be -0.55, which means that a one percent increase in price will yield only a 0.55 percent decrease in demand. See, Peter Cohen, Steven Levitt, Robert Hahn, Robert Metcalfe, and Jonathan Hall, “Using Big Data To Estimate Consumer Surplus: The Case of Uber,” National Bureau of Economic Research, working paper 22627, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w22627/w22627.pdf.

Effects of Ridesharing Fees On Consumer Welfare

This report analyzes the impact of ridesharing drop-off and pick-up fees across all U.S. airports on consumers. We estimate the extent to which eliminating these airport fees would lead to lower consumer prices, which would produce increased consumer benefits, commonly described as gains in *consumer welfare*.

1. Methodology

The benefits of increased consumer welfare resulting from a reduction in ridesharing fees can be estimated and are depicted as the shaded trapezoid ABCD in Figure 1 (below), labeled as the Consumer Welfare Increase. This welfare increase can be approximated by the reduction in airport fees resulting from the decrease in passenger fares (noted as the decrease in price from P_1 to P_2) and the corresponding stimulation in demand (noted as the increase from Q_1 to Q_2).



At the higher price, two costs are imposed on consumers by artificially increasing the fares of ridesharing to and from airports. First, is a deadweight loss created by pushing some customers away from ridesharing services. This is a loss to the whole economy as deadweight losses represent services that would have otherwise been provided but are not provided due to the fee. The second cost is borne by those customers who continue to use ridesharing services and pay the extra expense. This second cost represents a transfer of income from airline passengers to airports. The diagram above illustrates these by the shaded triangle and shaded rectangle, respectively.

Air travel appears to have recovered from its dramatic decline during the COVID epidemic. So, for the purpose of estimating consumer demand, passenger volumes for 2019 were selected to reflect normal (non-COVID) levels of operations. In estimating the costs of airport ridesharing fees, when assumptions were necessary conservative assumptions were intentionally made so as not to bias the estimation upward.

To estimate the cost to consumers of airport ridesharing fees, a weighted average of ridesharing fees for all airports was estimated using ridership data from the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) from 2019 to weight each airport's fee.¹⁰ For those airports not listed on the BTS spreadsheet, data on the number of passengers was retrieved from the airports themselves.¹¹

To cover the impact of these fees across all airports, data was collected for the largest 100 airports, accounting for 82 percent of U.S. airline passengers, with estimates for the remaining 18 percent of airport passengers. In determining a weighted average fee, the estimates excluded those airports that charged a fee as a percentage of the fare from the largest 100 airports and instead included them with the remaining airports. For those airports offering a discount for alternative fuel vehicles, the base price was used.

Our estimates found that the 100 largest airports had median pick-up and drop-off fees of \$3.00 and \$2.50, respectively. For the remaining U.S. airports, proxies for the average fees

¹⁰ "Tran Stats," Bureau of Transportation Statistics, accessed October 23, 2023, https://www.transtats.bts.gov/Data_Elements.aspx?Data=4.

¹¹ See Appendix A.

were based on the fees for lowest quartile of the largest 100 airports. Essentially, the remaining airports were assumed to have pick-up and drop-off fees set at \$2.50 and \$2.00, respectively.

Based on our estimates, the average fees on ridership services for pick-ups and drop-offs are \$3.47 and \$2.69. Our estimates are conservative, considering that drop-off fees reported in a study of 23 airports were estimated to be \$3.33.¹² The two charts below show the major airports reporting the highest pick-up fees and drop-off fees, respectively.



¹² "Ground Transportation Fees Benchmarking Study Final Report," Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, July 30, 2019, https://www.floridaairports.org/media/documents/SkyHarbor-benchmarking-study-final-report_revised-July%202019.pdf.

