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ESA’S ANNUAL SPACE ENVIRONMENT REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ever since the start of the space age there has been more space debris in orbit than operational satellites. As space debris poses a problem for the near Earth environment on a global scale, only a globally supported solution can be the answer. This creates the need for a set of internationally accepted space debris mitigation measures. A major step in this direction was taken in 2002, when the Inter-Agency Debris Committee (IADC) published its first Space Debris Mitigation Guidelines. This document, and subsequent updates, has since served as a baseline for non-binding policy documents, national legislation, and as a starting point for the derivation of technical standards. The standardisation of mitigation measures is important in order to achieve a common understanding of the required tasks leading to transparent and comparable processes. Even if having a consistent set of measures is paramount to tackle the global problem of space debris, it is still up to the individual nations, operators, and manufacturers to implement them.

In order to have an overview of the ongoing global debris mitigation efforts and to raise awareness of space activities in general, the European Space Agency, ESA, has been publishing a Space Environment Report since 2017. The document is updated yearly, it is publicly available, and it supports the awareness raising guideline (C.4) laid out in United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space's (UNCOPUOS) Guidelines for the Long-Term Sustainability of Outer Space Activities published in 2019. The purpose of this report is to:

- Provide a transparent overview of global space activities;
- Estimate the impact of these activities on the space environment;
- Quantify the effect of internationally endorsed mitigation measures aimed at improving the sustainability of space flight.

In this report, the status of the space environment is presented in various facets, focusing on the time evolution of catalogued and asserted objects in terms of number, mass, and area, as well as addressing the global adherence to space debris mitigation measures. Most internationally accepted space debris mitigation measures can be traced back to the following objectives:

- The limitation of space debris released during normal operations;
- The minimisation of the potential for on-orbit break-ups;
- Post mission disposal;
- Prevention of on-orbit collisions.

These objectives are translated in design and operation guidelines that can be measured and the consequences can be assessed. Aspirationally, these objectives lead to future in which space debris is not an issue.

Whereas the presentation of numerical values associated to launch and re-entry activities are essentially absolute, it is important to point out that metrics dealing with the adherence to space debris mitigation measures are *estimates*. These estimates depend on complex physical problems such as estimating orbital lifetime and require under-determined interpretations of observational quantities. As such, the conclusions on the state of the space environment presented hereafter need to be taken with appropriate care and can vary between yearly releases of the report. Notwithstanding such caveats, all care is taken in the design of the methodologies to minimise such variability and some summarising statements can be derived from the presented data.

The **amount of objects**, their combined **mass**, and their combined **area** has been **steadily rising** since the beginning of the space age, leading to the appearance of involuntary collisions between operational payloads and space debris. Ever increasing **improvements in space surveillance sensor capabilities** during the last decades have brought down the size limits where debris can be reliably tracked and catalogued. This, in turn, implies that we know about significant amounts of space debris, but not all their originating events. The **space traffic** itself is also undergoing **notable changes** since 2015, particularly in Low Earth Orbits, fuelled by the **miniaturisation** of space systems and deployment of **large constellations**, with a shift towards **commercial operators**. The exponential growth in the **number of new payloads** continued in 2025, facilitated by both an **increasing launch frequency**, and a rise in the use of **rideshare launches** carrying multiple payloads, once again achieving the highest launch traffic rates seen thus far. These three elements (i.e. volume of traffic, type of spacecraft, type of operators) are all of relevance when one considers the adequacy of space debris mitigation guidelines and possible ways for sustainable space operations, especially when looking at the **Earth's orbital environment as a finite resource**, in line with the UN Long-Term Sustainability Guidelines [1].

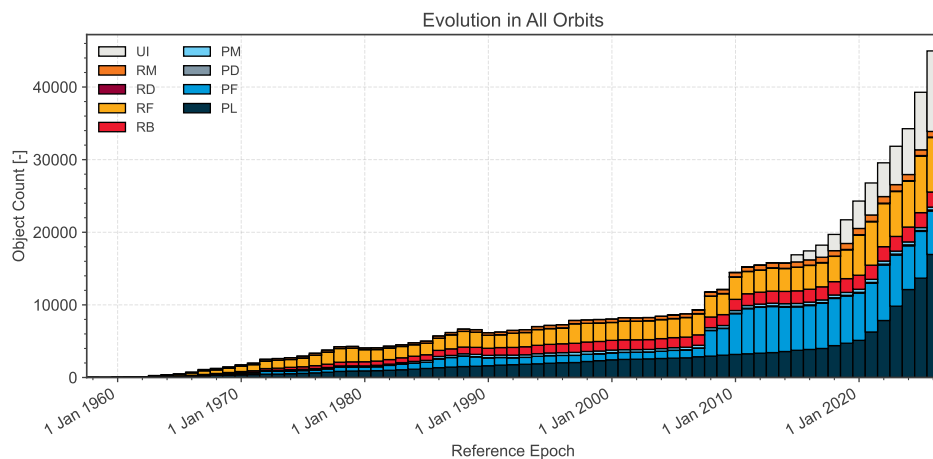


Figure 1: Evolution of number of objects in geocentric orbit by object class. Please consult Section 1.1 for the definitions.

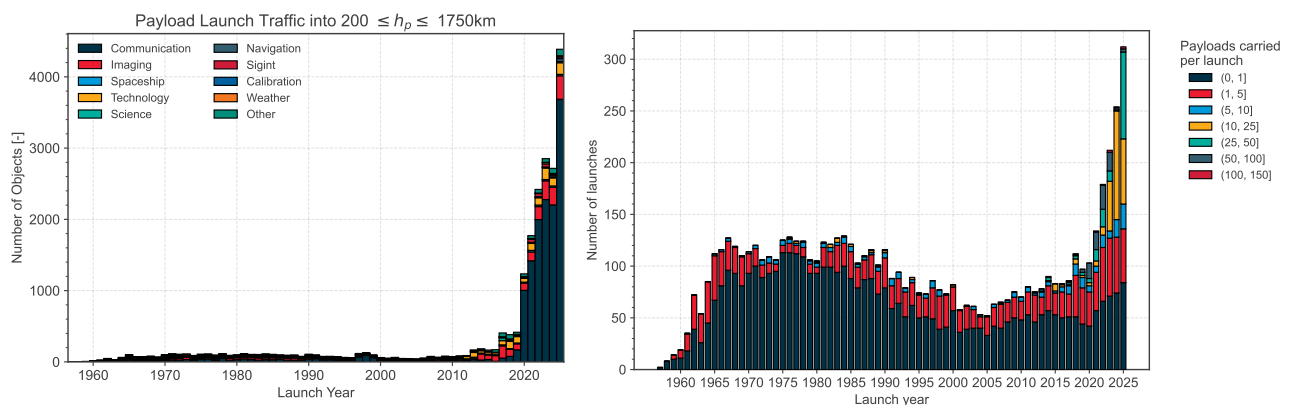


Figure 2: Evolution of the launch traffic in number of payload objects (left) and number of launches (right).

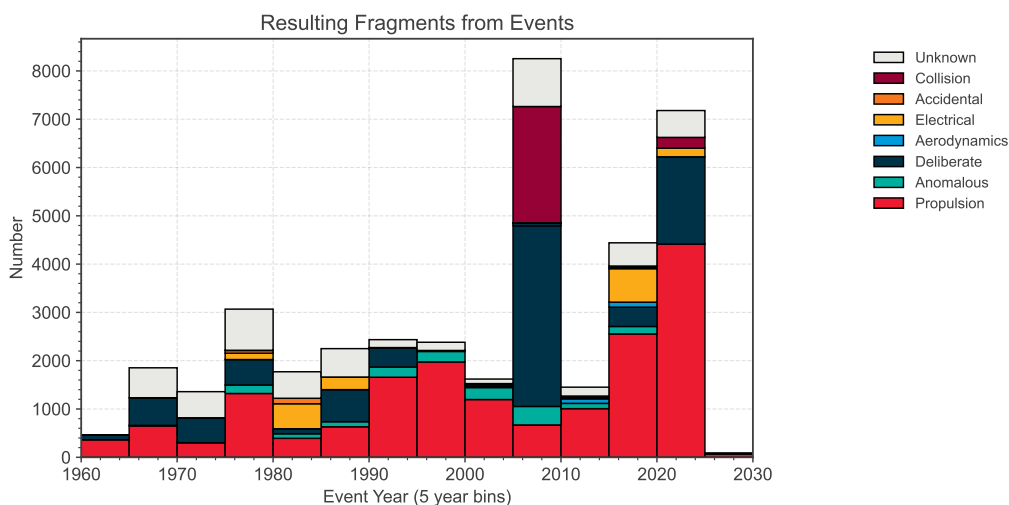


Figure 3: Historical trend of numbers of fragments produced by fragmentation events.

On average over the last two decades, **9.8 non-deliberate fragmentations** continue to occur in the space environment **every year**. This number remains stable, however the impact of each event is variable. This number drops significantly to **1.5** per year when the **lifetime of the generated fragments** is considered a factor of importance, and even **0.4** per year when **systematic** and **unexplained** events are **excluded** from the analysis. This suggests that **non-collisional events** with a large environmental impact are still taking place, partly due to the presence of **designs with known issues**. Further details are presented in Table 5.1 and Table 5.2. Fragmentations other than collisions are currently the dominant source of space debris as can be seen from Fig. 3. The year 2025 saw a **comparatively low** number of fragments added to the space environment from new events, in contrast to 2024, which saw a substantial increase of over 3000 catalogued fragments mostly attributed to propulsion-related breakups.

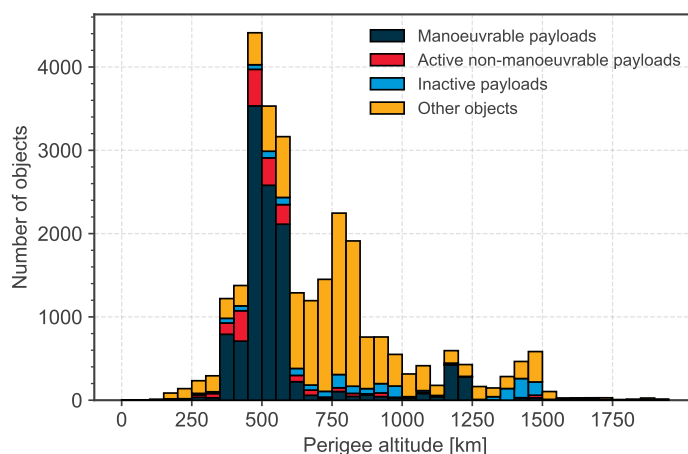


Figure 4: Distribution of manoeuvrable, active and inactive payloads, and other (debris) objects with altitude.

Preferential altitude ranges for communication constellations continue to show clear, but **increasingly mobile peaks in payload concentration** (Fig. 4). Combined with increasing launch traffic and the permanence of space debris events in Low Earth orbit, this results in a **significant conjunction risk** in the most used Earth orbits. This highlights the need for effective **space traffic coordination** in altitude ranges with high concentrations of active and manoeuvrable satellites (400 km - 600 km), as well as the need for effective space debris mitigation in high altitude

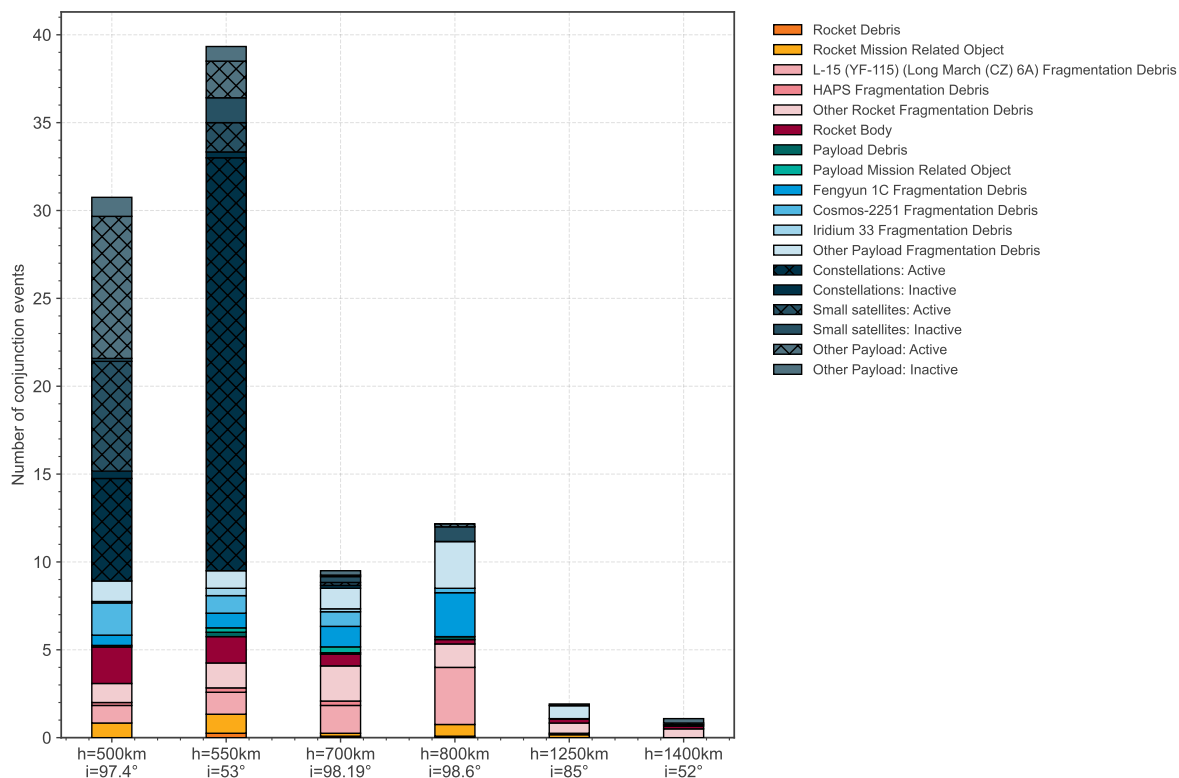


Figure 5: Conjunction events (i.e. events that could trigger an operator response but not necessarily an avoidance manoeuvre nor a collision) and corresponding chaser classification for a set of representative missions over 2025

orbits where debris objects linger with long orbital lifetimes. Detailed information is given in Section 3.5.

A core space debris mitigation principle to reduce the risk of fragmentation is post-mission disposal. One facet of this is to restrict the time spent on orbit after end-of-life, with residual orbital lifetime limited to be as short as practicable and no more than a maximum of 25 years set out by the IADC for the LEO protected region [2]. Of the payloads injected into LEO_{IADC} that have reached the end of their mission since 2020, between **88% and 99%** of those with masses below 1000 kg operate in orbits that **naturally adhere to this “25-year rule”**, as shown in Section 6.1.2.2. For the payloads with masses between 100 kg and 1000 kg in mass, this is dominated by the behaviour of constellations. For larger payloads, the level of adherence is much lower, with only **54%** set to remove themselves from orbit within 25 years.

Between **40 and 90%** of all **payload mass**, excluding human spaceflight, estimated as reaching end-of-life during the last decade in the LEO protected region does so in orbits that are estimated to **adhere to the 25-year lifetime limit**, as shown in Fig. 6.7. The noted increase in small payloads reaching end-of-life in compliant orbit implies a rising share, as does an increasing share of objects with manoeuvre capabilities such as constellations. Between **60 and 90%** of all **rocket body mass** reaching end-of-life during the last decade does so in orbits that are estimated to **adhere to the 25-year lifetime limit**, as shown in Fig. 6.9. A significant amount of this is due to **controlled re-entries** after launch, a practice which increased from 10% to over **65%** over the last decade. The positive trend of controlled re-entries of rocket bodies outnumbering uncontrolled re-entries continues in 2025, as can be seen in Fig. 6.

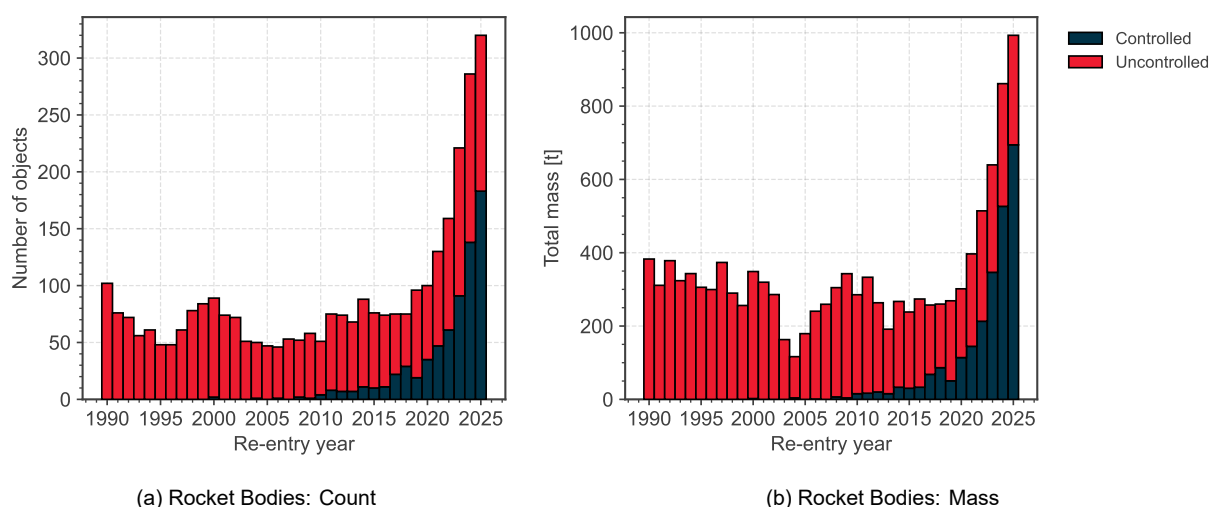


Figure 6: Controlled and uncontrolled re-entries for Rocket Bodies.

Despite this, current levels of compliance to space debris mitigation guidelines at large are **insufficient for achieving a sustainable space environment** long-term, and there is a growing consensus that stricter mitigation practices need to be implemented globally. In line with this, the early twenty-twenties saw some significant policy shifts come into force across major launching states across the globe, including ESA's own Zero Debris Approach and updated **Space Debris Mitigation Standard** and associated policy [3, 4]. Among the measures introduced by this Standard in 2023, was the **reduction of the post-mission lifetime limit from 25 down to 5 years**. Specifically, the Standard requires that the orbit clearance of a spacecraft or launch vehicle orbital element from the LEO protected region shall satisfy both following conditions: first, that the orbit lifetime is **less than 5 years**; and secondly, that the **cumulative collision probability** from end of life until re-entry with space objects larger than 1 cm is **below 10^{-3}** [3]. While this is only binding for ESA projects, one goal of the Zero Debris Approach is to lead by example, and thus compliance to both the 25- and 5-year thresholds is reported on here. While a common target for successful post-mission disposal is 90%, this practice will not by itself reduce the amount of debris in orbit, and will need to increase to near 100% in the near future.

Between **15 and 60% of payloads**, excluding human spaceflight, reaching end-of-life during the last decade in the LEO protected region in a **non-compliant orbit attempt to comply** with the **25-year** lifetime limit. The difference in behaviour between constellation and non-constellation objects can be significant as shown in Fig. 6.6. Between **5 and 50%** do so **successfully**, with the level remaining far from targets. Similar trends can be seen when applying the **5-year threshold**, with between **5 and 35%** successfully complying over the last decade (Fig. 6.28). Between **50 and 95% of rocket bodies** reaching end-of-life during the current decade in the LEO protected region in a non-compliant orbit **attempt to comply** with the **25-year** lifetime limit. Between **45 and 90%** do so **successfully**, with the compliance trend linearly increasing, but stabilising. Similar trends can be seen when applying the **5-year threshold**, with between **30 and 80%** successfully complying over the last decade. Between **85% and 100%** of all **payloads** reaching end-of-life during the last decade in the **GEO protected region attempt to comply with space debris mitigation measures**. Between **70% and 90%** do so **successfully**, with the compliance trend asymptotically increasing, but with notable exceptions in 2015 and 2022.

