

English articles

It's useful to read articles in English, even if you don't understand every word - it will help you increase your vocabulary and keep up to date with things happening in English-speaking countries!

*This page will be updated on **Mondays**. The first article is aimed at a B1 and upwards level and the second article is aimed at a B2 and upwards level*

Articles of the week



What can the 'black box' tell us about plane crashes?



By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

It's one of the most important pieces of forensic evidence following a plane crash: The so-called "black box."

There are actually two of these remarkably sturdy devices: the cockpit voice recorder and the flight

data recorder. And they're typically orange, not black.

Federal investigators on Friday recovered the black boxes from the passenger jet that crashed in the Potomac River just outside Washington on Wednesday, while authorities were still searching for similar devices in the military helicopter that also went down.

One recovered flight data recorder was in good condition and its information is expected to be downloaded shortly. Water had gotten inside the cockpit voice recorder, which will make downloading the data more difficult. The collision killed 67 people in the deadliest U.S. aviation disaster since 2001.

Here is an explanation of what black boxes are and what they can do:

What are black boxes?

The cockpit voice recorder and the flight data recorder are tools that help investigators reconstruct the events that lead up to a plane crash.

They're orange in color to make them easier to find in wreckage, sometimes at great ocean depths. They're usually installed a plane's tail section, which is considered the most survivable part of the aircraft, according to the National Transportation Safety Board's website.

They're also equipped with beacons that activate when immersed in water and can transmit from depths of 14,000 feet (4,267 meters). While the battery that powers the beacon will run down after about one month, there's no definitive shelf-life for the data itself, NTSB investigators told The Associated Press in 2014.

For example, black boxes of an Air France flight that crashed in the Atlantic Ocean in 2009 were found two years later from a depth of more than 10,000 feet, and technicians were able to recover most of the information.

If a black box has been submerged in seawater, technicians will keep them submerged in fresh water to wash away the corrosive salt. If water seeps in, the devices must be carefully dried for hours or even days using a vacuum oven to prevent memory chips from cracking.

The electronics and memory are checked, and any necessary repairs made. Chips are scrutinized under a microscope.

What does the cockpit voice recorder do?

The cockpit voice recorder collects radio transmissions and sounds such as the pilot's voices and engine noises, according to the NTSB's website.

Depending on what happened, investigators may pay close attention to the engine noise, stall warnings and other clicks and pops, the NTSB said. And from those sounds, investigators can often determine engine speed and the failure of some systems.

Investigators are also listening to conversations between the pilots and crew and communications with air traffic control. Experts make a meticulous transcript of the voice recording, which can take up to a week.

What does the flight data recorder do?

The flight data recorder monitors a plane's altitude, airspeed and heading, according to the NTSB.

Those factors are among at least 88 parameters that newly built planes must monitor.

Some can collect the status of more than 1,000 other characteristics, from a wing's flap position to the smoke alarms. The NTSB said it can generate a computer animated video reconstruction of the flight from the information collected.

NTBS investigators told the AP in 2014 that a flight data recorder carries 25 hours of information, including prior flights within that time span, which can sometimes provide hints about the cause of a mechanical failure on a later flight. An initial assessment of the data is provided to investigators within 24 hours, but analysis will continue for weeks more.

What are the origins of the black box?

At least two people have been credited with creating devices that record what happens on an airplane.

One is French aviation engineer François Hussenot. In the 1930s, he found a way to record a plane's speed, altitude and other parameters onto photographic film, according to the website for European plane-maker Airbus.

In the 1950s, Australian scientist David Warren came up with the idea for the cockpit voice recorder, according to his 2010 AP obituary.

Warren had been investigating the crash of the world's first commercial jet airliner, the Comet, in 1953, and thought it would be helpful for airline accident investigators to have a recording of voices in the cockpit, the Australian Department of Defence said in a statement after his death.

Warren designed and constructed a prototype in 1956. But it took several years before officials understood just how valuable the device could be and began installing them in commercial airlines worldwide. Warren's father had been killed in a plane crash in Australia in 1934.

Why the name "black box"?

Some have suggested that it stems from Hussenot's device because it used film and "ran continuously in a light-tight box, hence the name 'black box,'" according to Airbus, which noted that orange was the box's chosen color from the beginning to make it easy to find.

Other theories include the boxes turning black when they get charred in a crash, the Smithsonian Magazine wrote in 2019.

"The truth is much more mundane," the magazine wrote. "In the post-World War II field of electronic circuitry, black box became the ubiquitous term for a self-contained electronic device whose input and output were more defining than its internal operations."

The media continues to use the term, the magazine wrote, "because of the sense of mystery it conveys in the aftermath of an air disaster."

With home prices and mortgage rates high, many families find the American dream out of reach



By R.J. RICO Associated Press

The Petersen family's two-bedroom apartment in northern California is starting to feel small.

Four-year-old Jerrik's toy monster trucks are everywhere in the 1,100-square-foot unit in Campbell, just outside of San Jose. And it's only a matter of time before 9-month-oldCarolynn starts amassing more toys, adding to the disarray, says her mother, Jenn Petersen.