The fare for a trip without airport fees was estimated similarly using a weighted average of fares to or from the most prominent tourist destination near the airport, less the average pick-up and drop-off fees. While this is not representative of all passengers, we assume the population of riders are evenly dispersed around these locations for this estimate. The weighting was again done based on total passengers traveling through an airport.¹³

To estimate the proportion of people using rideshare services to and from airports each year, a weighted average was calculated using the airports that self-report ridesharing trips, something most airports do not do. These airports include Los Angeles International Airport (LAX),¹⁴ Harry Reid International Airport (LAS),¹⁵ Boston Logan International Airport (BOS),¹⁶ Dallas Love Field Airport (DAL),¹⁷ San Jose International Airport (SJC),¹⁸ and Memphis International Airport (MEM).¹⁹ This was done using the rideshare drop-off and pick-up data for 2019, the last year before COVID-19 severely curtailed air travel and ridesharing. This was then combined into a total rideshare use rate for all passengers, since most airports do not separate drop-offs from pick-ups in their reporting. Using this method across all airports, an overall rate of passengers using rideshare services was conservatively estimated to be 13.8 percent, a figure lower than the 15 to 20 percent reported at some large airports.²⁰

¹³ These estimates are based, in part, on Josh Koebert and Mindy Woodall, "Airports With the Most Expensive Uber and Lyft Rides," Finance Buzz, August 30, 2023, <https://financebuzz.com/most-expensive-airport-rideshare-cities>.

¹⁴ "Monthly Ground Transportation Statistics," Los Angeles World Airports, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://www.lawa.org/lawa-investor-relations/statistics-for-lax/ground-transportation-traffic-statistics>.

¹⁵ "Taxi and TNC Statistics," Harry Reid International Airport, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://www.harryreidairport.com/Business/Transportation/TaxiTNC>.

¹⁶ "2019 Data Report Rideshare in Massachusetts, Massachusetts State Government, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://tnc.sites.digital.mass.gov/>.

¹⁷ "Dallas Fort Worth International Airport Annual Comprehensive Financial Report," Dallas Fort Worth International Airport, 2022, https://assets.ctfassets.net/m2p70vmwc019/6drHiqyYqG39hwCkRbJRaz/dc1f0809442ed61c617db99acd694a65/FY_2022_Annual_Comprehensive_Financial_Report.pdf.

¹⁸ "Airport Activity," San Jose Mineta International Airport, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://www.flysanjose.com/airport-activity>.

¹⁹ "Statistics," Memphis International Airport, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://flymemphis.com/statistics/>.

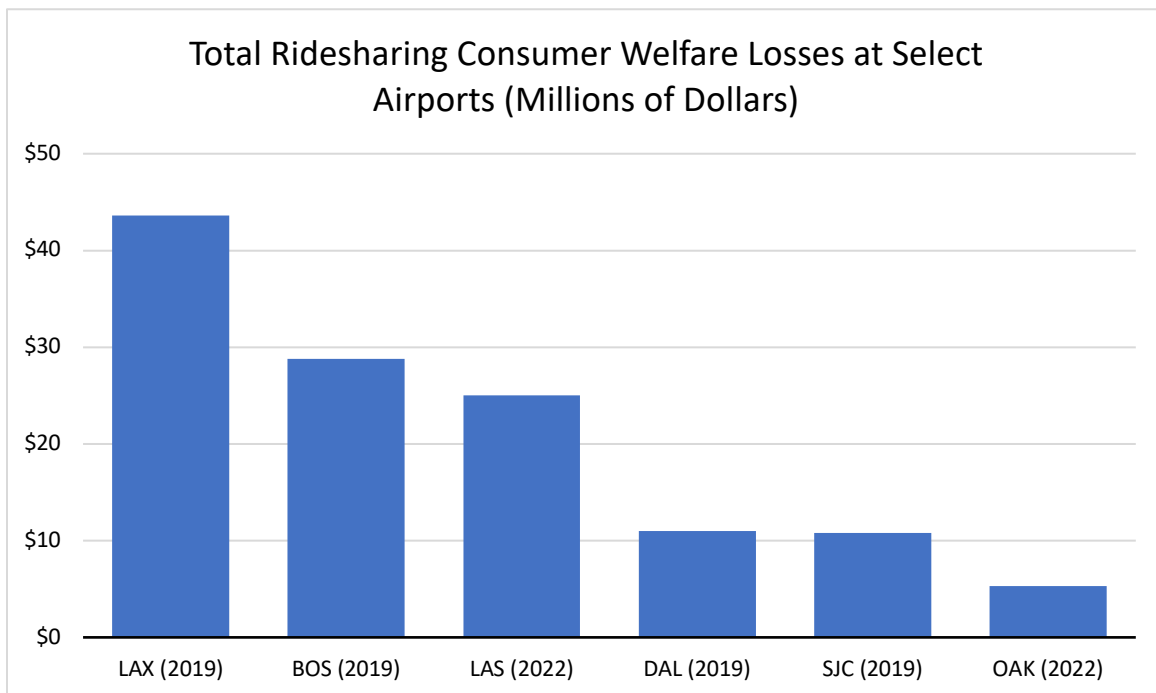
²⁰ Art Stadig, "Airport Parking, TNC's and Airport Business," Walker Consultants, October 4, 2018, <https://walkerconsultants.com/blog/2018/10/04/airport-parking-tncs-and-and-airport-business/>.