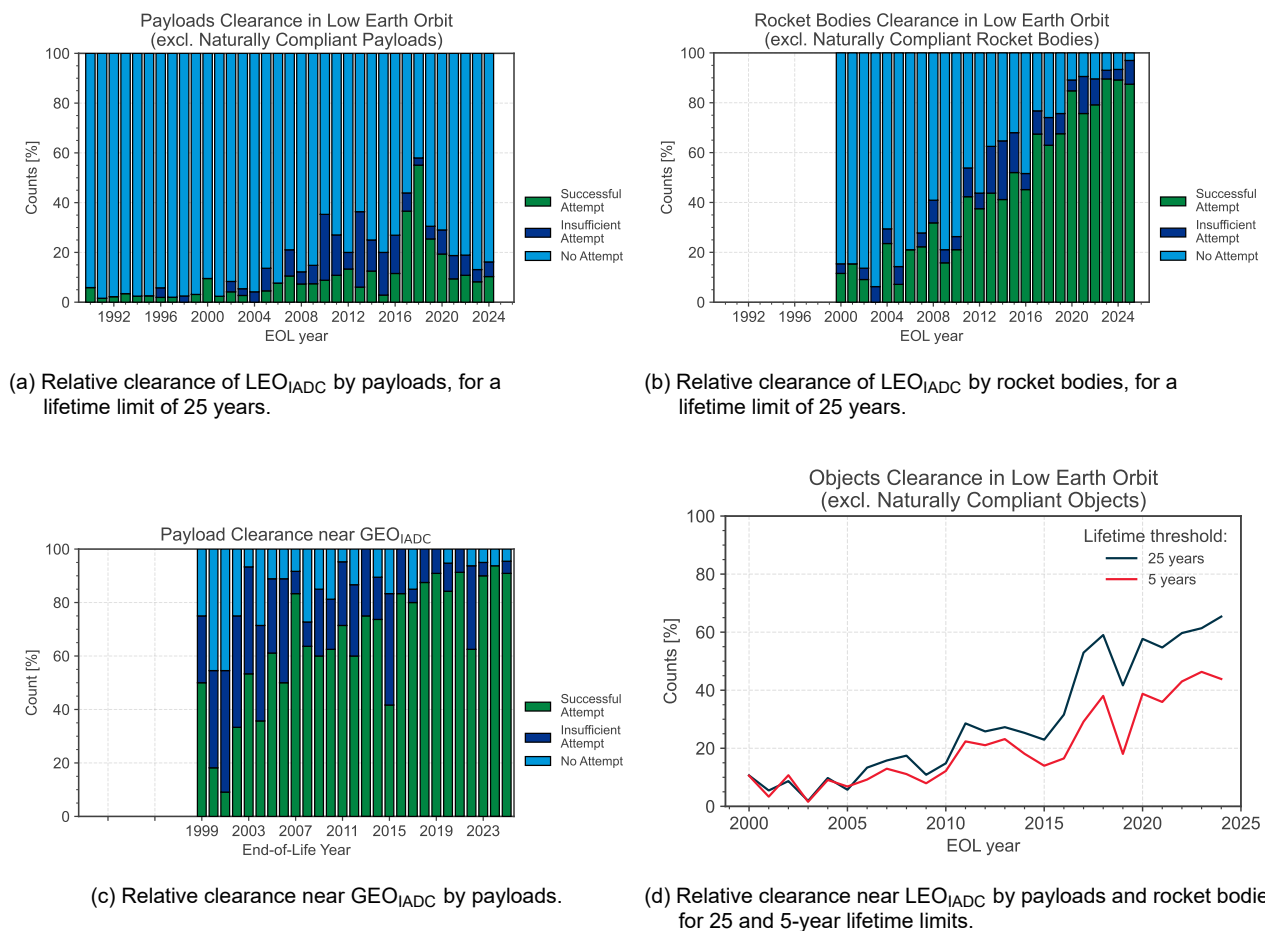
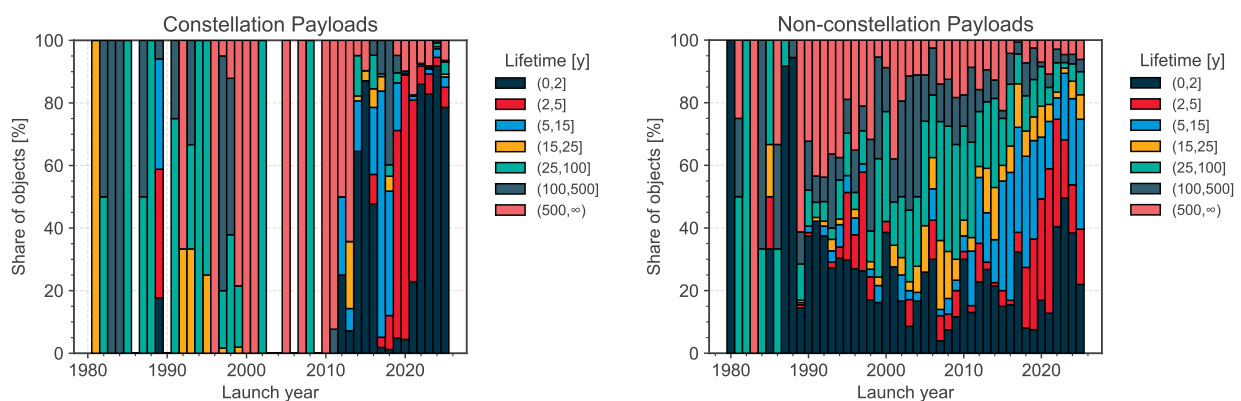


Figure 7: Trend of adherence to clearance of the protected region over time in terms of numbers, excluding naturally compliant objects.



Whereas adoption of, and **compliance** to, space debris mitigation practices at a global level is noted as **slowly increasing**, it is of importance to note that the successful implementation of either lifetime threshold is still at a **too low level to ensure a sustainable environment** in the long-run. Notably, some of the **increase in uptake of mitigation measures** as analysed by the metrics above, such as controlled re-entries of rocket bodies or post mission disposal success rates for payloads in LEO, are linked with the deployment and retirement of **large constellations**. In particular, the usage of operational mission orbits with low orbital lifetimes by constellations, as shown in Fig. 8, results in a natural compliance level of almost 90% with the 25-year lifetime limit.

Given these factors, combined with increasing launch traffic and high levels of solar activity, the number and size of re-entering objects is also increasing, with **1200 intact objects re-entering in 2025**. While significant portions of the objects that re-enter in an **uncontrolled** fashion break-up and demise during re-entry, fragments may survive re-entry and impact on ground. The aggregate human **casualty risk** as a result of these **impacting fragments**, defined as causing severe injury or death to at least one person, is shown in Fig. 10. While the estimated risk experienced by an individual remains extremely **low**, the aggregate number of casualties is expected to grow in the long-term with the number of re-entries, if safer design measures are not adopted. Further details are provided in Section 2.10.

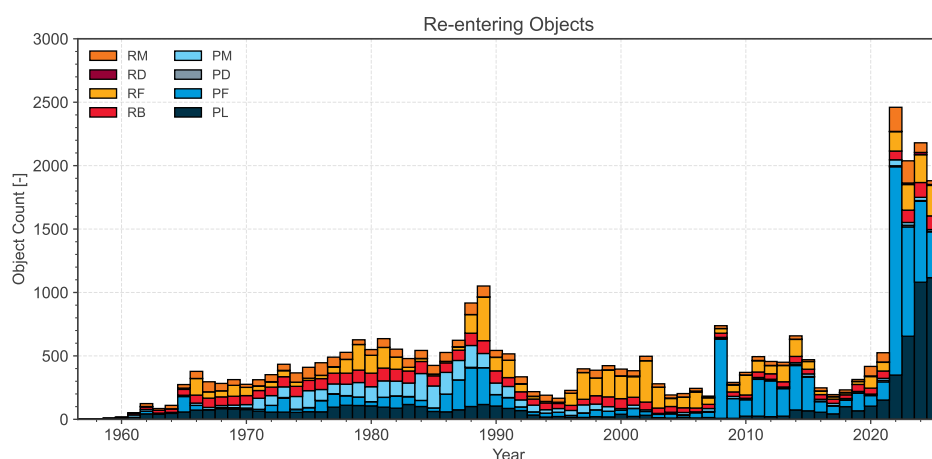


Figure 9: Evolution of re-entering objects in each year by object type without human spaceflight.

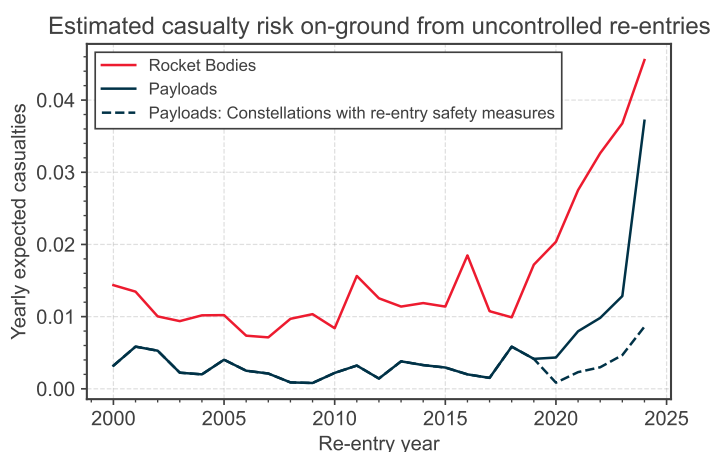


Figure 10: Evolution of the estimated on-ground casualty risk from uncontrolled re-entries. Contributions from payloads and rocket bodies, with an assumed correction for constellation payloads with re-entry safety measures.

Despite the improvement in orbital clearance efforts, the **extrapolation** of the current changing use of orbits and launch traffic, combined with continued fragmentations and limited post mission disposal success rate could lead to a **cascade of collision events** over the next century. In particular, the latest extrapolation scenario highlights the importance of maintaining high mitigation and disposal compliance within large constellations, where even an individual constellation can substantially affect the long-term stability of the orbital environment as a whole [5]. Even in case of **no further launches** into orbit, it is expected however that collisions among the space debris objects already present will lead to a **further growth** in space debris population in Low Earth Orbit.

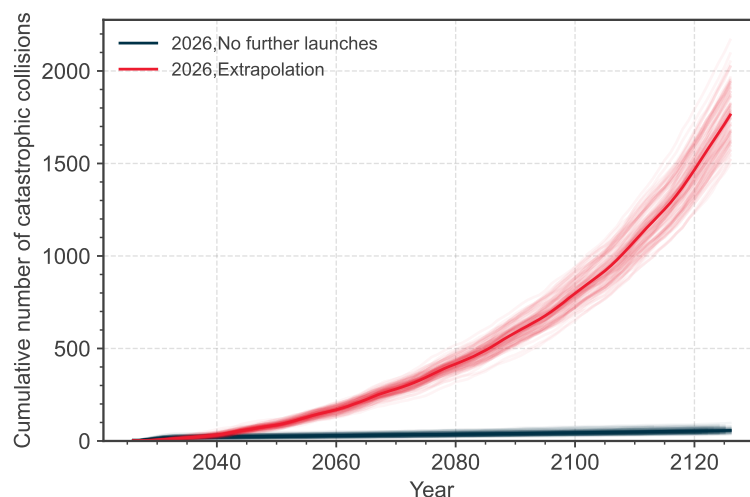


Figure 11: Number of cumulative collisions in LEO_{IADC} in the simulated scenarios of long-term evolution of the environment.

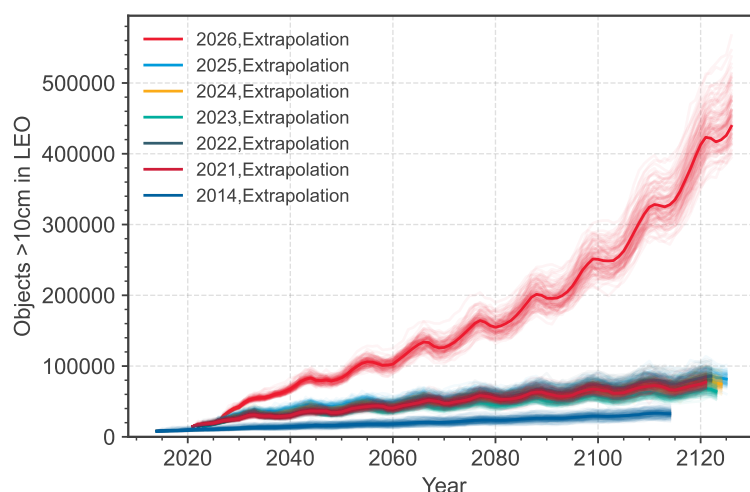


Figure 12: Number of objects in LEO_{IADC} in the simulated scenarios of long-term evolution of the environment, across extrapolation scenarios initiated at different start epochs.

To track the **long-term sustainability** of the space environment as a whole, in line with the UNCOPUOS Long-term Sustainability of Outer Space Activities, two elements are required: a metric and a baseline that characterises a sustainable environment. For space, this metric can be captured by a single **risk index** [6], which quantifies the contribution, or criticality, of each space object to long-term sustainability through their potential to generate debris and trigger subsequent collisions. This index can then be evaluated against a **target environment**, based on pre-constellation launch traffic and a high-level implementation of the IADC guidelines, representing the level of risk that was considered acceptable for long-term sustainability before the fundamental change in launch traffic associated with the New Space era. The evolution of the risk index for the space population in Low Earth Orbit, projected 100 years into the future, is shown in Fig. 13. Here, the status of the space environment can be compared to an **orbital reference threshold**, representing the index value of the first target towards a sustainable environment. In the business as usual extrapolation scenario, the level of risk associated with the environment is predicted to be **50 times higher** than this acceptable first target threshold towards long-term sustainability.

The increase relative to previous assessments is primarily driven by the projected **growth in the future object population**, reflecting the emergence of large-scale constellation deployments and the need for mitigation practices adapted to these systems. At the same time, future deployment plans, operational practices, and end-of-life strategies continue to mature, together with the availability of detailed and verifiable information on these developments. Long-term models must therefore rely on the best information currently available, supported by a number of necessary assumptions regarding future traffic evolution. Projections of future traffic remain subject to considerable uncertainty that extends beyond the variability captured by the simulations, and the outlook for the space environment may consequently improve substantially, or deteriorate further, as operational and disposal behaviours become observable over the coming years.

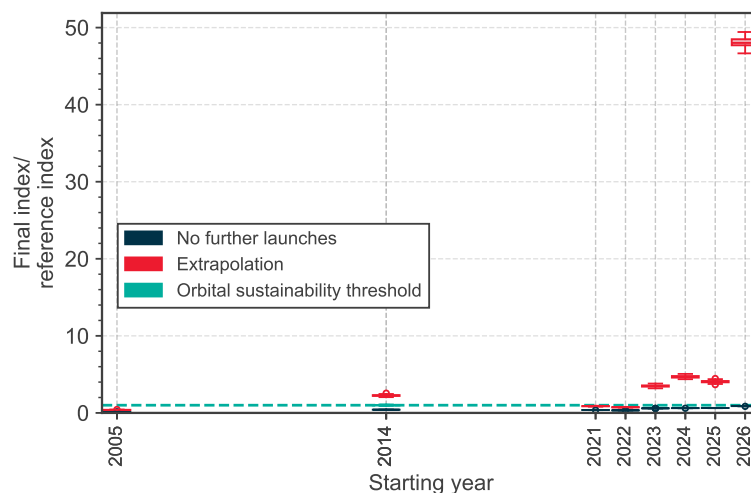


Figure 13: Index value in different scenarios, normalised against the first target towards a sustainable environment based on observed launch traffic at 2014.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the start of the space age on the 4th of October 1957 there has been more space debris in orbit than operational satellites. Space debris poses a problem for the near Earth environment on a global scale, to which all spacefaring nations have contributed and for which only a globally supported solution can be the answer. The first awareness of the problem came about in the early 1960s, based on initial research activities undertaken in the United States of America, but it took some time to reach the international community. It eventually did by the mid 1970s via conferences organised by the International Astronautical Federation. The effect whereby the generation of space debris via collisions and explosions in orbit could lead to an exponential increase in the amount of artificial objects in space, in a chain reaction which would render spaceflight too hazardous to conduct, was first postulated by Donald Kessler in 1978 [7]. The first dedicated conference on space debris was held in 1982, organised by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), followed by the first workshop on the re-entry of space debris in 1983, organised by the European Space Agency (ESA), in response to the re-entries of Skylab and Cosmos-1402.

The technical expertise on space debris, from re-entries to on-orbit break-up and hypervelocity impact testing, was gathered on agency and national level for much of the 1970s and 1980s. However, the global dimension of the issue called for bilateral knowledge transfer, which started on the initiative of NASA. These exchanges between experts resulted in multi-lateral meetings and lead to the creation of the Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee (IADC) in 1993, founded by ESA (Europe), NASA (USA), NASDA (now JAXA, Japan), and RSA (now Roscosmos, Russian Federation). Nine more agencies have joined the IADC since: ASI (Italy), CNES (France), CNSA (China), CSA (Canada), DLR (Germany), KARI (South Korea), ISRO (India), NSAU (Ukraine), and UKSA (United Kingdom). The IADC was founded as a forum for technical exchange and coordination on space debris matters, and can today be regarded as the leading international technical body in the field of space debris. Space debris has also been a recurring agenda item for the Scientific & Technical Subcommittee of the United Nations' Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (UNCOPUOS) since 1994.

The threat of space debris to the future of spaceflight combined with the nearly universal adoption of the Liability Convention [8] created the need for a set of internationally accepted space debris mitigation measures. A major step was taken in 2002, when the IADC published the *IADC Space Debris Mitigation Guidelines* [9] and presented them to the UNCOPUOS Scientific & Technical Subcommittee. This document has since served as baseline for non-binding policy documents, national legislation, and as starting point for the derivation of technical standards. A consistent set of measures is paramount to tackle the global problem of space debris, but it is up to the individual nations, operators, and manufacturers to implement them, which can lead to variations on a case by case basis. As such, nations around the world have developed safety standards and specific guidelines building on the work of the IADC. However, standardisation of mitigation measures is important in order to achieve a common understanding of the required tasks leading to transparent and comparable processes. This is the task of normative international standardisation bodies such as the International Standards Organisation (ISO) [10].

In order to address the issues posed by space debris on spaceflight activities UNCOPUOS has taken the initiative to create a set of internationally agreed *guidelines for the long-term sustainability of outer space activities* [1]. These guidelines contain recommendations on the policy and regulatory frameworks for space activities, the safety of space operations, rules of engagement for international cooperation, capacity-building and awareness, and scientific and technical research and development.

The content of this document is written in response to those guidelines by raising awareness of space activities, and aims to:

- Provide a transparent overview of global space activities,
- Estimate the impact of these activities on the space environment,
- And quantify the effect of internationally endorsed mitigation measures aimed at sustainability of the environment.

The document is structured as follows: Section 1 contains the definitions, data sources, and methodologies used to compile this document. Section 2 contains the history of the space environment since the beginning of the space age. Section 3 contains a snapshot of the space environment for a specific year analysed. The content of Sections 2 and 3 are further analysed in depth in Sections 4, 5, and 6 where respectively the intentional release of objects, fragmentation events, and end-of-life operations of space missions are covered. Section 7 summarises the space activities in Low Earth Orbit up until the year of analysis into an environment index. Furthermore, an executive summary containing the main space environment trends identified is added to the beginning of this report.

1.1. Definitions

This document aims to describe the *space environment*. This environment is understood to contain all artificial objects, including fragments and elements thereof, which currently, or previously did, reside in an Earth bound orbit.

The space environment will be described since the beginning of the *space age*, understood to start with the launch of Sputnik 1 on the 4th of October 1957, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

Space debris is defined as all artificial objects including fragments and elements thereof, in Earth orbit or re-entering the atmosphere, that are non-functional [9].

Objects in the space environment can be categorised in two broad categories: The ones which can be traced back to a launch event and for which the nature can be identified, and the ones for which this is impossible. The later ones will be identified as *Unidentified*, whereas the former can be further categorised in:

- *Payloads*, space object designed to perform a specific function in space excluding launch functionality. This includes operational satellites as well as calibration objects.
- *Payload mission related objects*, space objects released as space debris which served a purpose for the functioning of a payload. Common examples include covers for optical instruments or astronaut tools.
- *Payload fragmentation debris*, space objects fragmented or unintentionally released from a payload as space debris for which their genesis can be traced back to a unique event. This class includes objects created when a payload explodes or when it collides with another object.
- *Payload debris*, space objects fragmented or unintentionally released from a payload as space debris for which the genesis is unclear but orbital or physical properties enable a correlation with a source.
- *Rocket body*, space object designed to perform launch related functionality; This includes the various orbital stages of launch vehicles, but not payloads which release smaller payloads themselves.
- *Rocket mission related objects*, space objects intentionally released as space debris which served a purpose for the function of a rocket body. Common examples include shrouds and engines.
- *Rocket fragmentation debris*, space objects fragmented or unintentionally released from a rocket body as

space debris for which their genesis can be traced back to a unique event. This class includes objects created when a launch vehicle explodes.

