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How Direct Flights Shape a City's Fortunes.

Nonstop flights between cities are a more effective way of generating inter-city investment than increased airport capacity.

Not long ago, it was thought that planes would flatten the world, spreading us out even more than the rise of railroads and cars did in previous eras. But the reality has been much the reverse. Airplanes, airports, and air travel have contributed to our geographic spikiness, fueling the growing concentration of population and economic activity in a small number of large, productive, and well-connected superstar cities.

That's one of the key findings of a recent study on the effects of global airports and air connectivity on economic and urban development. The study, by economists at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and the University of Zurich, examines air travel's role in the economic performance of more than 819 cities and metro areas in 200 different countries. Using detailed data from the International Civil Aviation Organization, it looks specifically at how direct flights facilitate business links and investments between pairs of cities, with data on over half a million businesses and more than 30,000 major business events around the world.

To isolate the significance of direct inter-city flights, the study makes use of an interesting quirk of global aviation regulations. Due to restrictions on crew shifts, flights of more than 12 hours, or 6,000 miles, are significantly more expensive to operate, and thus much less common. This means that some cities, simply by way of their geography, are more likely to have more numerous direct flight links, which, in turn, facilitate more business connections.

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