Lastly, the elasticity of demand for ridesharing services was assumed to be -0.55 based on previous research.²¹ Essentially, a one percent increase in fare prices would result in a -0.55 percent decrease in ridesharing trips.

This means that, if airports raise fees, they will collect more money from those who keep using ridesharing services than they lose from people who stop using these services. This incentivizes airports to raise fees as a revenue source despite the costs it imposes on drivers and ultimately consumers.

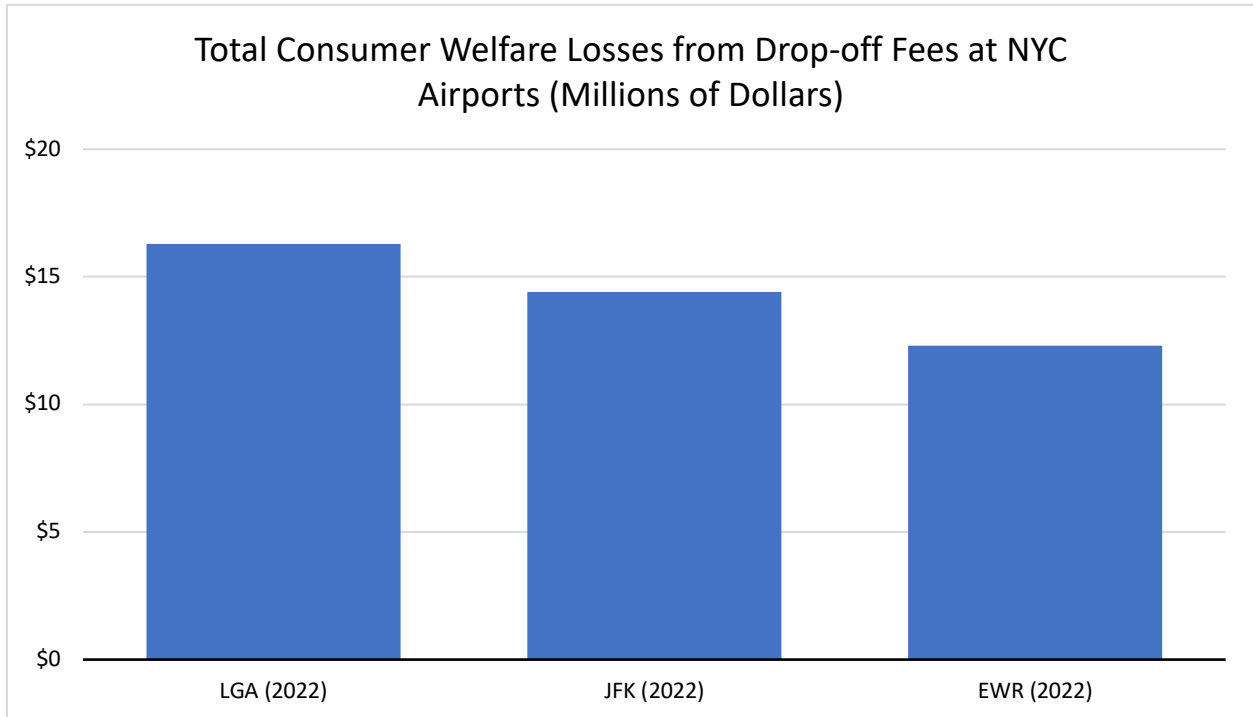
2. Empirical Results

Based on these estimations, the total consumer welfare loss from airport pick-up and drop-off fees is \$932 million annually from the estimated 291 million passengers using rideshare services each year to go either to or from airports. Among those major airports reporting ridesharing trips and fees, consumer welfare losses accounted for \$125 million annually.