- *Rocket debris*, space objects fragmented or unintentionally released from a rocket body as space debris for which the genesis is unclear but orbital or physical properties enable a correlation with a source.

A *fragmentation* is thus loosely defined as an event on-orbit that creates space debris without purpose, including but not limited to collisions, explosive break-ups, and tear and wear. With this definition of a fragmentation event in mind, the distinction between mission related objects and fragmentations debris is clear. Objects that are classified as general payloads or rocket debris can be reclassified when more information becomes available. An overview of this object type classification and the abbreviations used in the rest of the document is given in Table 1.1.

The taxonomy of objects in the space environment can be done based on type as defined previously, but also via the orbital regime in which they reside. A *catalogued object* will refer to an object whose orbital elements are maintained for prolonged periods of time in a catalogue created by a space surveillance system. An *asserted object* will refer to an object which has not been reported by a space surveillance system but is known to exist in the space environment by design. Asserted objects include, for example, rocket bodies that perform a re-entry burn after inserting a payload into orbit prior to repeated detections by a space surveillance system. As such, catalogued and asserted objects are not mutually exclusive and neither one is strictly contained within the other. Further objects exist in the space environment that are not catalogued for prolonged periods of time, for example as unpredictable orbit motion prohibits the correlation of observations, and can neither be asserted from a design point of view. These objects are beyond the scope of this report.

Catalogued and asserted objects can be categorised in terms of their orbital elements for a given epoch. Orbital regimes in this report will be identified based on semi-major axis, eccentricity, inclination, perigee height and apogee height. The orbital regimes that shall be used are defined in Table 1.2. Two regions are often identified as so-called protected regions by international standards, guidelines, and national legislation; they are specifically defined in Table 1.3 and will be referred to as such. It is important to note that all these definitions are inherent to this document and can change between issues. In addition to the orbital regions defined in Table 1.2, the report also refers to *Sun-Synchronous orbits*, i.e. orbits for which the secular variation of the right ascension of the ascending node, due to the Earth's oblateness, matches the Earth's rotation rate around the Sun. As a result, the orbital plane remains approximately fixed with respect to the Sun and a satellite in those orbits passes over a point on the Earth with the same local solar time and this makes Sun-Synchronous orbits particularly used for Earth Observation missions. This report will also make use of *Destination Orbits* for Payloads and Rocket Bodies. This single orbit per object is defined by an analyst to be representative for orbits used during its normal operations.

Table 1.1: Object Classifications.

Type	Description
PL	Payload
PF	Payload Fragmentation Debris
PD	Payload Debris
PM	Payload Mission Related Object
RB	Rocket Body
RF	Rocket Fragmentation Debris
RD	Rocket Debris
RM	Rocket Mission Related Object
UI	Unidentified

Table 1.2: Ranges defining each orbital class, with semi-major axis a , eccentricity e , inclination i , perigee height h_p and apogee height h_a . The units are km and degrees.

Orbit	Description	Definition		
GEO	Geostationary Orbit	$i \in [0, 25]$	$h_p \in [35586, 35986]$	$h_a \in [35586, 35986]$
IGO	Inclined Geosynchronous Orbit	$a \in [37948, 46380]$	$e \in [0.00, 0.25]$	$i \in [25, 180]$
EGO	Extended Geostationary Orbit	$a \in [37948, 46380]$	$e \in [0.00, 0.25]$	$i \in [0, 25]$
NSO	Navigation Satellites Orbit	$i \in [50, 70]$	$h_p \in [18100, 24300]$	$h_a \in [18100, 24300]$
GTO	GEO Transfer Orbit	$i \in [0, 90]$	$h_p \in [0, 2000]$	$h_a \in [31570, 40002]$
MEO	Medium Earth Orbit	$h_p \in [2000, 31570]$	$h_a \in [2000, 31570]$	
GHO	GEO-superGEO Crossing Orbits	$h_p \in [31570, 40002]$	$h_a > 40002$	
LEO	Low Earth Orbit	$h_p \in [0, 2000]$	$h_a \in [0, 2000]$	
HAO	High Altitude Earth Orbit	$h_p > 40002$	$h_a > 40002$	
MGO	MEO-GEO Crossing Orbits	$h_p \in [2000, 31570]$	$h_a \in [31570, 40002]$	
HEO	Highly Eccentric Earth Orbit	$h_p \in [0, 31570]$	$h_a > 40002$	
LMO	LEO-MEO Crossing Orbits	$h_p \in [0, 2000]$	$h_a \in [2000, 31570]$	
UFO	Undefined Orbit			
ESO	Escape Orbits			

Table 1.3: Ranges defining each protected region, with altitude h and declination δ . The units are km and degrees.

Orbit	Description	Definition	
LEO _{IADC}	IADC LEO Protected Region	$h \in [0, 2000]$	
GEO _{IADC}	IADC GEO Protected Region	$h \in [35586, 35986]$	$\delta \in [-15, 15]$

At various moments during the space age, payloads based on a limited amount of platforms have been deployed on-orbit with the intent to create a single larger system by operating in a coordinated manner. Well known examples include space segments of satellite navigation systems or systems dedicated to global data information coverage. Colloquially, such systems of payloads are known as *constellations*. For the purpose of this report, a constellation is understood as a group of space objects (payloads) consisting of at least 10 spacecraft launched to form a system with the purpose of achieving mission objectives [3]. The constellations considered in this report are those whose members are released into orbit over more than two events, with more than one year from the first to the last event, with the orbits in which they are deployed directly related to the constellation objective, and therefore include constellations that have started with systematic deployment, excluding precursor and technology demonstration missions [11]. A constellation is considered active, i.e. functional, as long as at least one of its constituting payloads is functional. For the current analysis, constellations are identified only in LEO_{IADC} and MEO, and these definitions are applied at group (or shell) level for large constellations, where shells may differ in their orbital or spacecraft characteristics. Consequently, only shells that have entered systematic deployment are included in constellation modelling. A total of 54 constellation or shell-level groups were included in this edition.

1.2. Data sources

Orbital information for catalogued objects is obtained from the USSTRATCOM Two-Line Elements data set, the Vimpel data set maintained by the JSC Vimpel Interstate Corporation and Keldysh Institute of Applied Mathematics (KIAM), and the Royal Aircraft Establishment (RAE) Tables of artificial satellites. Orbital information on asserted objects, as well as the justification for their assertion, is taken from the DISCOS Database (Database and Infor-

mation System Characterising Objects in Space) [12]. Orbital information on catalogued and asserted objects are correlated among the various sources to avoid duplication. While DISCOS additionally includes suborbital objects, this report is limited to orbital objects.

Physical properties for the objects, and the mission classification for Payloads, used in this report are taken from DISCOS. Shape properties such as area are derived from design values and not estimated from space surveillance systems, which implies that the debris and unidentified object types have no mass nor area indicated as part of this report. From the area and mass values so defined, the object area-to-mass ratio (A/m) is computed and it is used in the characterisation of Payloads (Section 2.7) and, more in general, for the propagation of the object trajectories for compliance analysis (Section 6) and in the simulation of the long-term evolution of the environment (Section 7.2). For orbital lifetime assessments, data derived from space surveillance systems can be used for these objects for the determination of the Ballistic Coefficient (BC), as explained in Section 6. Further information on the individual objects which is not directly physical in nature, e.g. ownership, is deliberately not reported on in this document.

The classification of whether a Payload is considered *active* is based on the data available at [13], which is used for data from 2019 onwards, and from the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) database [14], for earlier data since 2005. This classification by activity level is not used for the end-of-life analyses, where the activity of an object is instead estimated from space surveillance data.

1.3. Methodology

The first aim of this report is to describe the space environment based on observable facts. This takes the form of analysing trends in the various physical characteristics of the objects within the space environment, both covering the history since the beginning of the space age as well as a single year of analysis. The report focusses on the amount of mass, area, and object count passing through the different orbital regimes, with specific emphasis on the protected regions. Furthermore, the usage of the protected regions by payloads is documented.

Secondly, metrics are identified that serve as proxies for the global adherence to space debris mitigation guidelines, which have been put in place to protect the space environment from adverse effects such as the Kessler syndrome. The evolution of these metrics is described. Most internationally accepted space debris mitigation measures can be traced back to the following objectives:

- *The limitation of space debris released during normal operations*; i.e. in all operational orbit regimes, payloads and rocket bodies should be designed not to release space debris during normal operations. Where this is not feasible, any release of debris should be minimised in number, area and orbital lifetime.
- *The minimisation of the potential for on-orbit break-ups*; i.e. in all operational regimes one should minimise the potential for break-ups during operational phases, e.g. by thorough analysis of the failure trees, increase (sub)system reliability, etc., minimise the potential for post-mission break-ups resulting from stored energy, e.g. stored in tanks, batteries, flywheels, etc., and the avoidance of intentional destruction and other harmful activities, e.g. intentional break-ups should avoided at all cost but if need be they should be conducted at sufficiently low altitudes so that orbital fragments are short-lived.
- *Post mission disposal*; i.e. two protected regimes, Low Earth Orbit (LEO_{IADC}) and Geostationary Orbit (GEO_{IADC}), have been identified and should be cleared from permanent or (quasi-) periodic presence of non-functional artificial objects. Payloads or rocket bodies that are terminating their operational phases in other orbital regions should be manoeuvred to reduce their orbital lifetime, commensurate with LEO lifetime limitations, or relocated if they cause interference with highly utilised orbit regions.
- *Prevention of on-orbit collisions*; i.e. in developing the design and mission profile of a space object, a project

should estimate and limit the probability of accidental collision with known objects during the payload or rocket body's orbital lifetime. If reliable orbital data is available, avoidance manoeuvres and co-ordination of launch windows may be considered if the collision risk is not considered negligible.

Even though the goals of the mitigation measures as identified above are intuitively clear, their technical implementation is less straightforward. The proposed metrics to observe adherence to these objectives are described in the corresponding sections and follow as close as possible [10]. In case of orbital lifetime predictions, the corresponding international standard is followed [15]. Details on the data gathered or methods used corresponding to results presented in the individual sections of in this report are covered in those sections.

Not all aspects of space debris mitigation can, currently, be reliably derived from observational data. For example a collision avoidance manoeuvre can look similar to an orbit control manoeuvre to maintain a specific ground-track. In the same way, the observed behaviour due to passivation of fluids at the end of life of a mission does not need to be different from the effects of an orbit control manoeuvre. The philosophy behind this document is to accept these limitations and not to risk over-interpreting the available data.

Thirdly, metrics are identified to estimate the impact of global space activities on the space environment. Historically, such metrics have often been formulated in terms of the outcomes of long-term, i.e. centuries, space environment evolution models that serve to extrapolate a set of space traffic condition into the future and derive the expected amount of space debris and collision events. As of recent, also the establishment of dedicated risk metrics for the purpose of impact assessments has become more commonplace. Both metrics are included in this report.

1.4. Notable changes

1.4.1. Edition 4

Significant changes have taken place when it comes to the usage of the space environment since the first issue of this report in 2016. As can be observed in Section 2, there has been a significant increase in the ability of space surveillance networks to reliably catalogue objects in orbits near the Geostationary Orbit, and launch traffic to Low Earth Orbit increased to previously unseen levels. With the improvements in capabilities of observation systems and the rapid miniaturisation and innovation for space system designs, it is likely that those developments will continue in the future.

As a consequence, also international documents dealing with space debris mitigation have been updated in 2019, with most notably the ISO space debris mitigation requirements [10] and the IADC space debris mitigation guidelines [16]. This is also reflected in the content of this report by means of some noticeable changes. Prior to edition 4, attempts to relocate Payloads above Low Earth Orbit were seen as a positive space debris mitigation effort, even though this was not endorsed by the IADC space debris mitigation guidelines. This is no longer the case. Furthermore, given the uncertainties associated with orbital lifetime predictions, the thresholds used to categorise Payload or Rocket Body as (non-)compliant w.r.t. space debris mitigation guidelines are now addressed stochastically for those cases near the threshold.

A major event visible in this edition of the report is the de-orbiting of a telecommunication constellation in Low Earth Orbit which started in 2018. Just as the insertion of this constellation is visible in the launch traffic increase, it now stands out as an increase in successful post mission de-orbiting when it comes to compliance to the guidelines. Furthermore, with the coming into operations of a newer generation of launchers, the release of mission related objects as part of their operations is going down. However, releasing large mission related objects altogether is unfortunately not a relic of the past (yet).

1.4.2. Edition 5

Starting with edition 5 of this report, an increased emphasis is put on the consequence of the global level of adherence to space debris mitigation guidelines. To capture these consequences in relation to the dynamic evolution of the actors in orbit and measures to achieve space debris mitigation, it became necessary to estimate automatically the average properties of objects and the orbital usage alike. Based on these properties, short-term consequences such as the risk of collision faced by operators in the LEO protected region as well as the long term risk of triggering the Kessler syndrome in the LEO protected region can be estimated.

Notable events visible in this edition of the report are the completion of the de-orbiting of a telecommunication constellation from Low Earth orbit in 2019 and the start of on-orbit deployment of two new ones during 2020. To a certain extent, 2020 marks the beginning of a new era in spaceflight with the maturation of large and medium-sized constellations being deployed on orbit and the availability on ground of the derived service, the increased use of so-called ride-share missions, and the continuation of miniaturisation of space system. This is in contrast with the period between the mid 1990'ies and ending mid 2010's, which saw the slow but steady roll-out and demonstration of the new technologies that are becoming commonplace today.

The start of solar cycle 25 marks a change for the regularly updated orbital lifetimes used in this report. The change in cycle behaviour has an impact on the estimated compliance rates as show in Fig. 6.34. In the uncertainty analysis, the values for the last year are affected by the low number of cases for Rocket Bodies due to the increased usage for controlled re-entry as disposal strategy. This is not an issue, as Payload data is accounted for with one year delay, and the uncertainties have generally a limited impact in this case.

1.4.3. Edition 6

The space environment continued to change rapidly in 2021 with the accelerated deployment of large constellations in LEO_{IADC}, increasing demand for the deployment of small Payloads, but reduction of launch traffic to GEO_{IADC}. For the first time, launching more than one payload per launch has become the most common way of getting into orbit. To put this into perspective, the analyses introduced in Edition 5 of this report were extended to cover different epochs from the recent space age, i.e. addressing how collision avoidance risk has evolved (Fig. 3.12) and what would be the outcome of extrapolating various long-term evolution scenarios (Fig. 7.6-7.7). The combination of changing launch traffic patterns in general, and the dichotomy between constellation-related objects and other intact objects specifically, has a noticeable impact on both short and long-term risk indicators.

With the increased awareness of space sustainability in the community at large, a new emphasis is placed on space debris mitigation aspects that were previously less noticeable or are gaining in prominence. As such, new analyses have been added to this version of the report to highlight the risks posed by Rocket Bodies crossing the GEO_{IADC} Protected Region (Fig. 6.38), show the variability in disposal orbit strategies in the MEO region (Fig. 6.39), and focus on the space surveillance issues associated with the release of large amounts of Payloads by various services (Fig. 2.21). In addition, a review of the United Nation Register of Objects Launched into Outer Space is added to show the diversification of space actors (Section 2.12).

1.4.4. Edition 7

The accelerated use of space over the last years continued unabated in 2022, leading to launch and re-entry traffic rates to see new records and challenges in keeping accurate track of the state of the environment. The metrics presented in this report were further refined to give an overview of the impacts on space debris mitigation aspects, and to prepare for the trend in calling for stricter guidelines. Notably, forecasting methodologies have been updated and a greater emphasis on understanding the space debris environment at smaller length scales has been introduced. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the observed spike in 2022 concerning re-entering

space debris is due to the Kosmos 1408 anti-satellite missile test.

1.4.5. Edition 8

In 2023, the space environment continued to experience substantial growth, with launch traffic once again reaching record levels. In LEO_{IADC}, large constellations, which have outpaced other payloads not only in number but also mass and area, now drive many of the global statistics. While this is leading to increased congestion and challenges for space traffic coordination in certain orbits, it is also accompanied by an increased usage of controlled re-entry as a disposal strategy for rocket bodies and new levels of compliance with space debris mitigation guidelines.

In this edition of the report, methodologies for modelling the future evolution of the space environment have been further refined, specifically for forecasting the growing contribution from constellations, leading to new and updated results for the analysed years 2022 and 2023. It should be noted that current levels of compliance still result in an unsustainable environment in the long-term. Consequently, there is a growing trend advocating for stricter guidelines, with new measures introduced in 2023 as a part of ESA's Zero Debris Policy and updated Space Debris Mitigation Standard [3]. These developments imply that notable changes may be anticipated in the next edition of this report in terms of methodologies and assessed thresholds, reflecting ongoing efforts to address the challenges of space sustainability.

1.4.6. Edition 9

While the exponential growth in the number of new payloads slowed in 2024, the number of launches continued to rise, setting new records for both the mass and size of objects sent into Low Earth Orbit. With new launches targeting lower altitudes, high levels of solar activity, and an increasing (but insufficient) rate of willingness to limit orbital lifetime, this trend is reflected in re-entries, with new records also in the mass and size of re-entering objects. However, fragmentation events remain a persistent issue, continuing to pollute the space environment. Related to this, 2024 saw an increase in the number of space objects with unidentified object class (Figures 2.1, 2.32). It can be seen from Figures 2.6 and 2.33 that these mostly affect the GEO regime, and are likely associated to fragmentation events that occurred in the vicinity of this region (Table 3.7). Further work to correlate unidentified objects to these events may see a reduction in this object class in future editions as they are assigned to known object classes (such as Payload or Rocket Fragmentation Debris).

This edition of the report contains three main updates. The first, is the release of the MASTER (Meteoroid and Space Debris Terrestrial Environment Reference) 2024 population, which reveals that the density of active payloads is approaching that of space debris in heavily populated altitude bands for the first time. Secondly, 2024 marks the first full year for which the ESA Space Debris Mitigation Standard [3] became applicable to ESA projects. As such, new analyses have been added to this version of the report to highlight global compliance to the 5-year post-mission lifetime limit, in addition to the 25-year limit used in previous editions. This change required the methodology for calculating the orbital lifetimes to be updated to account for solar activity variation, with the lifetime now calculated probabilistically over a full 11-year solar cycle to ensure robust compliance assessment. The difference in compliance between these two thresholds can be seen to be on the order of 10%, indicating that global adherence to stricter guidelines is attainable for ensuring the long-term sustainability of space activities. Finally, a target environment, or *orbital sustainability threshold*, was introduced to facilitate a transparent evaluation of global steps towards space sustainability. Extrapolating current trends, the level of risk of fragmentation and collision associated with the space environment (encapsulated in a single environment index) is predicted to be 4 times higher than this acceptable threshold for long-term sustainability.

1.4.7. Edition 10

2025 saw more than 300 launches and 4000 new payloads added to the space environment, marking the start of systematic deployment of several new large LEO constellations. As the number of new objects increases and compliance with space debris mitigation orbital clearance guidelines continues to improve, the number of re-entries of larger intact objects is also increasing. At the same time, while fragments from new fragmentation events contributed less to the rise in the number of catalogued objects in 2025, the number of space objects with unidentified object class continues to increase (Figures 2.1, 2.32). This mismatch between detected and catalogued fragments remains a point of attention. Notably, the majority of fragments associated with new events this year (Table 3.7) are *asserted* rather than catalogued by the U.S. Space Surveillance Network, and were identified through various alternative space surveillance networks and service providers.

The following additions were included in this edition of the report: new analyses focusing on the on-ground casualty risk resulting from uncontrolled re-entries (Fig. 2.39); plots associated with the latest MASTER reference population (reference epoch 1st February 2026), as well as the non-maneuvrable reference population (Fig. 2.9). The following changes were made to this edition of the report: methodologies for modelling the future evolution of the space environment have been further refined, including the introduction of a new model for explosion forecasting, and a revised 100-year simulation horizon reflecting the increasingly rapid evolution of the orbital environment; the compliance assessment methodology for end-of-life in LEO has also been refined such that objects injected into naturally compliant orbits remain classified as naturally compliant, even if subsequent actions are performed to further reduce orbital lifetime.

