

Reducing and Managing Disruptive and Unruly Behavior in Airports

1:00 PM (Eastern Time)

March 25, 2026

TRB Webinar based on ACRP Research Report 280:
Reducing and Managing Disruptive and Unruly Behavior in Airports



Today's Learning Objectives

At the end of this webinar, participants will be able to:

- **Discuss contributing factors as well as recommendations for prevention and mitigation;**
- **Access available resources to address the issue, including training, awareness campaigns, and facility improvements; and**
- **Analyze incidents and ensure accountability using an example framework.**

American Association of Airport Executives (AAAE)

**1.0 Continuing Education Units (CEUs)
are available to Accredited Airport
Executives (A.A.E.)**

Report your CEUs:

www.aaae.org/ceu

American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP)

1.5 Certification Maintenance (CM) Credits

Log into the American Planning Association website (<https://www.planning.org/>) to claim your credits

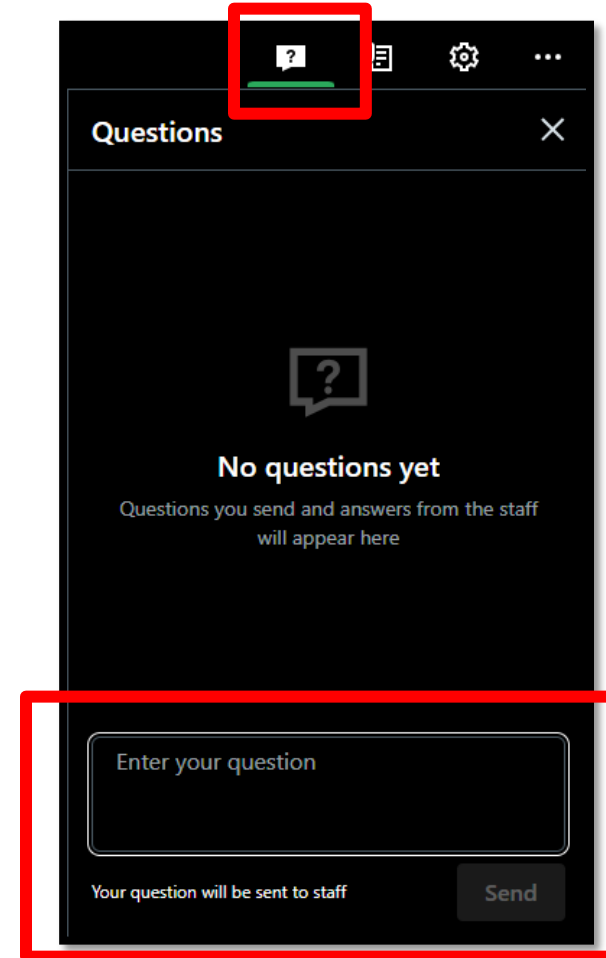
Contact APA at AICPCM@planning.org with questions

Questions and Answers

Please type your questions into
your webinar control panel

We will read your questions out
loud, and answer as many as
time allows

#TRBwebinar



Today's Presenters



Amiel Porta

aporta@san.org



Michele Freadman

MFreadmanConsulting@outlook.com

M. FREADMAN
CONSULTING, LLC



Scott Houston

scott.houston@chertoffgroup.com



Michelle Bregel

michelle.bregel@outlook.com

Reducing and Managing Disruptive and Unruly Behavior in Airports

Scott Houston

Principal Investigator

- Senior Director, The Chertoff Group
- Principal Investigator, three applied research projects
- Seventeen years, Transportation Security Administration
- Strategy, risk management, and security operations



Report Overview

What We Set Out to Do

- Develop a practical guide for reducing and responding to disruptive, threatening, and violent behavior in airports
- Focus on the airport environment (distinct from in-flight incidents)