The 42-year-old chiropractor had hoped she and her husband, Steve, a 39-year-old dental hygienist, would have bought a house by now. But when they can afford a bigger place, it will have to be another rental. Petersen has done the math: With mortgage rates and home prices stubbornly high, there's no way the couple, who make about \$270,000 a year and pay about \$2,500 in monthly rent, can afford a home anywhere in their area.

According to October data from the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, a San Jose family with a median income of \$156,700 would need to spend 80% of their income on housing — including an \$8,600 monthly mortgage payment — to own a median-priced \$1.54 million home. That's far higher than the general rule of thumb that people should pay no more than 30% of their income on a mortgage or rent.

Moving out of state is out of the question for the Petersens — they have strong family ties to the area and their income would plummet if they move to a lower cost-of-living area. “I'm not willing to give up my job and close connections with my family for a house,” Petersen said.

The issue is widespread and near historic highs nationally: As of last fall, the median homeowner in the U.S. was paying 42% of their income on homeownership costs, according to the Atlanta Fed. Four years ago, that percentage was 28% and had not previously reached 38% since late 2007, just before the housing market crash.

“The American dream, as our parents knew it, doesn't exist anymore,” Petersen said. “The whole idea that you get a house after you graduate college, get a steady job and get married? I've done most of those milestones. But the homeownership part? That just doesn't fit financially.”

First-time homeowners are getting older

The same is true for an increasing number of American families.

In 2024, the median first-time homebuyer was 38 years old, a jump from age 35 the previous year, according to a recent report by the National Association of Realtors. That's significantly above historic norms, when median first-time buyers hovered between 30 and 32 years old from 1993 to 2018.

The biggest driver of this trend, experts said, is simple: There are far too few houses on the market to match pent-up demand, driving prices past the point of affordability for many people who are relatively early in their careers. Coupled with high mortgage rates, many have concluded that renting is their only option.

“Wage growth hasn't kept up with the increase in home prices and interest rates,” said Domonic Purviance, who studies housing at the Atlanta Fed. “Even though people are making more money, home prices are increasing at a faster rate.”

That gap has left many out of the housing market, which for generations has been a way for Americans to build equity and wealth that they can pass down or leverage to buy a larger home. It's also led to widespread worries about housing in the U.S. About 7 in 10 voters under age 45 said they were “very” concerned about the cost of housing in their community, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 120,000 voters in the 2024 election.

Is the dream of homeownership going to fade?

Brian McCabe, a sociology professor at Georgetown University, said he frequently tells his students that “there are few things that all Americans agree on, but one of them is that they'd rather own a home than rent.”

McCabe said homeownership, especially as a wealth-building tool, is the right move for many, especially if the owner intends to be in one place for a long time. But he also said many are realizing that not owning a home has its advantages, too — it gives people more flexibility to move and allows them to live in exciting neighborhoods they would not be able to afford to buy property in.

McCabe said millennials are getting married later, having children later, have a stronger desire to stay in cities and, especially due to remote work, value the flexibility of being able to move with ease — all of which he said could prompt an end to the notion that homeownership is the “apex of the American dream.”

“The big question is whether we see the sheen of homeownership start to fade,” McCabe said. “It's such an interesting cultural marker: Why is owning a home the pinnacle for so many people?”

It's a question Petersen wrestles with because she knows any three-bedroom home she found in her area would leave her family “house poor.”

“I used to subscribe to the idea that owning a house is just a natural milestone you have to reach,” she said. “At some point, though, what are you sacrificing by just owning a house and gaining equity? I want to be able to travel with my kids. I want to be able to sign them up for extracurriculars. How are we supposed to do that if we're paying a mortgage that's most of our take-home pay?”

Petersen said she'll “always hold out a little bit of hope” that homeownership will be in her family's future. But if they find a townhouse to rent that has space for her kids and fits within their \$3,600 monthly rental budget?

“I'd take that,” she said.

Some cities are providing crucial aid to first-time homebuyers

Lifelong Boston resident Julieta Lopez, 63, spent decades hoping to buy a home but watched as prices became increasingly out of reach.

“The prices in Boston just got higher and higher and higher and higher,” said Lopez, who works for the city traffic department issuing tickets for parking violations.

Two years ago, furious to learn that her subsidized apartment's monthly rent was being hiked to \$2,900, Lopez, who earns about \$60,000 annually, took out her phone and began searching for government programs that help first-time homebuyers. She was determined to finally own her own place.

Within months, she had succeeded. Lopez qualified to receive \$50,000 from the local Massachusetts Affordable Homeownership Alliance nonprofit and another \$50,000 from the city of Boston's Office of Housing — funds that helped her with a down payment on the \$430,000 two-bedroom condominium she shares with her 30-year-old son. She now pays about \$2,160 a month on her mortgage.

Lopez knows she is lucky the city has placed such a focus on aiding first-time buyers like herself — Boston has poured more than \$24 million into its homeownership assistance programs since Mayor Michelle Wu took office in 2021, helping nearly 700 residents get their first homes.

But Lopez also feels proud to have her own place after years of working so hard — jobs that included everything from telecommunications to health care to electronics.

“I was determined to have my piece of the pie,” she said. “I felt I deserved that. I've always worked. Always. Nonstop.”

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