1.5. Acknowledgements

The authors take the opportunity to thank the team at the European Space Agency's Space Debris Office for providing technical support and all data quality work, in particular Álvaro Arroyo Parejo. Furthermore, we thank the international space debris community at large for the received comments and suggestions for improvements.

1.6. Disclaimer

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The analysis presented in this document is derived from a continuously evolving database. Mistakes can unavoidably happen during the preparation process and we are thus ready to take feedback. If you detect any error or if you have any comment or question please contact:

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2. SPACE ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY IN NUMBERS

This section reports on the evolution of the space environment since the beginning of the space age. The evolution of catalogued objects in orbit is graphically represented for count, mass, and area. This data is further subdivided based on object and orbit classification. A catalogued object is only taken into account for a given year if it appeared in a space surveillance system during that year. This implies that reported evolutions do scale with the quality of the space surveillance systems at a given epoch. In case of the evolution of payloads and rocket bodies the reported numbers are close to values one would obtain when only considering asserted objects. In all other object classifications the amount of catalogued objects are almost certainly an underestimation and hence lower limit for the true space environment.

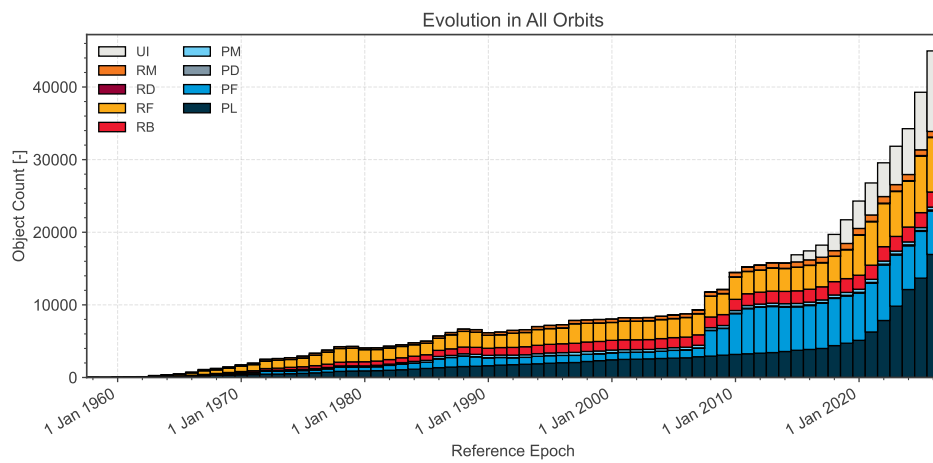
Concerning the LEO and GEO protected regions, the absolute and equivalent number of objects, mass, and area interfering with these regions are graphically represented. To obtain the equivalent object penetrating the protected regions, the physical property of the absolute object, i.e. count, mass, and area, is multiplied with an equivalence factor. This factor is computed as the ratio of the time spent in the protected region per orbit to the orbital period for each orbit. This indicates per orbital class how many objects are interfering with the protected regions without being permanently present. Even though the LEO and GEO regions are defined as protected regions as a whole, most of the traffic takes place in narrow bands.

The evolution of the catalogued and asserted objects appearing in or re-entering the Earth atmosphere from the space environment is graphically represented for count, mass, and area. This data is further subdivided based on object and orbit classification. In case of incomplete orbital data, the orbit classification may be affected. This is the case, for example, of a group of objects for which the last available orbital data is such to classify them as MEO, but the re-entry epochs are several months later. Objects that are both asserted and catalogued are only counted once for a given year. In case of minor inconsistencies between the asserted and catalogued object information for the same object, the 'N/A' tag is applied. Objects associated with human spaceflight include crew vehicles or parts thereof as well as payloads dedicated to cargo transfer, but not the rocket bodies associated to these missions. For the vast majority of cases, there is no reliable mass or area estimate for objects in the Debris or Unidentified categories and hence they are equated to 0.

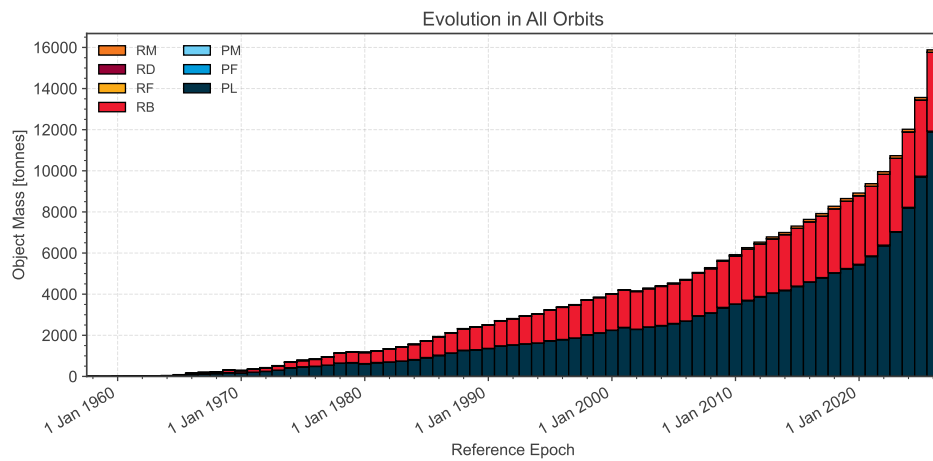
In all figures within Sections 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3, the environment parameters are presented as they are at the 1st of January of the indicated year. In all figures within Sections 2.5, 2.8, and 2.9, the environment parameters are presented as aggregated data within the indicated year. All data used to generate the analysis in this section is available online [\[12\]](#).

2.1. Overall Space Environment

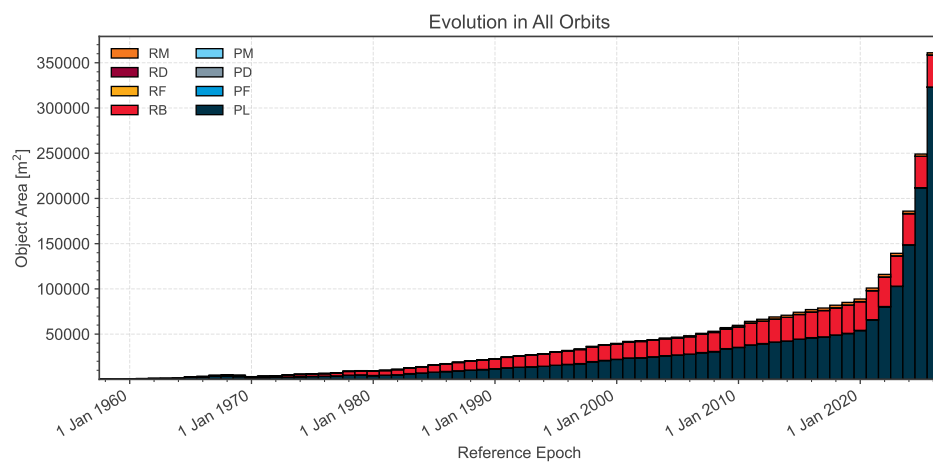
Fig. 2.1 captures the evolution of the space environment in terms of number of objects, mass, and area in geocentric orbit by object class. This data is limited to catalogued and asserted objects, and hence at any given epoch limited to the capability of the space surveillance system in use at the time. A secondary effect hereof is that when new objects are detected due to increased sensor performance, they can generally not be traced back to an event or source and become classified as Unidentified. In Figures 2.2 the same data is presented by orbit class instead of object class. In Figures 2.3 the same data is presented in relation to the cumulative values for those properties in case they would not have been removed from orbit.



(a) Evolution of number of objects.

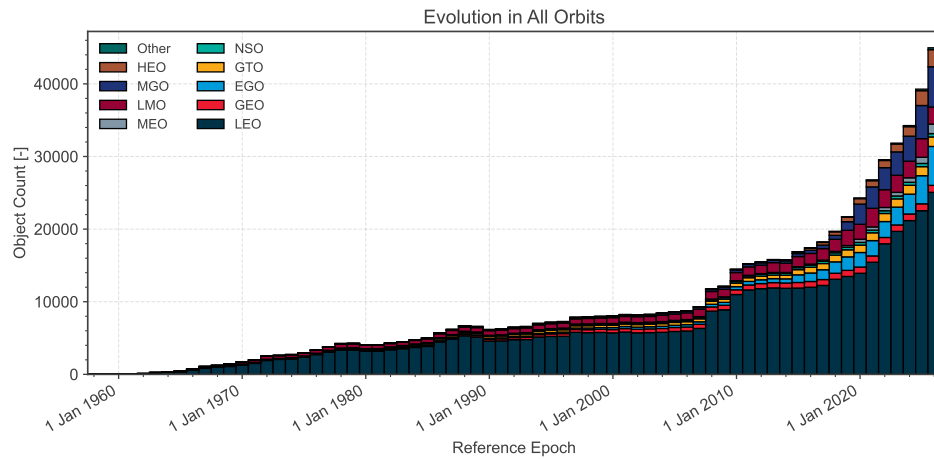


(b) Evolution of mass.

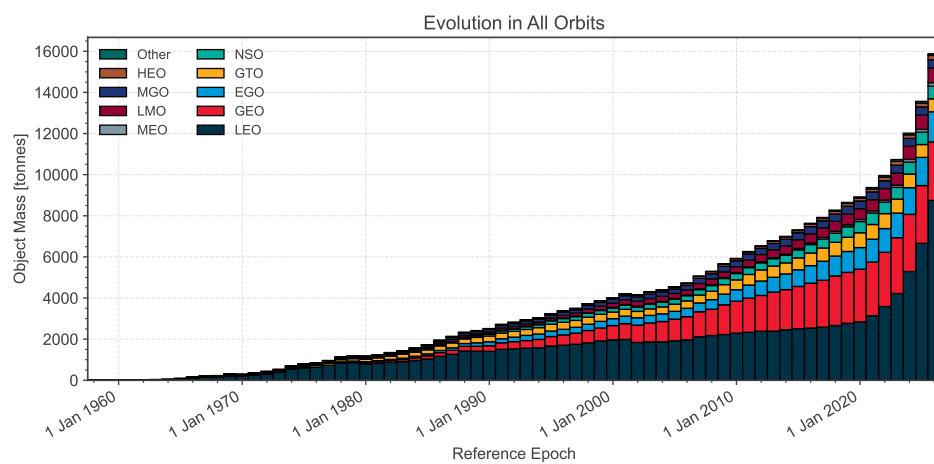


(c) Evolution of area.

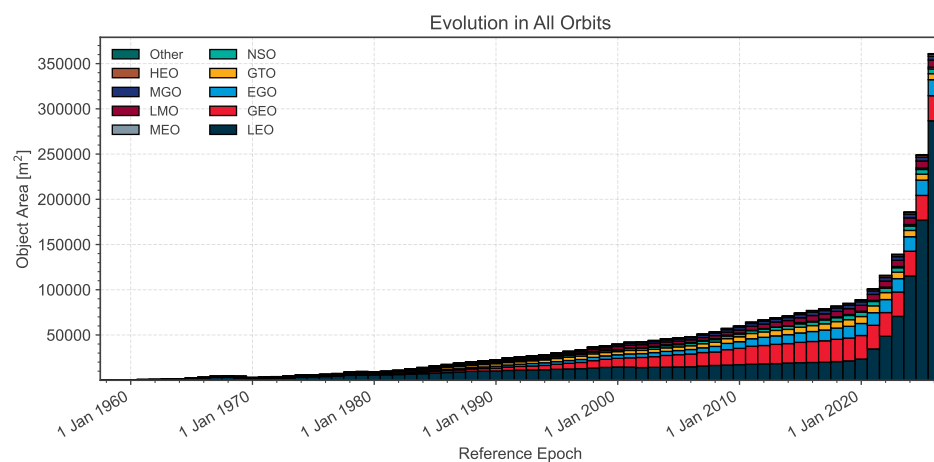
Figure 2.1: Evolution of number of objects, mass, and area in geocentric orbit by object class.



(a) Evolution of number of objects.

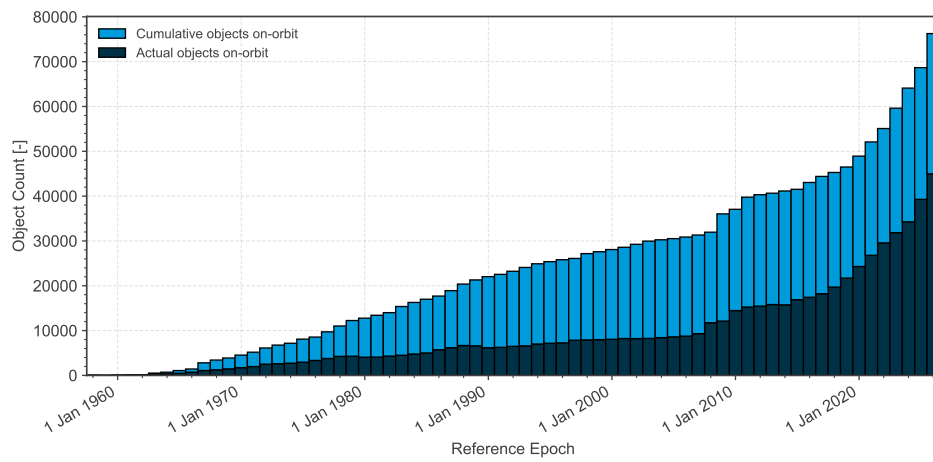


(b) Evolution of mass.

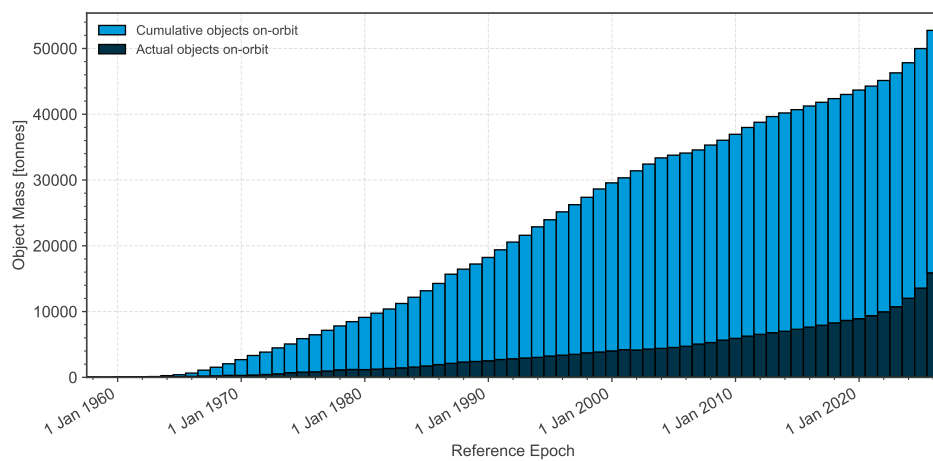


(c) Evolution of area.

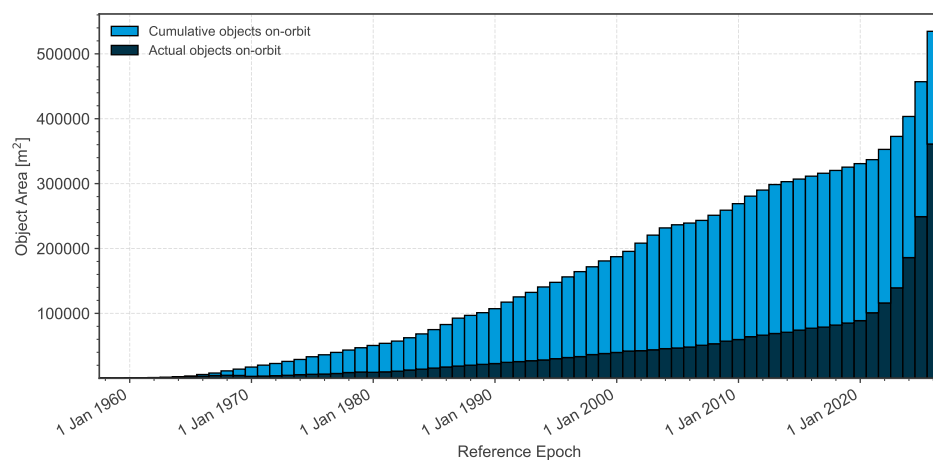
Figure 2.2: Evolution of number of objects, mass, and area in geocentric orbit by orbit class.



(a) Evolution of number of objects.



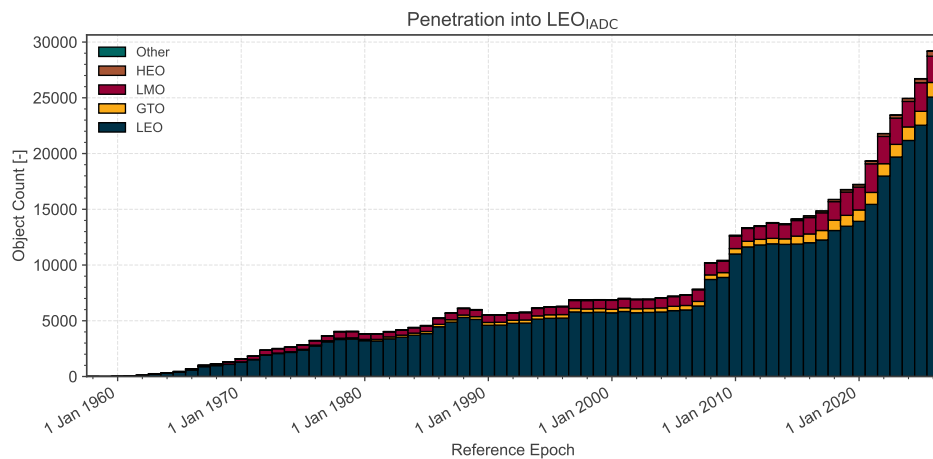
(b) Evolution of mass.



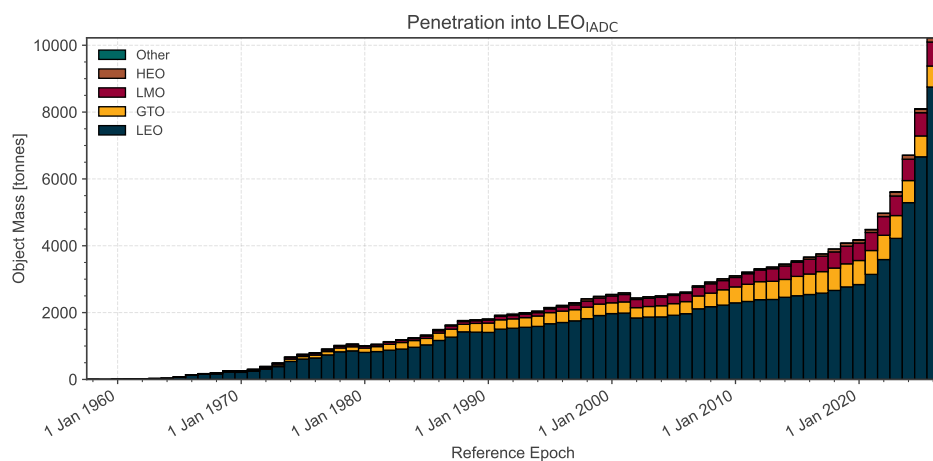
(c) Evolution of area.

Figure 2.3: Evolution of number of orbiting objects, mass, and area in geocentric orbit versus total number of objects.

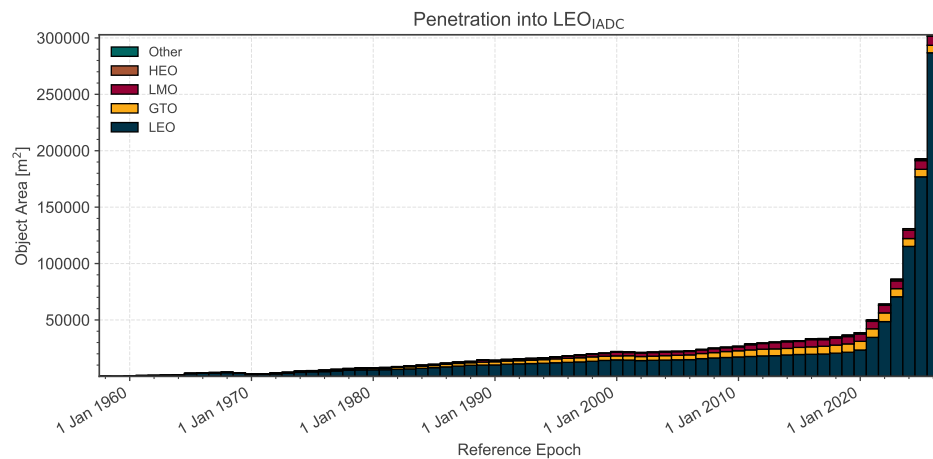
2.2. Evolution of Environment in LEO



(a) Evolution of absolute number of objects.