How the Research Was Conducted

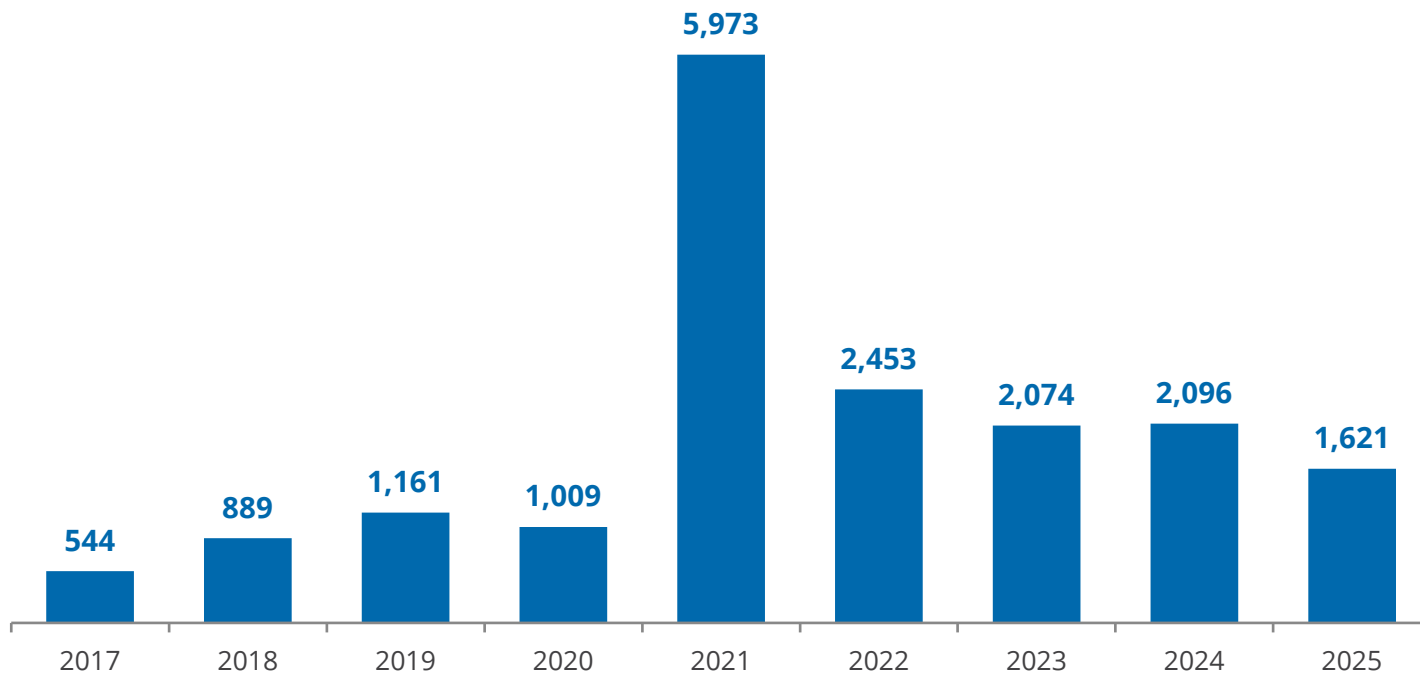
- Literature review: dozens of articles, reports, and cross-industry analysis
- 19 interviews with airports, air carriers, federal agencies, law enforcement, and mental health professionals

How the Report Is Organized

- Ch. 1: Introduction and primer (frequency, offenders, root causes, stakeholders)
- Ch. 2: Prevention and mitigation (training, policies, facility design)
- Ch. 3: Response and intervention (communication, appropriate response, jurisdictions)
- Ch. 4: Post-incident analysis and prosecution (metrics, RCA, legislation, accountability)
- Ch. 5: Conclusion (the systems approach)

Scope of the Problem: Unruly Incident Trends

FAA Unruly Passenger Reports (U.S.)



Source: FAA Security and Hazardous Materials Safety, March 15, 2026

Key Takeaways

- **73% decline** from 2021 peak (5,973) to 2025 (1,621)
- 2023-2024 plateau at ~2,000/year; 2025 shows renewed decline (-23%)
- Incidents remain 40%+ above pre-pandemic baseline (2019: 1,161)
- ~72% of 2021 incidents were mask-related; mask mandate vacated April 2022
- FAA data captures only in-flight incidents; airport-only incidents are largely untracked
- 310+ cases referred to FBI from 2011-2024

Root Causes of Unruly Behavior

1. Drugs and Alcohol

- ~1/3 of airport unruly incidents involve intoxication
- To-go alcohol, overservice, and venue-to-venue “reset”
- 90%+ of incidents with officer injuries involved intoxicated individuals

2. Stressors of Air Travel

- Delays, cancellations, gate changes, hidden fees, long queues
- Sensory overload and poor communication about flight status
- Poor customer service interactions with aviation workers

3. Mental Health

- Non-compliance with medications, anxiety, fear of flying
- Sensory overstimulation (neurodivergent populations)
- Personal trauma, homelessness, fatigue, and jet lag

Root causes differ significantly from airport to airport based on regional and societal factors.

