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How Guilty Should You Feel About Flying?

Hiroko Tabuchi and Nadja Popovich, *The New York Times*, Oct. 2019

Should most Americans really be ashamed of getting on a plane to see grandma this holiday season?

The short answer: probably not. If your flights are purely a luxury, though, that's another matter.

A small group of frequent fliers, 12 percent of Americans who make more than six round trips by air a year, are responsible for two-thirds of all air travel and, by extension, two-thirds of aviation emissions. Each of these travelers, on average, emits more than 3 tons of carbon dioxide per year. And the most frequent fliers, those who take more than 9 round trips per year, emit the highest share.

Flying isn't the biggest part of the average American's carbon footprint. Most Americans should be more concerned with emissions from driving or from heating or cooling their homes.

So the data gives a clearer picture of who is responsible for air travel emissions in the United States, which make up a quarter of global aviation emissions, more than any other country. Airline emissions could also be lowered with more fuel-efficient planes, of course. Plane manufacturers like Boeing and Airbus have competed to drive down fuel use in their models.

The problem is that air travel is growing many times faster than fuel efficiency gains, which more than cancels out the improvements in fuel efficiency. Meanwhile, the adoption of lower-carbon fuels that can reduce emissions, like biofuels, has been slow. Because of this, emissions from air travel are growing faster than predicted in previous projections.

One idea to curb frequent flying would be to tax fliers progressively: everyone gets one tax-free return flight each year, and a tax kicks in at a low rate from the second flight. Taxes then increase for each additional flight in that year.

And just this month, a Britain-based commission recommended banning air miles and frequent flier programs so that airlines do not "incentivize excessive flying."

For now, even frequent travelers can try to minimize their aviation footprints by choosing routes that fly newer aircraft. They could opt for routes that fly the more efficient A320neo plane, the fuel-efficient plane that Airbus announced back in 2010. They could also keep in mind that a first-class seat can generate many times the emissions of an economy one because of the more spacious cabins. Travelers can also choose to offset a flight's carbon emissions.

They could also think again about whether they really need to fly for the ninth time this year.