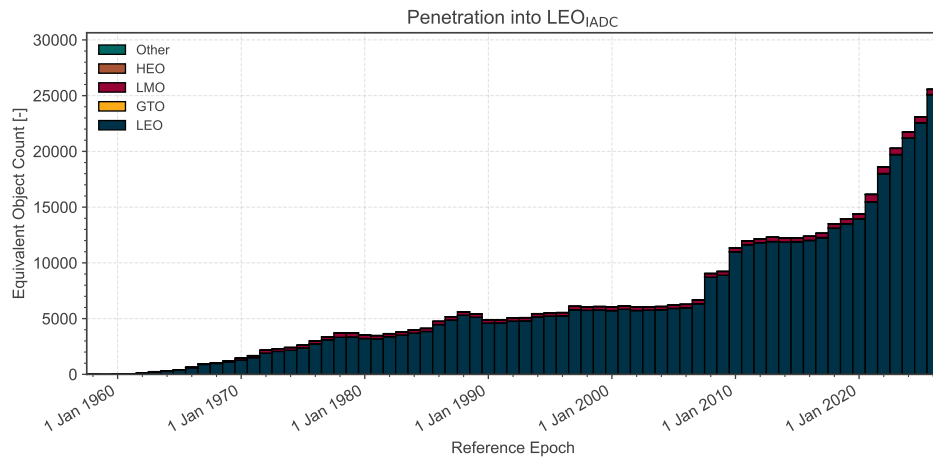


(b) Evolution of absolute mass.

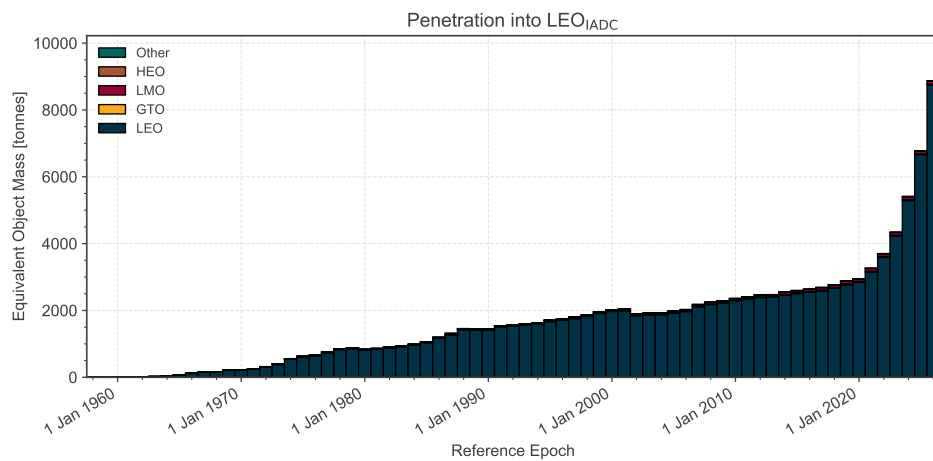


(c) Evolution of absolute area.

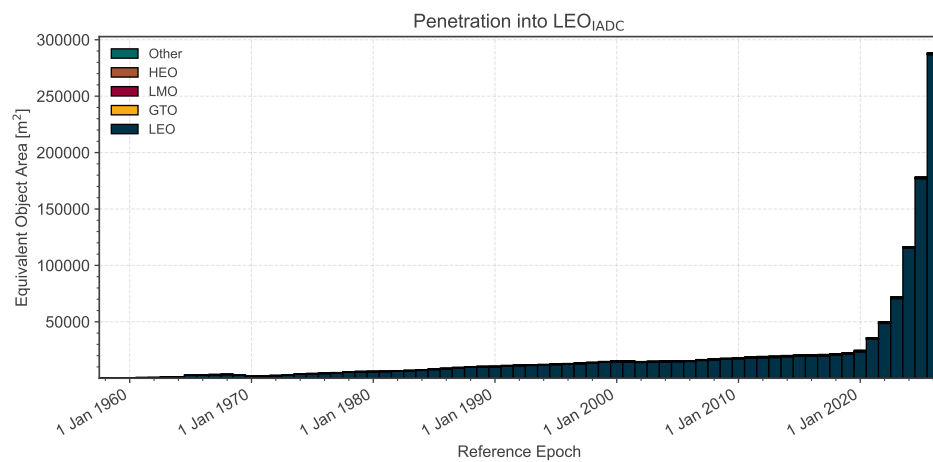
Figure 2.4: Evolution of absolute number of objects, mass and area residing in or penetrating LEO_{IADC}.



(a) Evolution of equivalent number of objects.



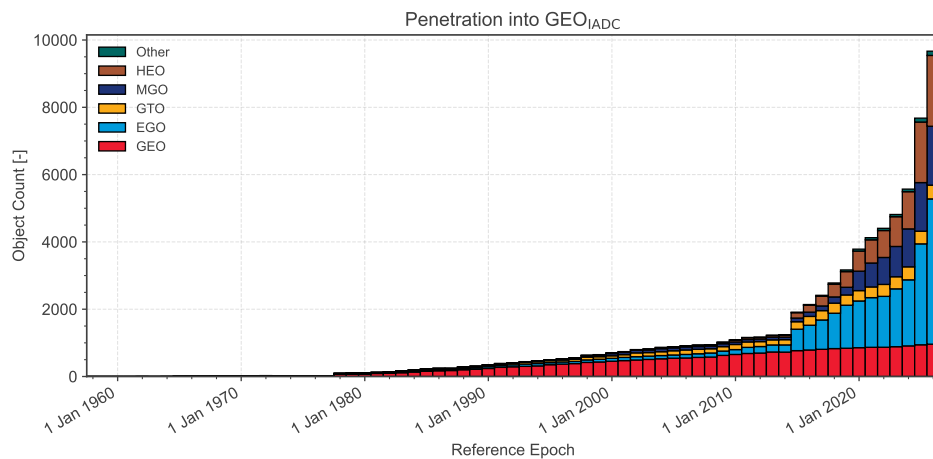
(b) Evolution of equivalent mass.



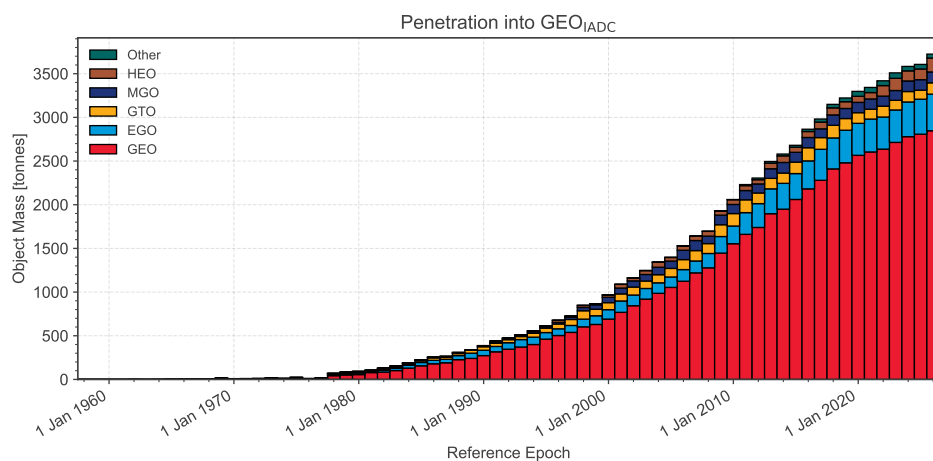
(c) Evolution of equivalent area.

Figure 2.5: Evolution of equivalent number of objects, mass and area residing in or penetrating LEO_{IADC}.

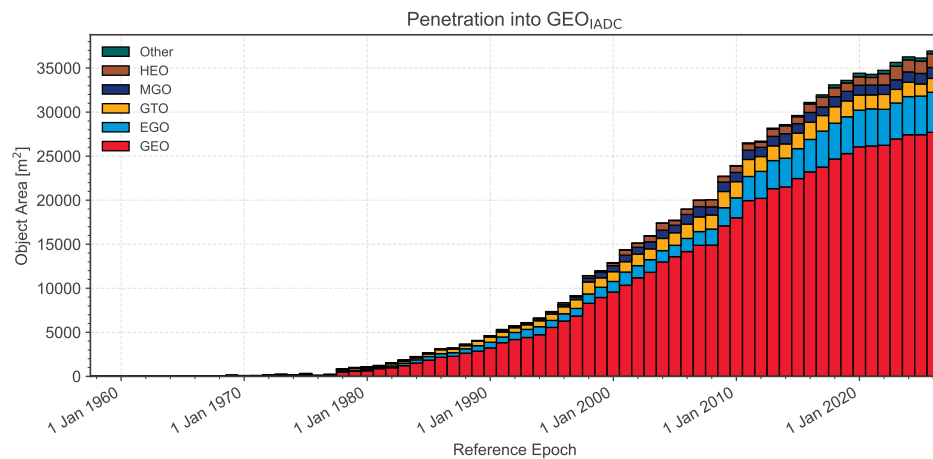
2.3. Evolution of Environment in GEO



(a) Evolution of absolute number of objects.

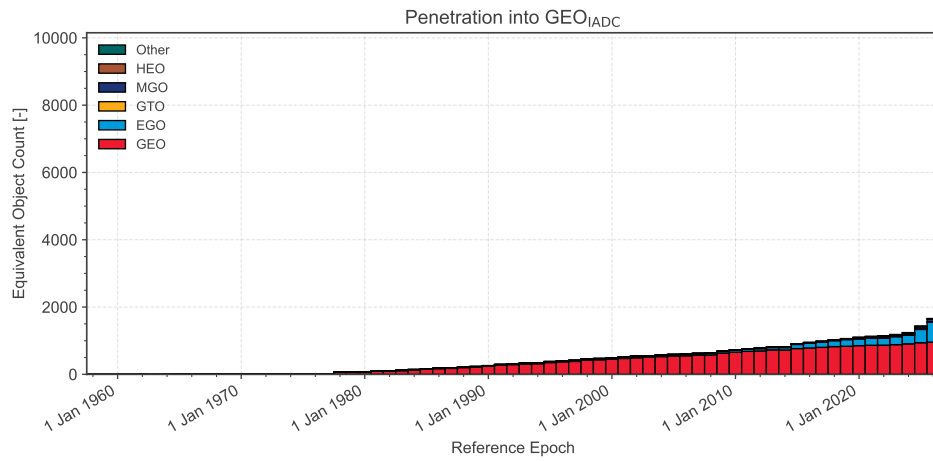


(b) Evolution of absolute mass.

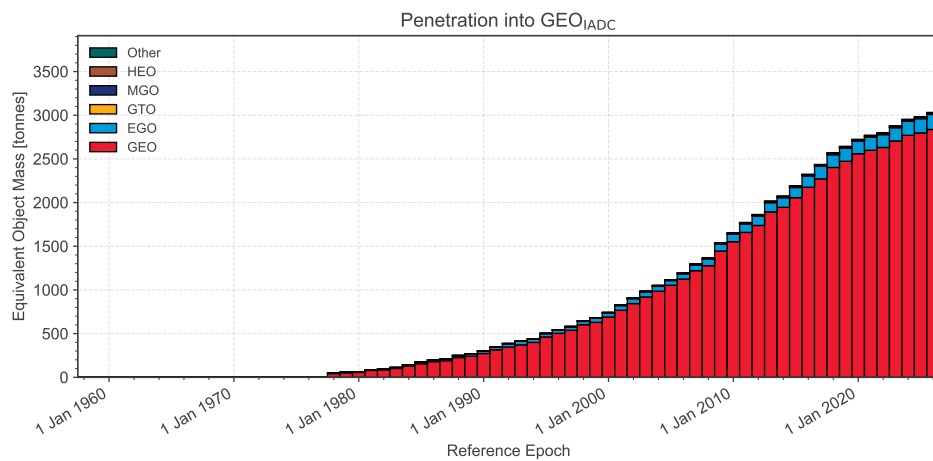


(c) Evolution of absolute area.

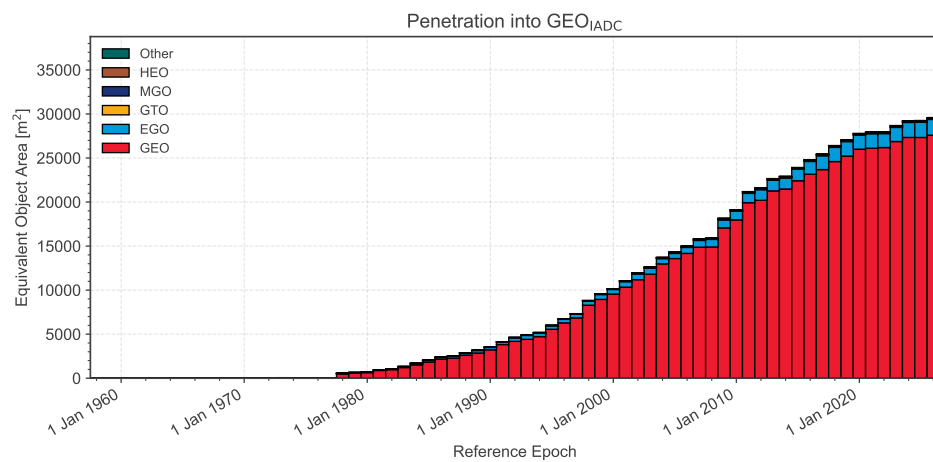
Figure 2.6: Evolution of absolute number of objects, mass and area residing in or penetrating GEO_{IADC}.



(a) Evolution of equivalent number of objects.



(b) Evolution of equivalent mass.



(c) Evolution of equivalent area.

Figure 2.7: Evolution of equivalent number of objects, mass and area residing in or penetrating GEO_{IADC}.

2.4. Non-catalogued and modelled objects

According to ESA's space debris environment model MASTER (Meteoroid and Space Debris Terrestrial Environment Reference), at the most recent reference epoch 1st February 2026, the estimated number of space objects in orbit in the different size ranges is the following:

- 68,450 space objects greater than 10 cm (including approximately 11,300 active payloads),
- 1.5 million space debris objects from 1 cm to 10 cm,
- 230 million space debris objects from 1 mm to 1 cm.

The distribution of the number of objects as a function of their size is shown in Fig. 2.8: the plot shows the number of objects larger than the threshold diameter indicated in x-axis, considering space objects crossing the LEO regime. Fig. 2.9 shows the density profiles with altitude corresponding to different minimum object sizes (respectively 10 cm in dark blue and 1 cm in red), considering only the LEO region. The logarithmic scale is used in the y-axis to take into account the different orders of magnitude corresponding to the two populations.

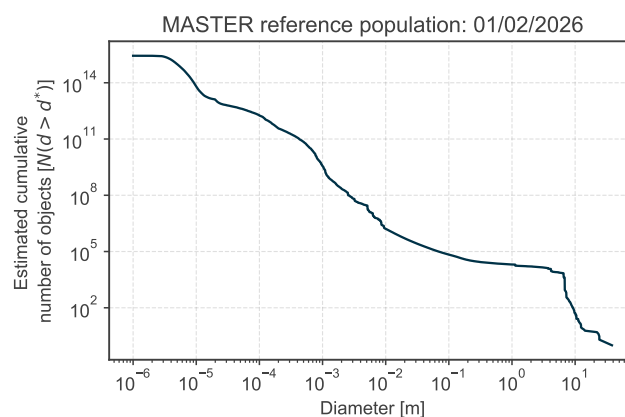


Figure 2.8: Estimated number of space objects crossing LEO as a function of the object diameter from the 01/02/2026 reference population.

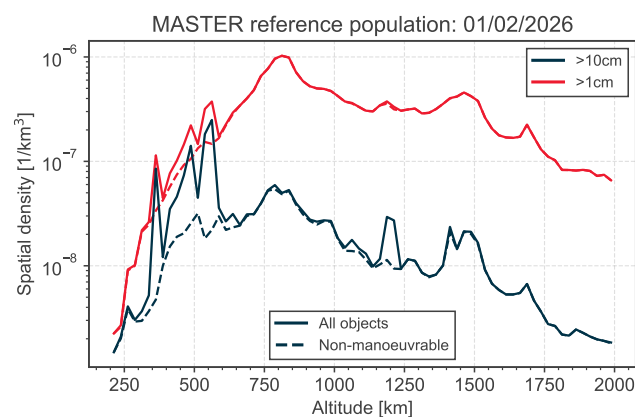


Figure 2.9: Density profiles in LEO for different space object size ranges from the 01/02/2026 reference population.

Historically, the MASTER model incorporated all space objects, both catalogued and statistically simulated, without differentiating between inactive and operational satellites as part of the population. Up until the reference population released in 2016, the proportion of active, manoeuvrable spacecraft within the overall population was relatively low compared to non-manoevrable debris. This balance has since shifted, with the deployment of large constellations and increasing space traffic significantly increasing the number of active, manoeuvrable satellites in orbit. As a result, manoeuvrable objects now constitute a much larger share of the population, impacting collision risk assessments and the overall dynamics of the space environment modelled by MASTER. A secondary population has therefore been introduced that excludes active, manoeuvrable spacecraft from the MASTER population (denoted as “non-manoevrable” in Fig. 2.9). This provides a complementary view of the space environment by focusing on objects that cannot actively mitigate collision risk.

Fig. 2.10 shows the density profiles with altitude for space objects larger than 10 cm, considering only the LEO region, for the most recent reference epoch 1st February 2026, as well as for the previous MASTER population releases with reference epochs 1st August 2024, and 1st November 2016. This includes the *non-manoevrable* reference population, which excludes active and manoeuvrable objects, and has been made available since the generation of the 2024 reference population. In particular, this highlights the contributions coming from constellations as well as fragmentation events. Similarly, Fig. 2.11 shows the difference for space objects larger than 1 cm.

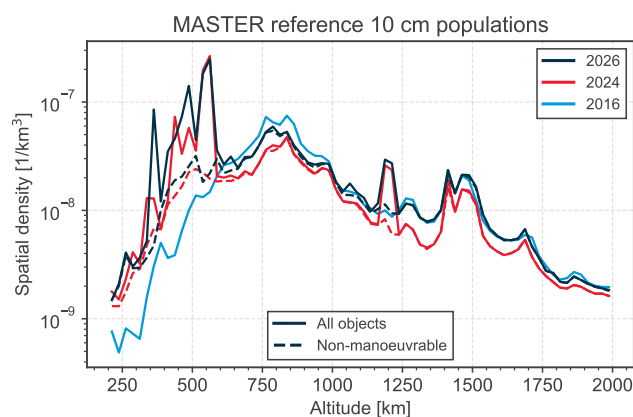


Figure 2.10: Density profiles in LEO for space objects larger than 10 cm for the 01/02/2026, 01/08/2024 and 01/11/2016 reference populations.

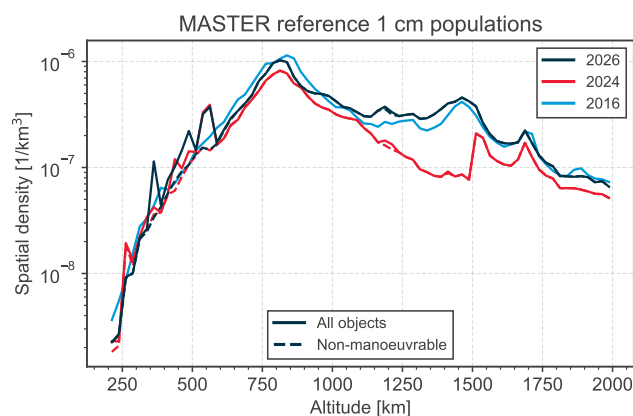


Figure 2.11: Density profiles in LEO for space objects larger than 1 cm for the 01/02/2026, 01/08/2024 and 01/11/2016 reference populations.

2.5. Usage of the Protected Regions

This section aims to provide an overview of the usage of the protected regions in terms of launch traffic as represented by object count and mass, given that the stability of the space environment is dependent on them.