The Complexity of Incident Response

What the Research Found

- ~85% of calls for service for unruly behavior are initiated by air carrier employees.
- The majority are assessed as customer service issues by the responding LEO.

The “Telephone Game” Problem

- When incidents involve a diverted or returned aircraft, the report must pass through multiple channels and organizations before reaching responding officers
- Information is paraphrased or changes slightly at each handoff
- Officers frequently arrive on scene with minimal or conflicting information

Practitioner Takeaways

- **Standardize information flow** between air carrier, dispatch, and responding personnel (Rec. 3.1b)
- **Capture witness statements and video evidence early;** information dilutes with time (Rec. 3.1a)
- **Establish role clarity:** several airports advise LEOs to stand by and let the air carrier representative handle the situation first, intervening only if it escalates
- **Coordinate with TSA** on system update timelines for denied boarding and trespass actions
- **Prepare for social media:** incidents go viral in real time; have a communications response plan ready

Jurisdictional Boundaries

Local Jurisdiction

- Incidents on airport property (outside aircraft) fall to local law enforcement
- Air carrier reps determine denied boarding/removal at the gate
- Disorderly conduct is a misdemeanor in many states; some jurisdictions do not allow arrest
- Airports straddling multiple counties (e.g., DFW, SFO) face coordination challenges

Federal Jurisdiction

- "Special aircraft jurisdiction" applies from door closure to reopening (49 U.S.C. 46501)
- TSA and FAA: civil enforcement (fines)
- FBI: criminal prosecution for in-flight offenses
- FAA refers most serious cases to FBI; 310+ referrals since 2021
- TSA PreCheck eligibility revoked for unruly passengers

Practitioner Actions

- Work with prosecuting authorities to clarify jurisdictional agreements
- One airport developed an exclusion ordinance: ban for up to 90 days without criminal charges
- Another airport sought on-site presence of local prosecutors to impact low-level incidents that were previously dismissed

Post-Incident Analysis: Metrics and Root Cause Analysis

The Data Gap

- FAA only tracks in-flight incidents; limited data on airport-only incidents
- Most airports do not perform in-depth root cause analysis (RCA)
- Informal debriefs common; formal AARs only for serious incidents

Building Effective Metrics

- Requires consistency in: definition, reporting criteria, data collection, classification
- Track customer service data to identify passenger journey pain points
- Review incident data to identify trends and common root causes
- Collect baseline measurements before implementing improvements

Root Cause Analysis

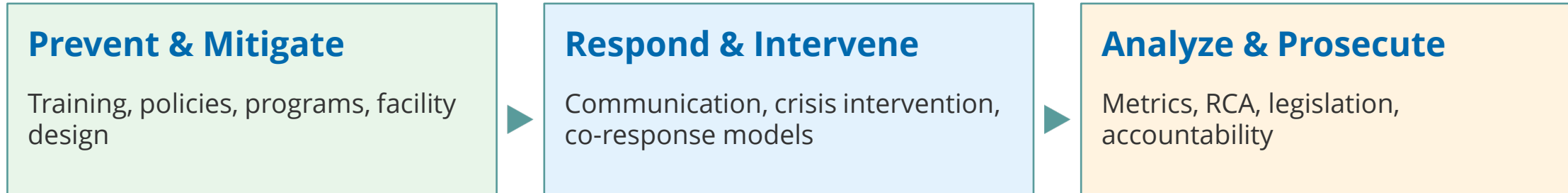
- Wide variety of root causes makes common trigger points difficult to identify
- RCA is a continuous process: revisit and refine as new information becomes available
- Understanding common root causes helps craft targeted, proactive responses

Key Insights

- Establishing consistent metrics is a critical first step.
- Customer service data can help identify pain points contributing to unruly behavior.