²¹ Peter Cohen, Steven Levitt, Robert Hahn, Robert Metcalfe, and Jonathan Hall, “Using Big Data To Estimate Consumer Surplus: The Case of Uber,” National Bureau of Economic Research, working paper 22627, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w22627/w22627.pdf.

The consumer welfare losses were also significant in one metropolitan area in particular. As shown below, New York City's three airports (LaGuardia, JFK, and Newark Liberty International airports) amounted to \$43 million in annual losses for consumers in drop-off fees alone.



Impacts on Drivers, Rideshare Companies, and the Economy

The law of supply and demand explains that as the price of a good or service rises, people purchase less of it. With limited resources, higher costs create a burden for consumers, incentivizing people to find other means of achieving their goals, and in doing so use less of the product or service with an increased price.

Ridesharing is no different. Just as with all goods and services, a higher price lowers the demand for rideshare drivers. Airport ridesharing fees artificially increase the price of ridesharing, reducing the demand and creating the deadweight loss for passengers, as discussed

earlier in this study. But the reduction in demand also reduces the income of and opportunities for drivers, rideshare companies, and the overall economy. These are measurable impacts.

Removing airport fees would return an estimated 22 million riders to rideshare services and boost annual income by \$532 million in fares for drivers and rideshare companies. This figure is conservative, considering that it does not include drivers' tips, meaning the total economic gain from removing the fees is far greater. In effect, ending these airport fees would result in more work and pay for drivers, as well as higher overall economic activity from increased ridesharing trips.

Based on the direct effects of returning \$532 million in revenue, and using the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis economic multipliers, the boost in jobs, employment earnings and total economic output, including direct, indirect, and induced benefits, can be calculated.²² These industry multipliers incorporate supply chain effects across all downstream industries and include the increased household spending from workers. For example, transit and ground passenger transportation services rely on fuel, manufacturing of vehicles, and other industries. These figures include all of these direct and indirect effects.

Using the BLS estimates as described, we estimate the total downstream effects on economic output resulting from the removal of ridesharing fees to be \$1.7 billion per year, including an increase in household earnings of \$510 million per year, and the creation of 17,000 additional jobs. Clearly, reversing these fees will have a significant benefit to consumers and workers alike.

Unfortunate Airport Inaction

Since 2015, airports have seen ground transportation shifting to ridesharing services.²³ Yet, instead of shifting their ground transportation business model to account for changing

²² "RIMS II Online Order and Delivery System," Bureau of Economic Analysis, accessed November 8, 2023, <https://apps.bea.gov/regional/rims/rimsii/>

²³ Using ridesharing fees as a revenue source is not a new concept. Cities and states have been using ridesharing fees for years, with the earliest example in 2013 in California, before ridesharing services had even expanded to

consumer preferences, airport authorities have treated rideshare services as a new revenue stream. The fact is, rideshare services provide no more wear and tear on airports' infrastructure than private vehicle drop-offs and pick-ups, for which airports charge no fees. In some instances, taxi services and rideshare services may use a staging area, but otherwise they use little or no resources from airports.

Airport authorities have been slow to adapt to consumer preferences for ridesharing services. Instead of downsizing the overhead costs of other ground transportation services, airports seem to have concluded that they can charge ridesharing more in order to subsidize their increasingly obsolete traditional ground transportation services. It may also be that these revenues are being used for other purposes, none of which directly relate to ground transportation services. This raises a question of transparency on how these ridesharing fees are ultimately spent.

Airport authorities seem to act as if they know they can get away with raising consumers fees without consequences. This is evidenced by the low elasticity of demand for ridesharing services, meaning that few consumers will forgo the benefits of ridesharing, despite the rent-seeking behavior of airports. To some, ridesharing has become somewhat of a necessity – where these services are preferred by many consumers over other services offered by airports. By imposing fees on passengers with few options, these consumers are being unnecessarily inconvenienced in the least.