From a historical point of view, the launch traffic of Payloads can be categorised in terms of the main funding source (Civil, Defence, Commercial, Amateur) or in terms of the main missions type (Communication, Imaging, Navigation, etc.). The Amateur category includes those Payloads associated by academic institutions when none of the other entities are the driving contributor. Payloads that are deployed from the International Space Station (ISS) are identified with a separate label as part of the launch traffic.

In case of Rocket Bodies, it is of importance which launcher family is generating the traffic to orbit, given that the adherence level to space debris mitigation guidelines correlates with this family identifier. These families are to be understood as major stable design versions of a launcher, e.g. covering performance improvements but not engine changes. New families can appear sporadically and in this report the most regularly used ones over recent years are identified. Earlier families of launchers are grouped under *Used earlier*.

Of increasing importance in a changing space traffic landscape are also the so-called *ride-share* launch opportunities, where a single launch vehicle carries a multitude of Payloads from different entities into orbit. For the purpose of this report, ride-share launches are defined as those launches that carry Payloads with at least three different mission domains and at least ten Payloads in total. A *mission domain* is defined by the combination of mission type, funding, and operator.

For Payload objects in LEO_{IADC}, it is instructive to analyse not only where they reside now, but also how the destination orbits that enable their operations evolve over time. In particular, as space debris mitigation measures focus on limiting orbital lifetimes, adoption of these practice leaves a noticeable imprint on the data. This imprint can distinctively visible as a function of the mission domain, in particular when distinguishing between constellation and non constellation objects.

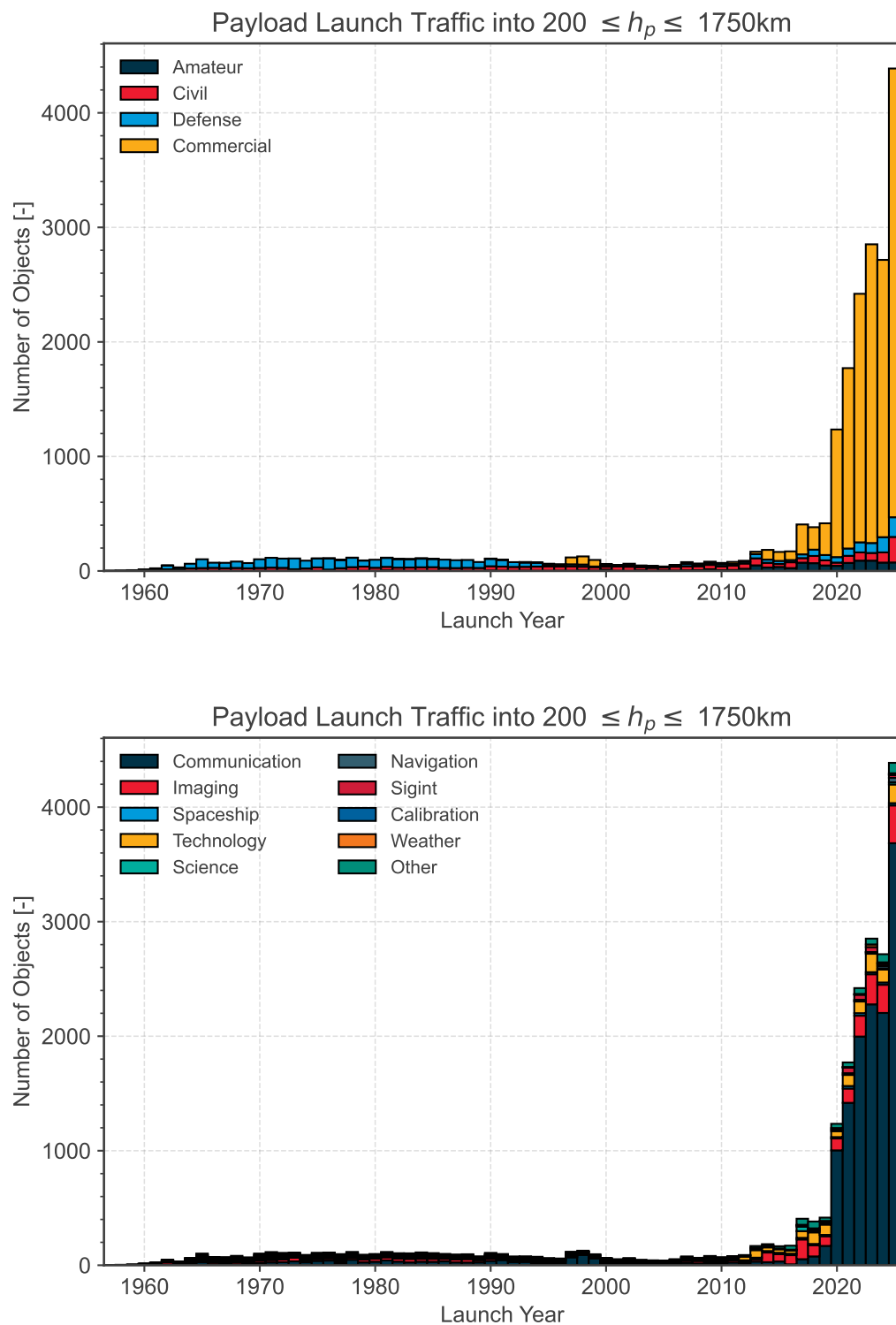


Figure 2.12: Evolution of the launch traffic near LEO_{IADC} per mission funding (top) and type (bottom).

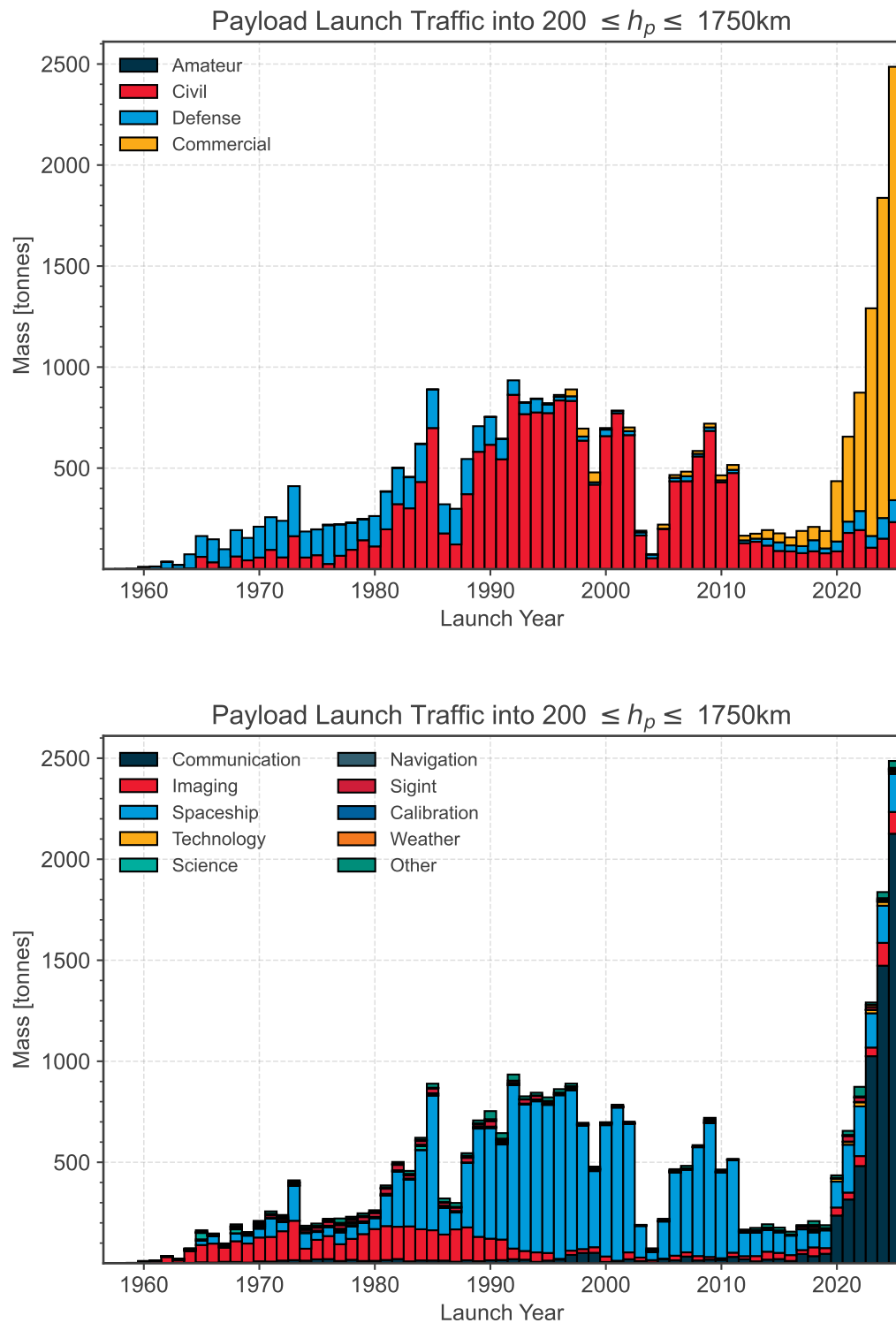


Figure 2.13: Evolution of the launch traffic near LEO_{IDC} per mission funding (top) and type (bottom) in terms of mass.

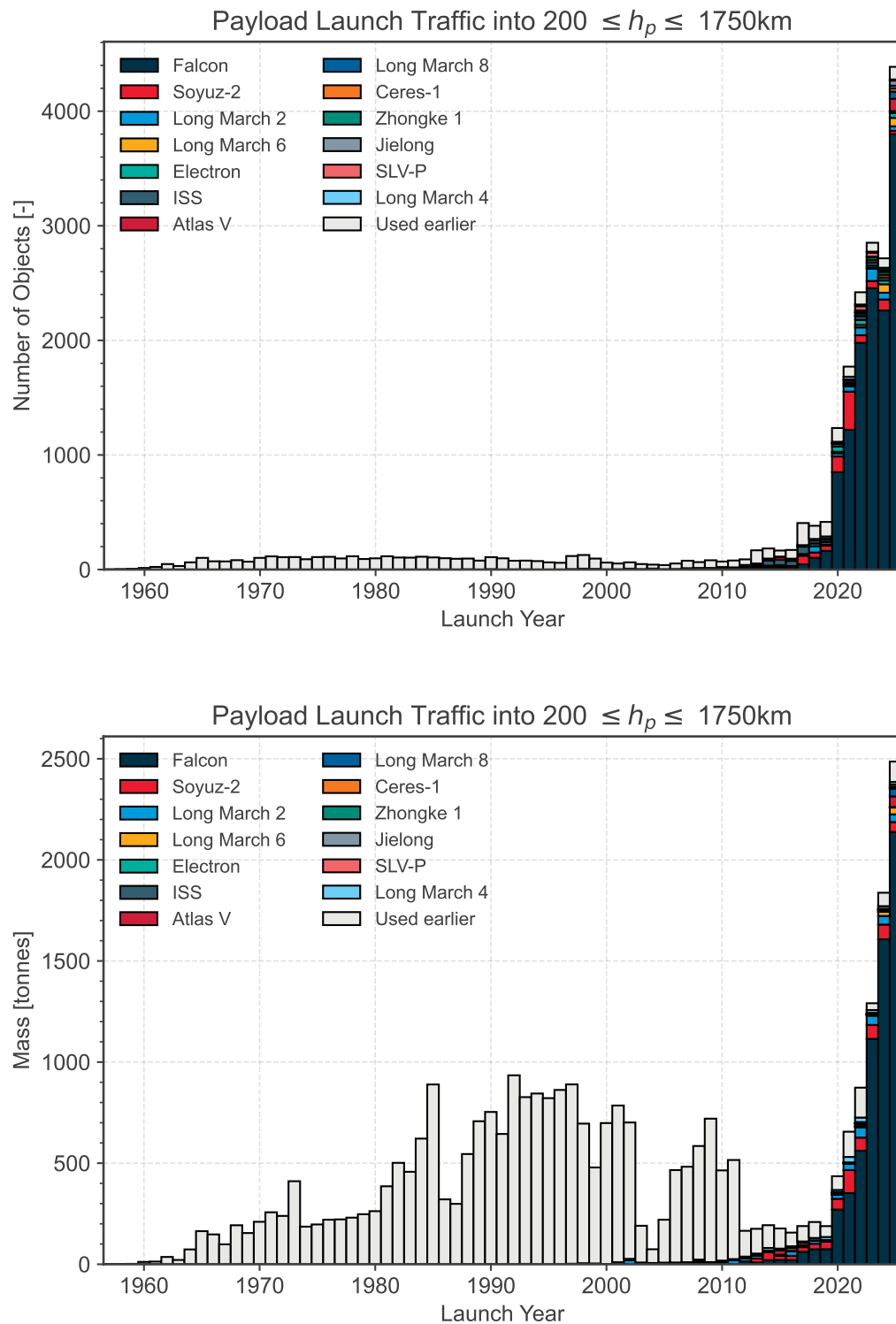


Figure 2.14: Evolution of the launch traffic near LEO_{IADC} per launcher family expressed in terms of number of objects (top) and mass (bottom).

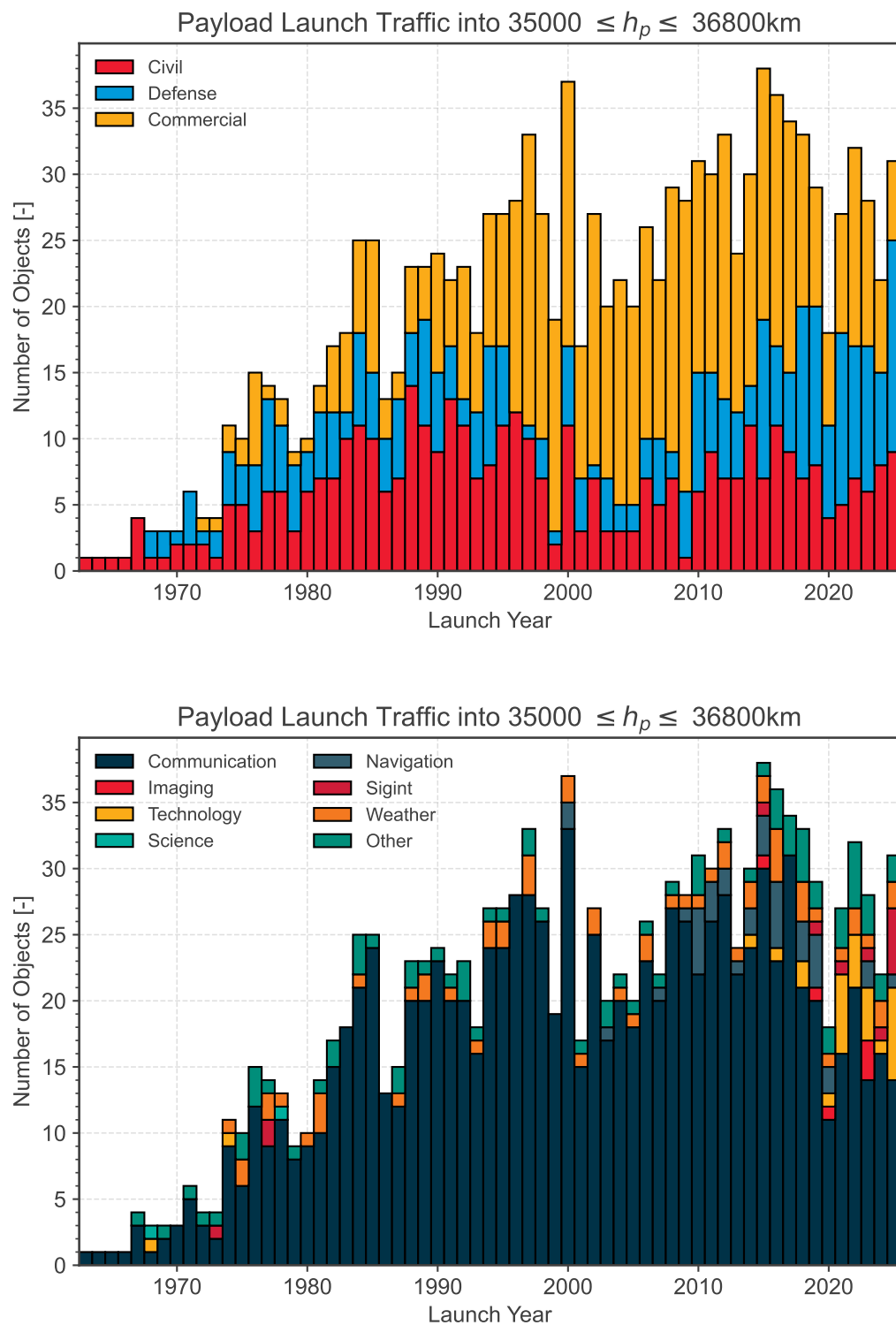


Figure 2.15: Evolution of the launch traffic near GEO_{IADC} per mission funding (top) and type (bottom).

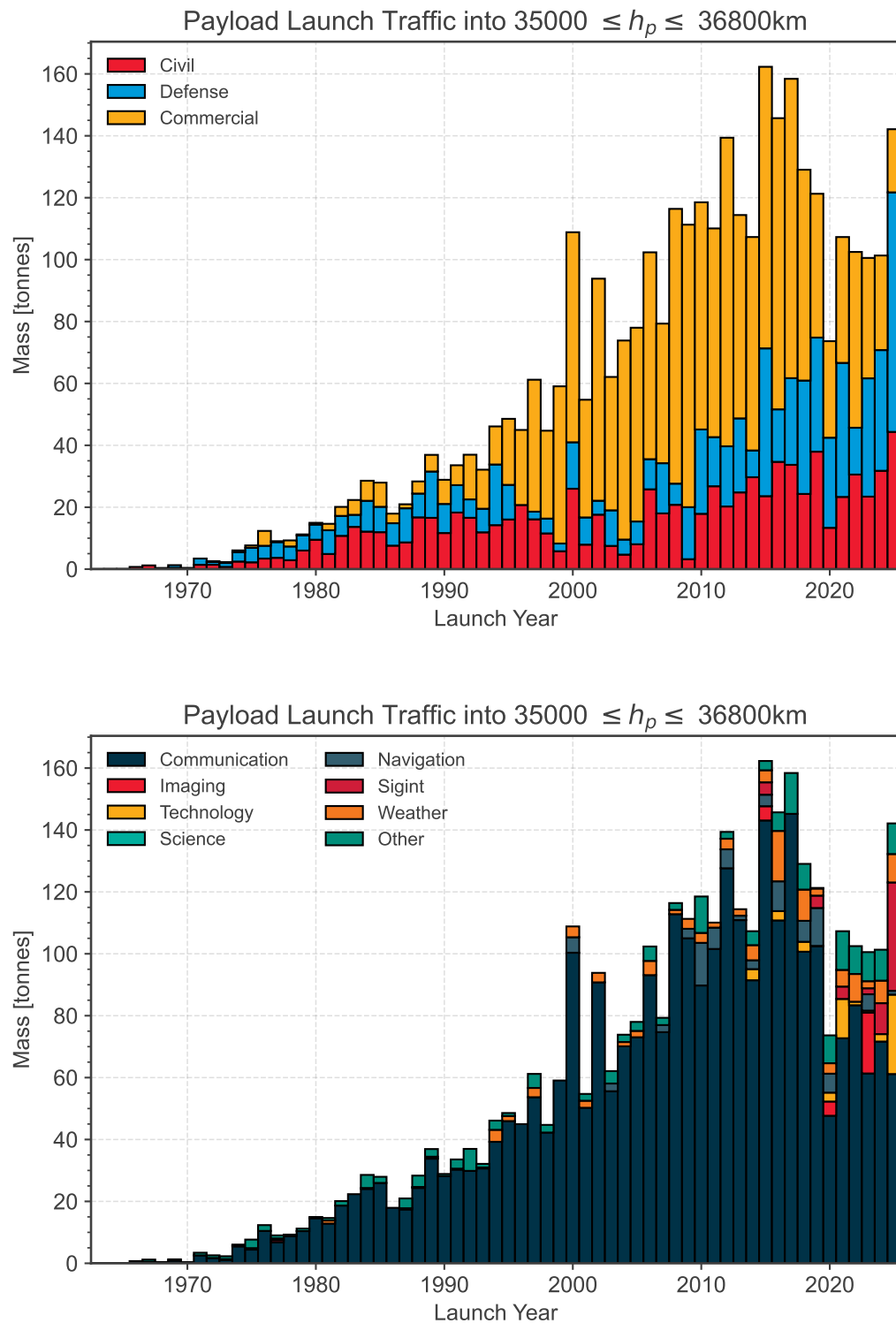


Figure 2.16: Evolution of the launch traffic near GEO_{IADC} per mission funding (top) and type (bottom) in terms of mass.