A Connected Approach

A Connected System



Resources in the Report

- Unruly Incident Tabletop Guide (Appendix A): editable exercise based on an actual airport incident
- Unruly Passenger Incident Form template (Appendix B)
- Boston Logan CRT case study (Appendix C)
- FAA Reauthorization Act excerpts (Appendix E)
- Cross-industry practices: air carrier, cruise line, bus, rail (Appendix F)

Key Avenues, Strategies, and Considerations for Prevention and Mitigation of Incidents

Michele Freadman, CPP

M. FREADMAN

CONSULTING, LLC

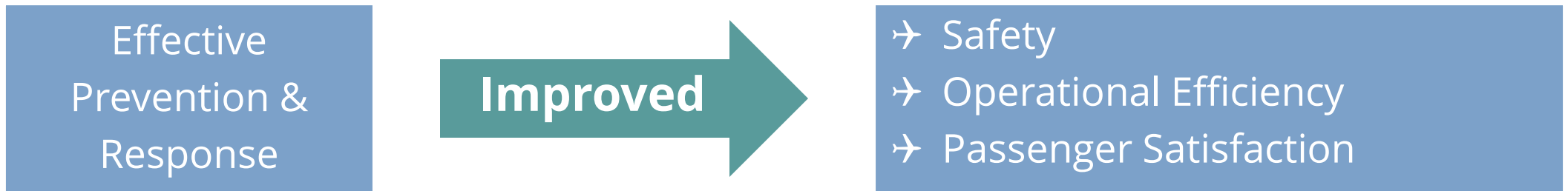
Prevention & Mitigation Framework Introduction

Current Situation

- Unruly incidents remain above pre-pandemic levels
- Airports face a complex, multifaceted challenge – no single solution

Understanding the Approach

- Prevention begins long before a crisis occurs
- Holistic, whole-airport approach is essential
- Three avenues:
 - Training
 - Policies and programs
 - Facility design



Prevention & Mitigation Framework

Primary Avenues

- Stakeholder Training and Awareness
- Policies, Programs and Procedures
- Facility Design and Services

Core Principals

- No two incidents are the same – solutions must be adaptable
- Early identification and intervention reduce escalation
- Shared stakeholder responsibility

Stakeholder Training and Awareness

- Primary root causes:
 - Drugs and alcohol,
 - Travel-related stress
 - Mental health
- *Quality of interaction* – customer service fundamentals
- *Recognition* – behavioral and situational awareness
 - Identifying signs of intoxication, stress, and mental health crisis
- *Response* – behavioral health-informed approaches
- Crisis communication skills and techniques
- Responsible alcohol service

Policies and Programs

- Clear codes of conduct and behavioral expectations
 - Badgeholder conduct standards
- Consistent reporting protocols and documentation
- Alcohol service controls and concessionaire accountability
- Public awareness campaigns — expectations and consequences

Facility Design and Services

- Biophilic and calming design to support mental health and well-being
 - Natural light, open spaces, greenery, water features, noise reduction
- Queue and wayfinding clarity
- Quiet rooms, sensory-sensitive spaces, and neurodivergent-friendly environments
- Passenger support programs and services
 - Therapy animal programs, fear of flying clinics, traveler assistance programs

Key Implementation Considerations

Develop a whole-airport approach

- Integrate training, policy and facility design

Identify root causes through data collection and analysis

- Identify high-impact areas and hot spots

Coordinate across all stakeholders and partners

Build behavioral health literacy across aviation worker roles

- Ensure training accessibility across all shifts and roles

Establish Behavioral health resources and support

- Implement employee assistance programs

Develop co-responder and clinician partnerships

Crisis Communication and Interventions

Determining an Appropriate Response

- Law enforcement respond to non-law enforcement issues
 - Dispatch determines who is notified & responds
 - Many police agencies require deplaning before boarding to address issue
 - Results in loss of information
 - Travel and operations delays
 - Can escalate other travelers
 - Should respond when security threat exists or situation escalates
- Other response options may prevent police response