Some airports, while often still incorporating ridesharing fees, have begun employing different solutions to address consumer demand changes. LAX, for instance, is creating a separate parking lot and shuttle system for ridesharing and taxi services which is scheduled to be operational in 2024.²⁴ Other airports have looked for ways to repurpose the empty parking spots, sometimes redesignating part of their parking garages for ridesharing services instead of parking. These solutions to congestion may be less harmful to consumers by facilitating the

airports. See, So Jung Kim and Robert Peuntes, "What's Right? What's Next?" Eno Center for Transportation, July 23, 2018, <https://enotrans.org/eno-resources/eno-brief-taxing-new-mobility-services-whats-right-whats-next/>.

²⁴ Dawit Habtemariam, "Scrambling for Solutions As Airport Curbside Congestion Reaches Critical Mass," Business Travel News, January 22, 2020, <https://www.businesstravelnews.com/Transportation/Ground/Scrambling-for-Solutions-As-Airport-Curbside-Congestion-Reaches-Critical-Mass>.

benefits consumers get from ridesharing services, so long as these consumers are spared the fees.

In any case, as traditional ground transportation methods become less critical, airports need to adapt to changing consumer demand by lowering their costs, instead of levying fees to pay for the services that some passengers do not want to use. As consumer preferences for transportation change over time, airports need to be more aggressive to cut their costs for transportation options that are becoming less popular to consumers and provide relief from overly exorbitant ridesharing fees.

Recommendations

As noted earlier, these cost estimations are very conservative. The average fees estimated here are similar to what a previous estimate found, but the drop-off fee is significantly smaller, and the rate of ridesharing is lower than at many large airports. If less conservative assumptions are made, such as assuming 15 to 20 percent of riders use ridesharing like at many large airports, the estimated consumer cost jumps from \$932 million to \$1.01 billion and \$1.35 billion, respectively.

Besides the benefits to consumers, relaxing the conservative assumptions in this study would also increase the estimated benefits for drivers and ridesharing companies compounding into the downstream effects on economic output, household earnings, and jobs. Including the lost tips for drivers would increase the economic benefits even further.

The overall cost to consumers for airport ridesharing fees is estimated in this report at nearly \$1 billion and is likely to grow in the future as air passenger traffic grows. As air traffic grows, ridesharing fees charged by airports continue to climb. Today, Orlando International Airport's fees stand at \$7.00 after increasing in August and again in October of 2023.²⁵ With no

²⁵ McKenna Schueler, "Orlando International Airport set to raise fees for Uber, Lyft and other rideshare services," Orlando Weekly, July 24, 2023, <https://www.orlandoweekly.com/news/orlando-international-airport-set-to-raise-fees-for-uber-lyft-and-other-rideshare-services-34698255>.

ability for taxpayers and passengers to object, airport authorities are relatively free to raise fees on the flying public with significant adverse consequences.

Ridesharing services fees are simply a transfer of income from consumers to airport authority budgets, amounting to a substantial revenue stream for airports and providing consumers with no benefit. Removing ridesharing fees would return \$1 billion in value to American consumers each year, as well as stimulate economic growth by \$1.7 billion and create 17,000 jobs. Based on these economic costs and the lack of justification for these airport fees, policymakers should reexamine the ability of airport authorities to raise fees on ridesharing providers without public approval.

Appendix A: Airport Passenger Data

1. "Tran Stats," Bureau of Transportation Statistics, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://www.transtats.bts.gov/DataElements.aspx?Data=4>.
2. "Passenger Statistics Reports," Palm Beach International Airport, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://www.pbia.org/business/reports/>.
3. "Callender Year 2022 Passenger Numbers Final Revised," Bradley International, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://bradleyairport.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Calendar-Year-2022-Passenger-Numbers-Final-Revised.pdf>.
4. "Monthly Airport Passenger Activity Summary December 2022," Rhode Island Airport Corporation, January 26, 2023, <https://flyri.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Passenger-Stats-December-2022.pdf>.
5. "Aviation Activities Report For December 2022," McGhee Tyson Airport, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://flyknoxville.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/December-2022-Pax-Stats.pdf>.
6. "Fresno Yosemite International Airport December 2022," Fresno Yosemite International Airport, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://flyfresno.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Copy-of-2022-12.pdf>.