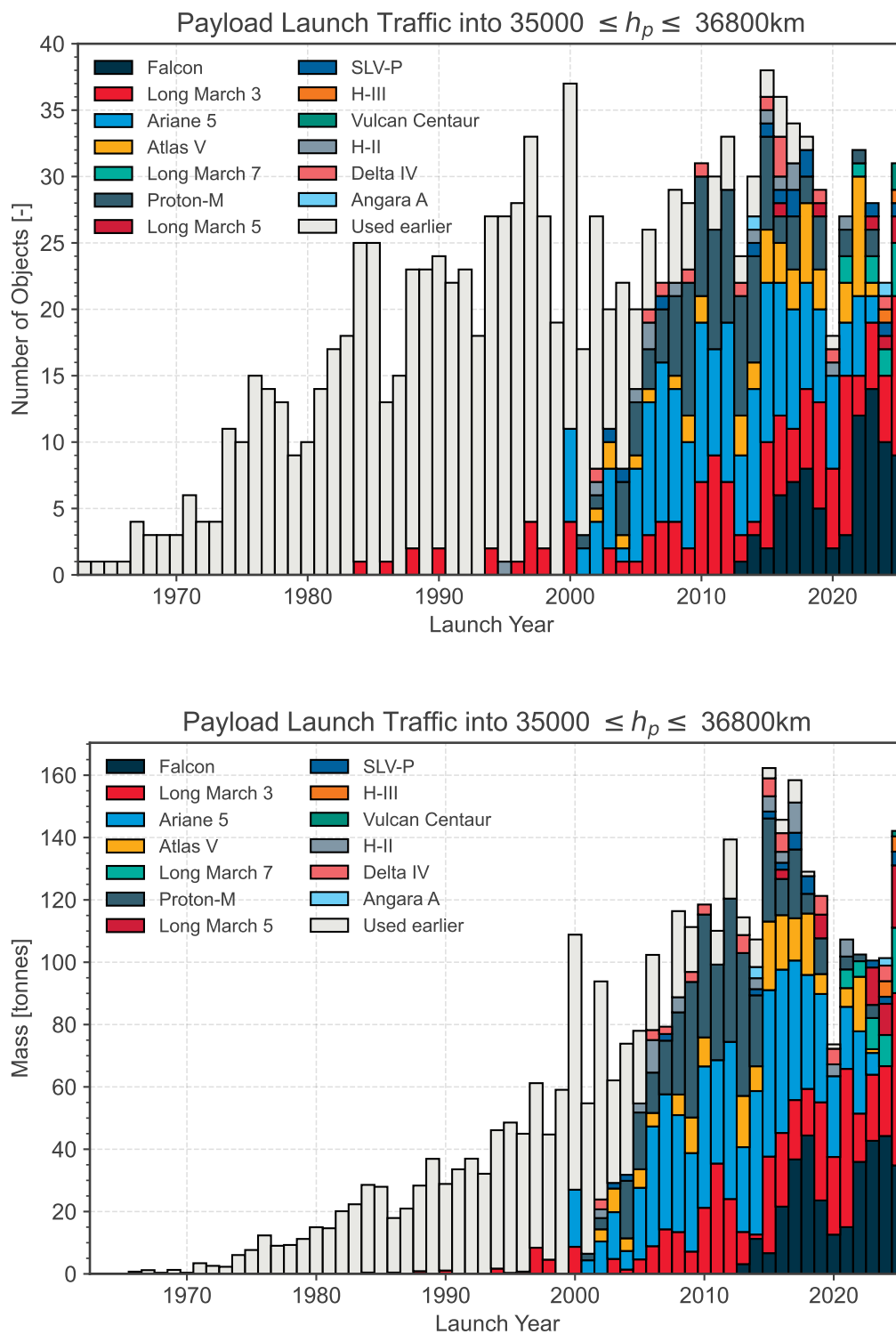


Figure 2.17: Evolution of the launch traffic near GEO_{IADC} per launcher family expressed in terms of number of objects (top) and mass (bottom).

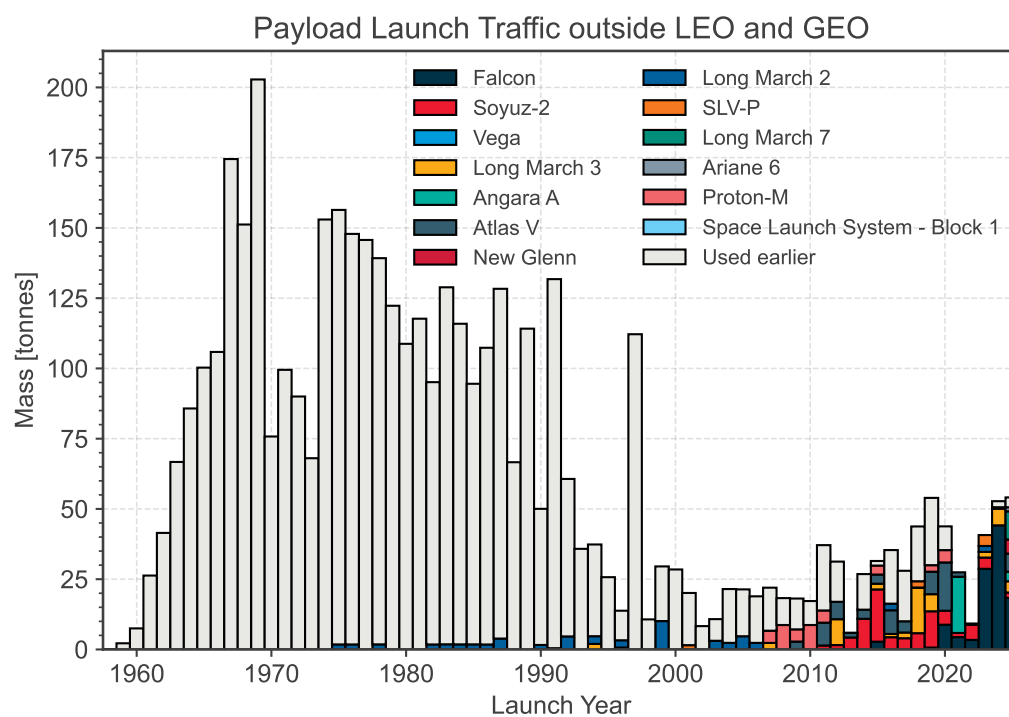
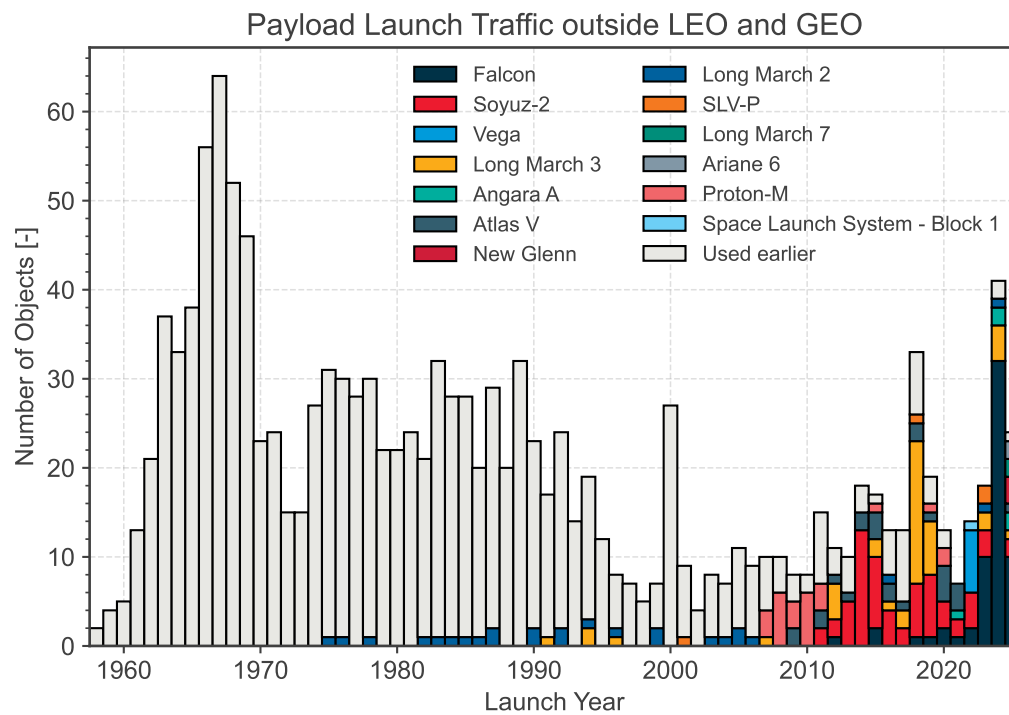


Figure 2.18: Evolution of the launch traffic outside LEO_{IADC} and GEO_{IADC} per launcher family expressed in terms of number of objects (top) and mass (bottom).

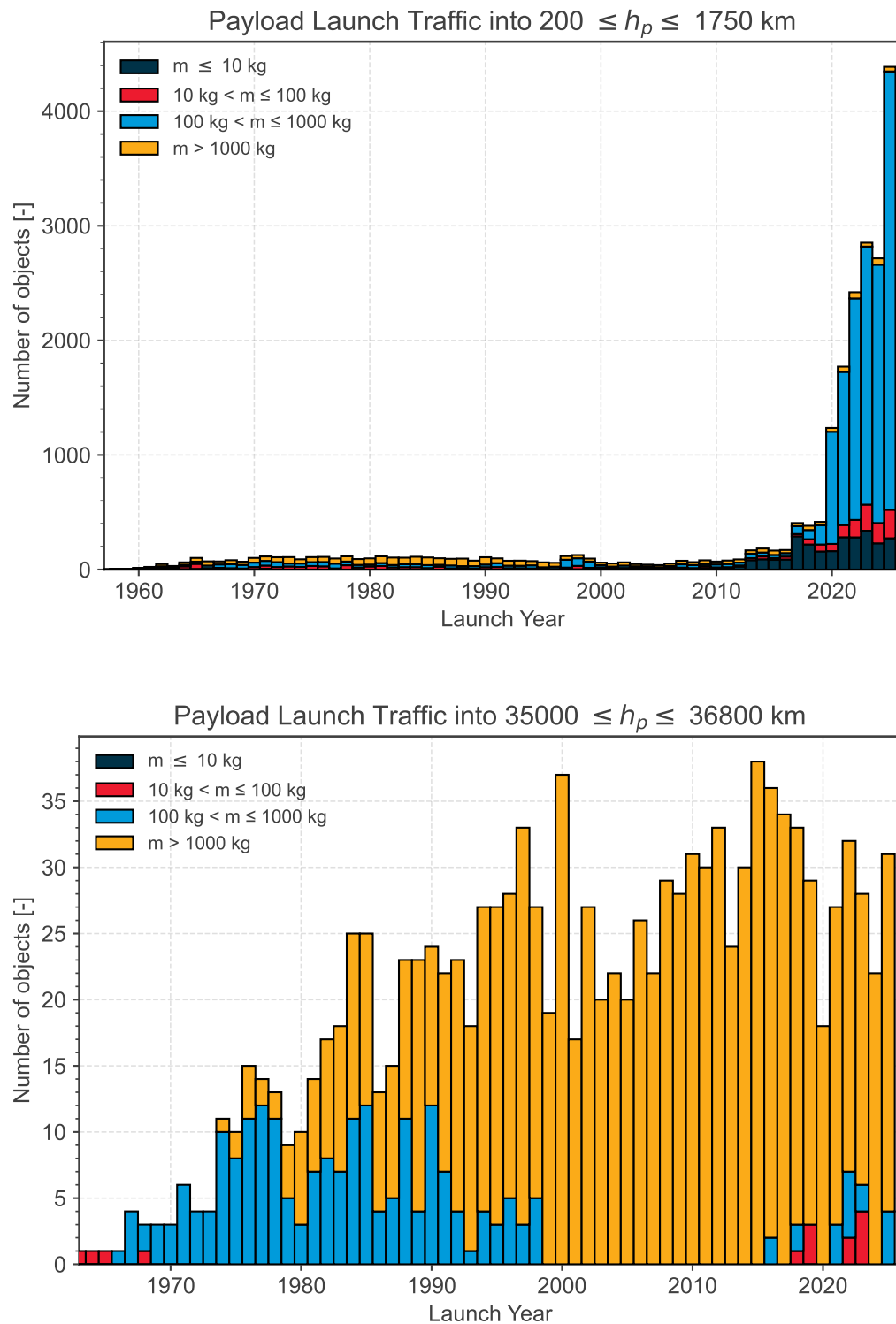
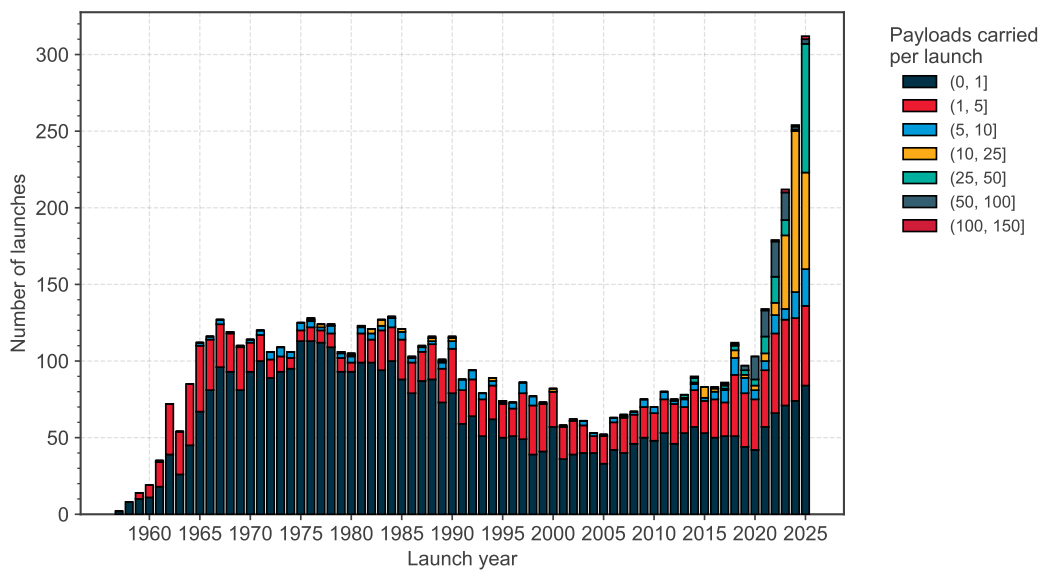
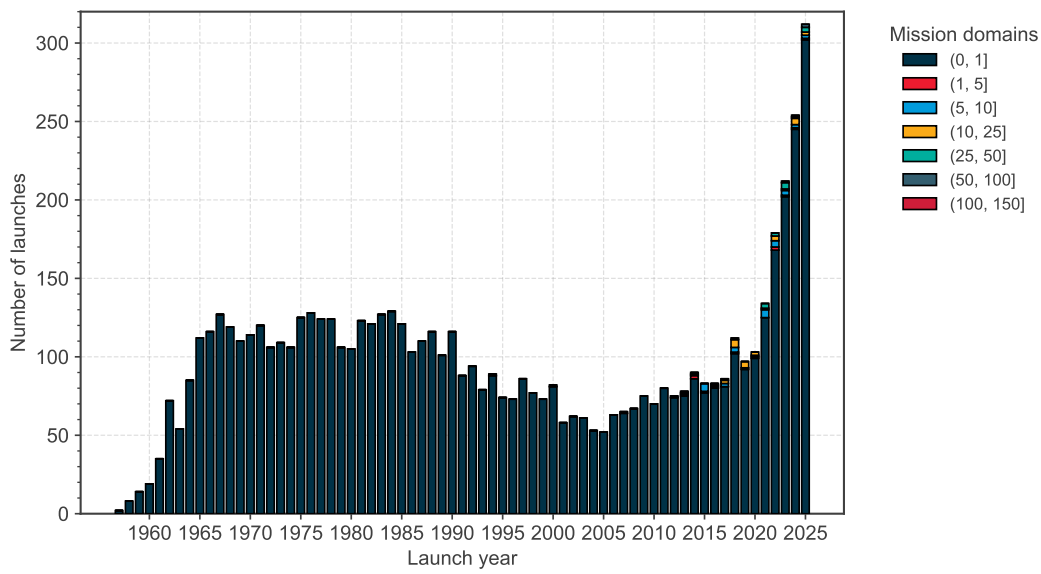


Figure 2.19: Evolution of the launch traffic per mass category in terms of number of objects in LEO_{IADC} (top) and GEO_{IADC} (bottom).



(a) Payloads



(b) Mission domains

Figure 2.20: Evolution of the launch traffic.

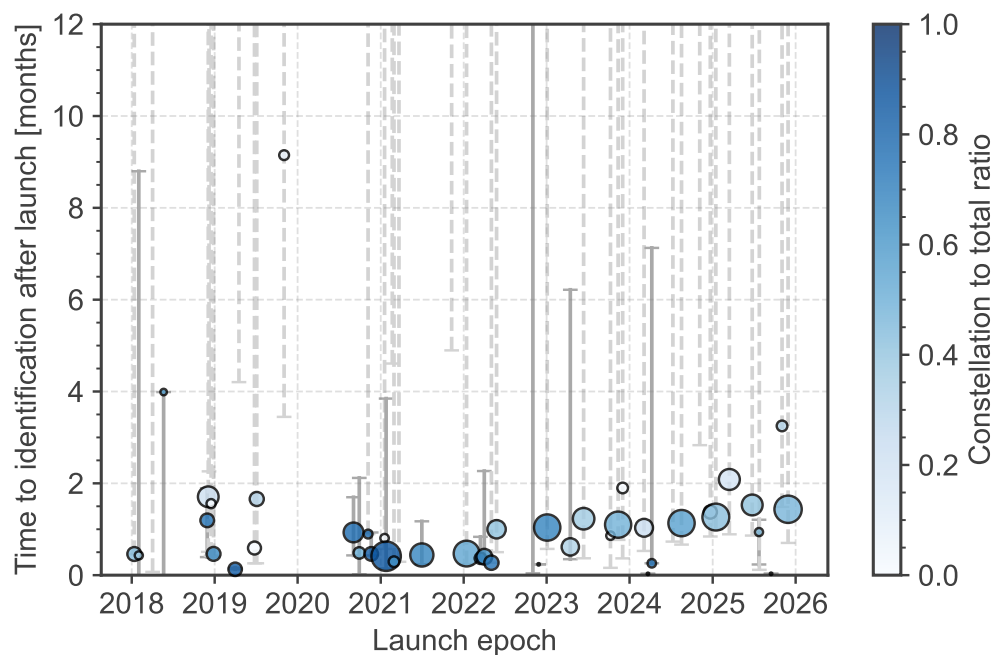


Figure 2.21: Identification rate for rideshare launches.

Unidentified Payload objects form a collision risk for active operators as potential avoidance scenarios cannot be coordinated effectively. In particular, ride-share launches can form an issue for timely identification by space surveillance networks when deployment is not coordinated with the operators on-board. Fig. 2.21 plot represents the rate of identification for Payloads on ride-share launches since 2018, applying the definition introduced above. The x -axis indicates the launch epoch and the y -axis lists some of the crucial timings between launch and identification. Per ride-share launch event, the grey lines indicate the time interval between the epoch when 10% and 90% of the Payloads in the launch were identified with a cut-off after 12 months (some Payload might never be identified). If the 90% has not (yet) been reached, the interval is indicated with a dashed line. The location of the circular marker indicates the time when 50% of the Payloads are identified, the size is proportional to the total number of Payloads in the ride-share launch, and the colour indicates which fraction of the Payloads belong to a constellation. The latter makes a practical distinction in terms of amount of Payloads that can be coordinated with a space surveillance operators.