Crisis Communication and Interventions

Alternative Response Options

- Airport Representative Response
 - Ticket issues, seating issues, lost baggage, other travel inconveniences
 - Appropriately trained airport representatives serve as liaison
 - Strong customer service & de-escalation skills
- Can prevent escalation and law enforcement involvement

Crisis Communication and Interventions

Alternative Response Options

- Behavioral Health Specialist Intervention and Response
 - Trained behavioral health clinicians and specialists
 - Mental health/substance use crisis
 - People experiencing homelessness (PEH)
 - Death of traveler, employee, stakeholder in the airport
 - Assess for danger to self, others, or ability to care for self

Crisis Communication and Interventions

Police Co-Response Models

- With Civilians
 - One or two LEO's w/airport representative (operations or security manager/staff)
 - Civilian provides softer, customer service focused presence
 - Special training for both the LEO and civilian
 - Assess and address situation, possibly avoiding criminal issue
 - Appropriate resolution determined with needs of the person addressed
 - May result in criminal charges, administrative citation
 - When appropriate, the BH needs are addressed w/resource referrals

Crisis Communication and Interventions

Police Co-Response Models

- With Clinicians
 - Police officer responds w/licensed mental health clinician
 - Officers receive CIT, MH First Aid, and other specialized training
 - Focus on arrest as last resort
 - Seek to provide services first using intervention techniques & strategies
 - Allows clinician to address complex, multifaceted issues requiring non-traditional resolution
 - Airport police can return to policing while crisis teams engage with individual

Crisis Communication and Interventions

Police Co-Response Models

- Challenges
 - 24/7 coverage is difficult
 - Funding challenges
- Benefits
 - Enhanced crisis response
 - Improved public safety and trust
 - Resource efficiency
 - Support for officers

Crisis Communication and Interventions

Recommendations

- Establish protocols for determining appropriate response
- Establish procedures that prioritize safety during incidents
- Create an implementation strategy for a co-response program
- Establish a LEO/trained civilian co-response team
- Develop comprehensive co-response program with MHP
- Train frontline staff to recognize crisis and use crisis communication/de-escalation skills

Today's Presenters



Amiel Porta

aporta@san.org



Michele Freadman

MFreadmanConsulting@outlook.com

M. FREADMAN
CONSULTING, LLC



Scott Houston

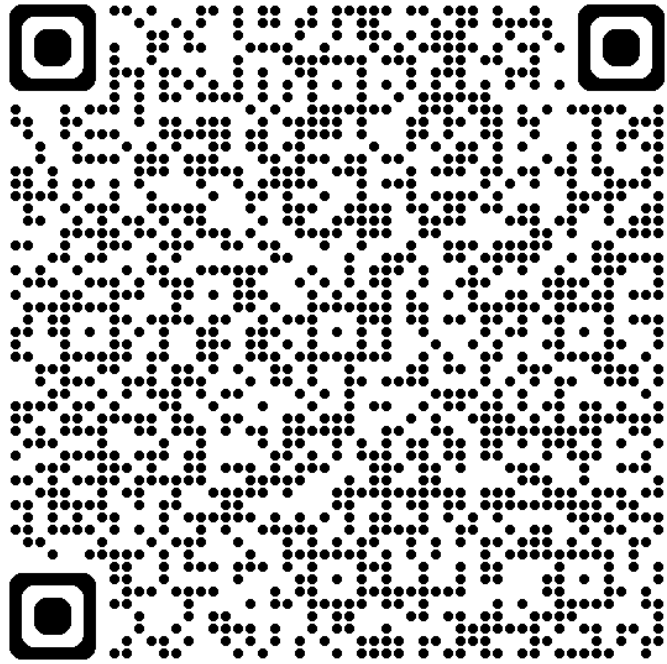
scott.houston@chertoffgroup.com



Michelle Bregel

michelle.bregel@outlook.com

ACRP UNIVERSITY DESIGN COMPETITION



NATIONAL
ACADEMIES

*Sciences
Engineering
Medicine*

TRB TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH BOARD

Other Events for You:

JUNE 8-11, 2026

TRB Symposium on Aviation Innovation and Research

<https://www.nationalacademies.org/events/1075>

January 10-14, 2027

2027 TRB Annual Meeting

<https://trb-annual-meeting.nationalacademies.org>



Subscribe to the newsletter for the most recent TRB news & research:

<https://bit.ly/ResubscribeTRBWeekly>

Get involved with TRB

Receive emails about upcoming webinars:

<https://mailchi.mp/nas.edu/trbwebinars>

Find upcoming conferences:

<https://www.nationalacademies.org/trb/events>



@NASEMTRB



@NASEMTRB



Transportation Research Board

Get Involved with TRB

Be a Friend of a committee bit.ly/TRBcommittees

- Networking opportunities
- May provide a path to Standing Technical Committee membership

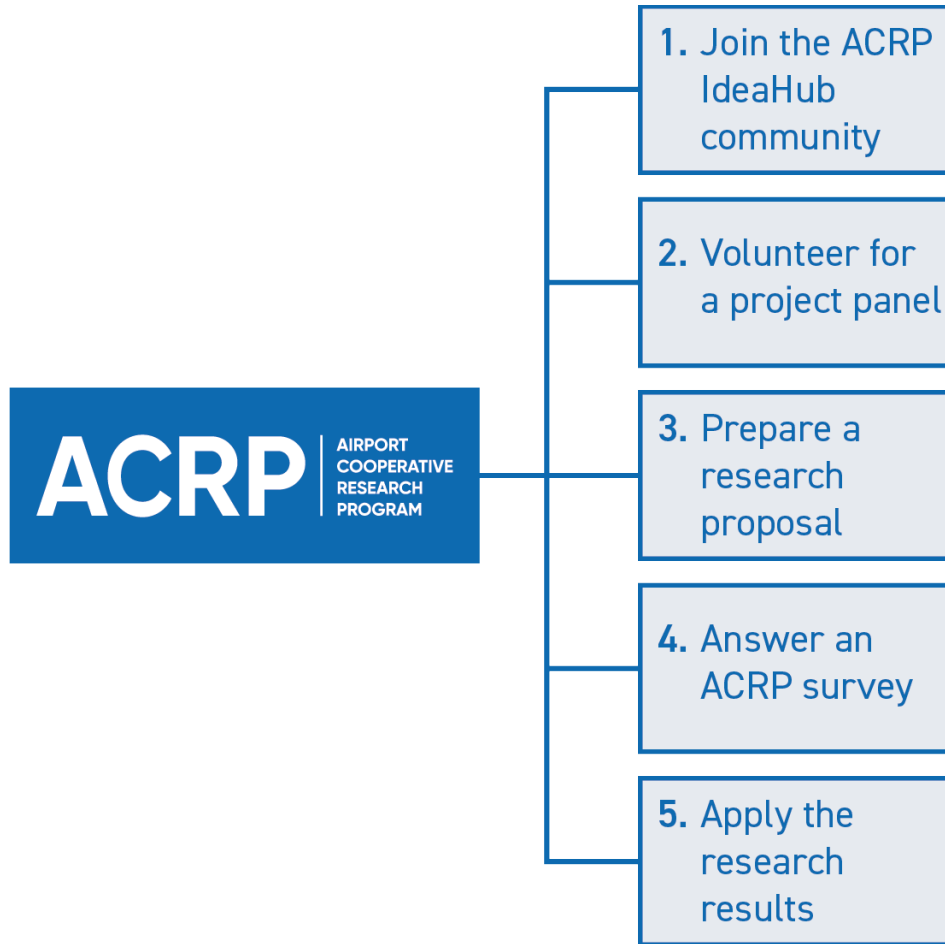
Join a Standing Committee bit.ly/TRBstandingcommittee

Work with CRP <https://bit.ly/TRB-crp>

Update your information www.mytrb.org

Getting involved is free!

Get involved with ACRP



Visit us online:

www.trb.org/ACRP

ACRP Recorded Webinars



Have you missed a past ACRP webinar that you wish you could have attended?

No worries! All ACRP webinars are recorded and posted to TRB's website for viewing at any time.

There are over 100 webinar recordings on a variety of aviation topics available to you at:

<https://www.nationalacademies.org/events>

Select "Past Events" tab and search for "TRB Webinars".