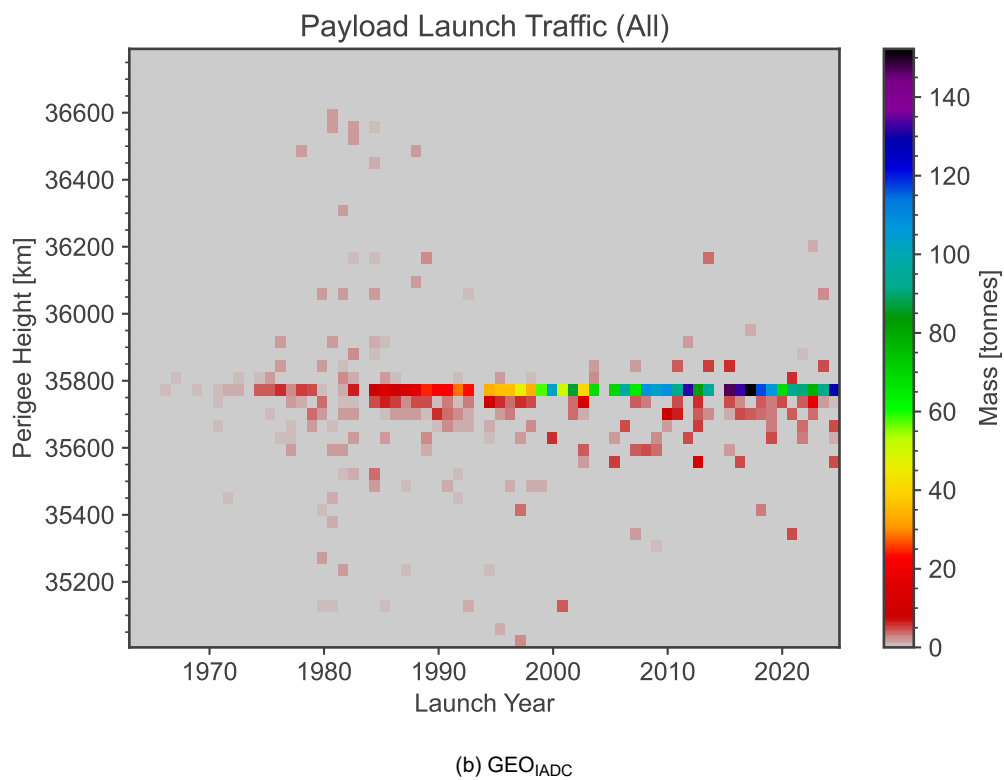
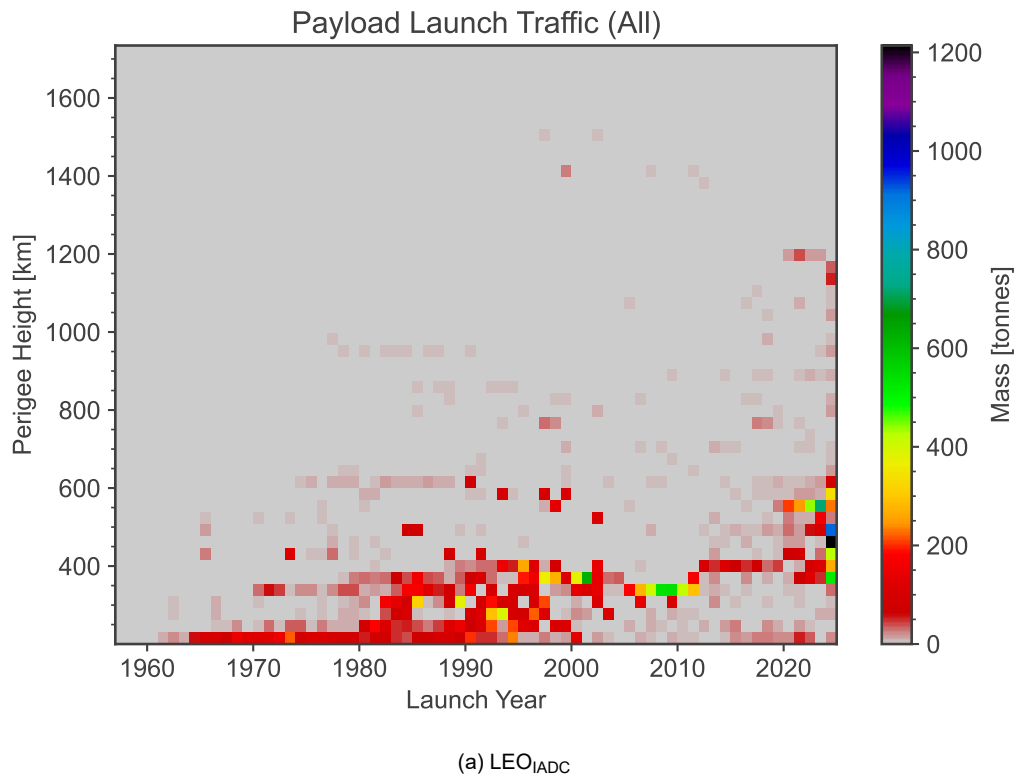
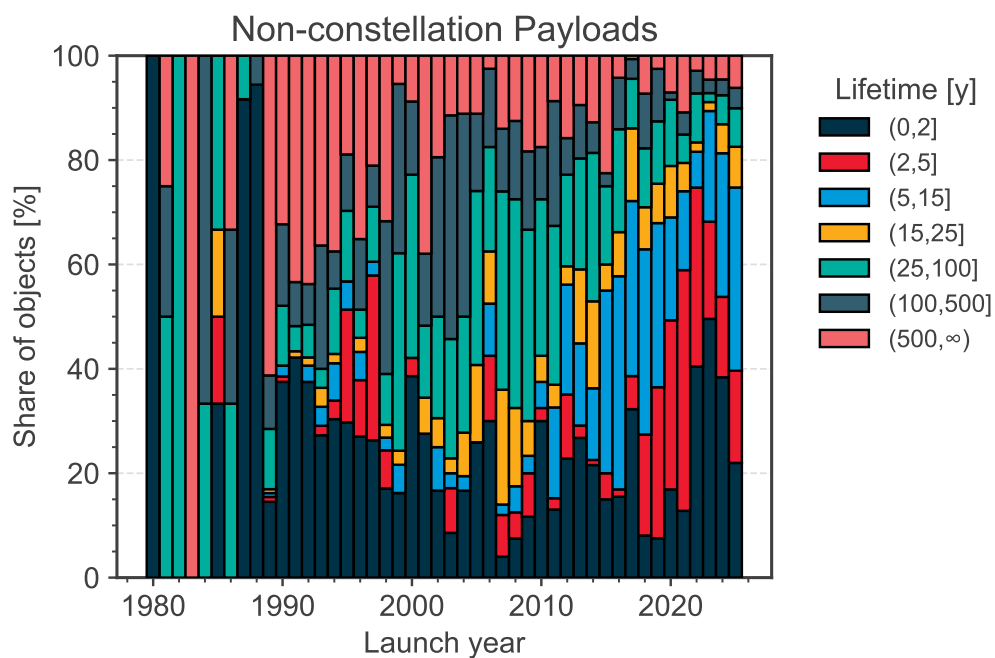
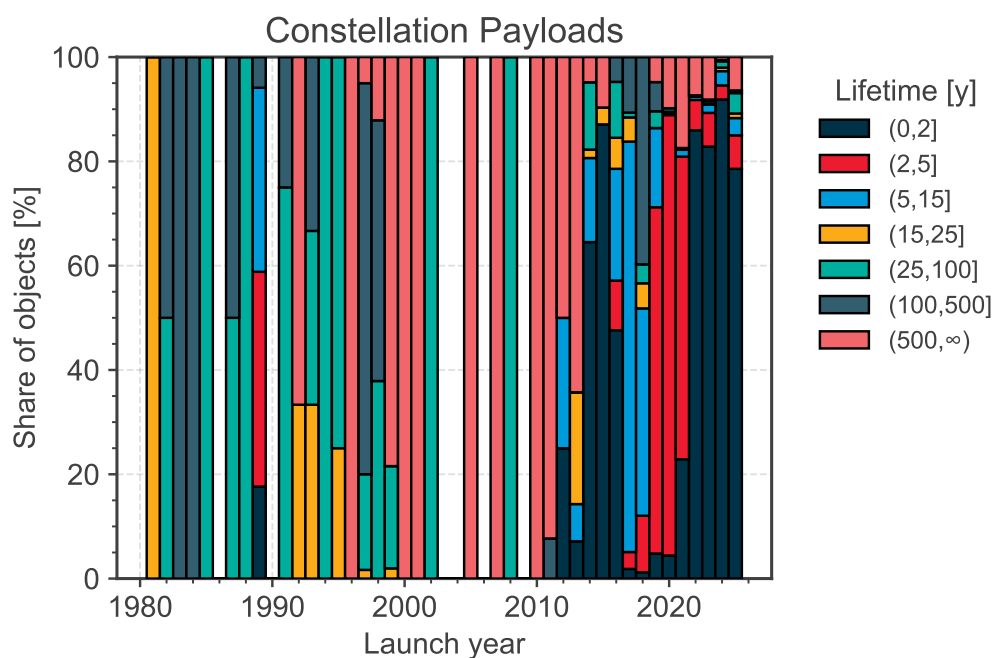


Figure 2.22: Evolution of the launch traffic: mass injected.

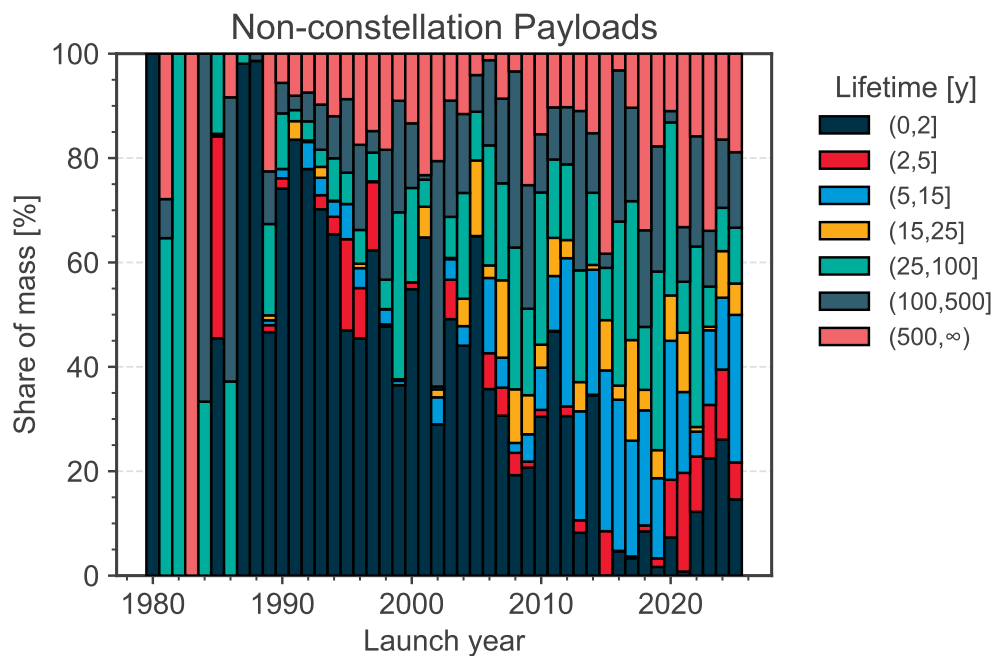


(a) Payload objects not belonging to constellations

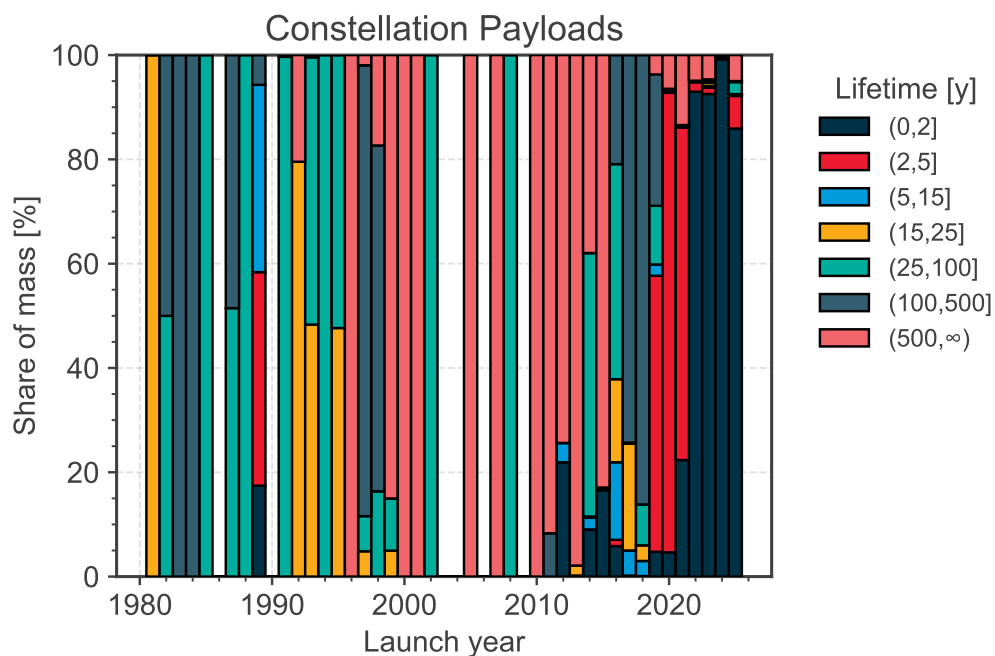


(b) Payload objects belonging to constellations

Figure 2.23: Estimated lifetime for the Payload destination orbits by launch year: share of objects.



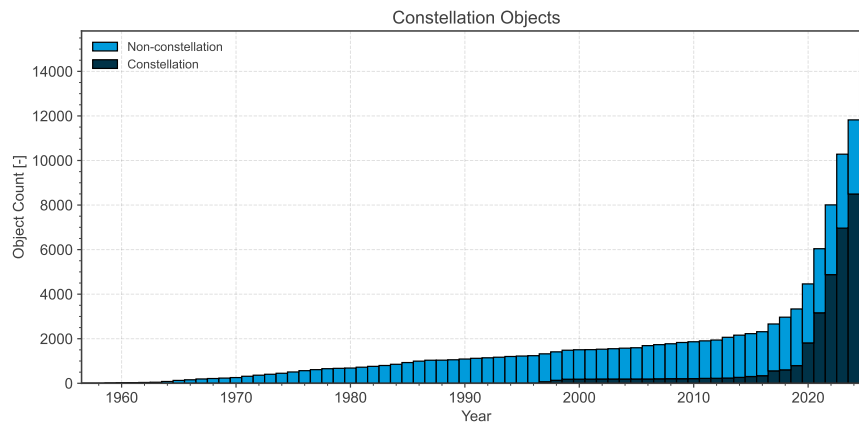
(a) Payload objects not belonging to constellations



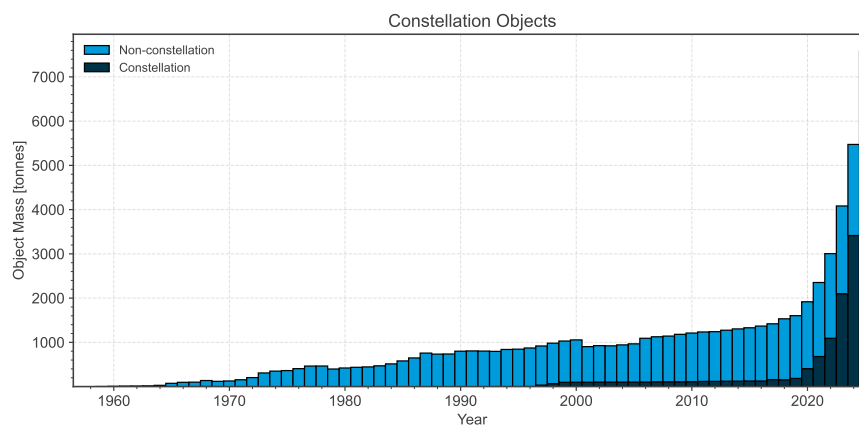
(b) Payload objects belonging to constellations

Figure 2.24: Estimated lifetime for the Payload destination orbits by launch year: share of mass.

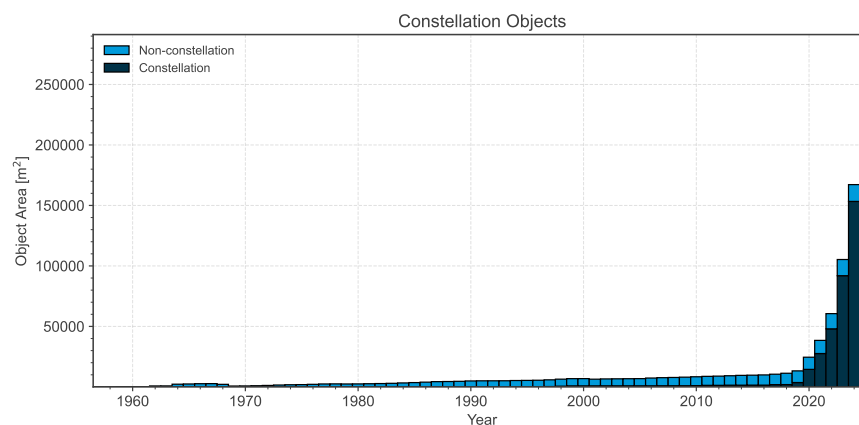
2.6. Constellations in the LEO protected region



(a) Evolution of number of objects.



(b) Evolution of mass.



(c) Evolution of area.

Figure 2.25: Evolution of number of objects, mass, and area in LEO_{IADC} distinguishing constellations and non-constellation payloads.

2.7. Active payloads in the LEO protected region

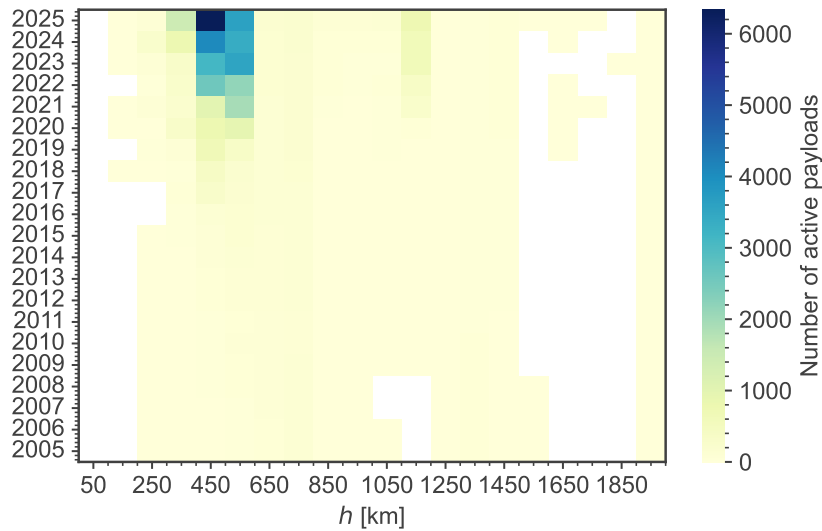


Figure 2.26: Distribution of active payloads in LEO by year and mean altitude.

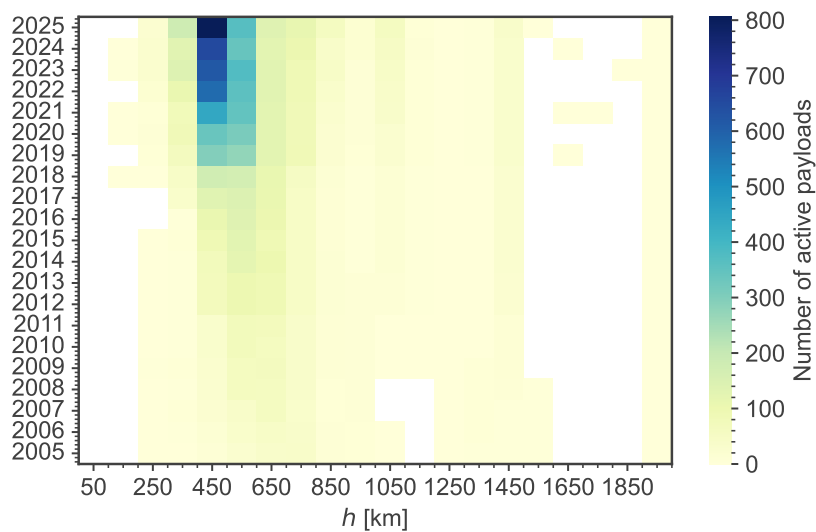


Figure 2.27: Distribution of active payloads not belonging to constellations in LEO by year and mean altitude.

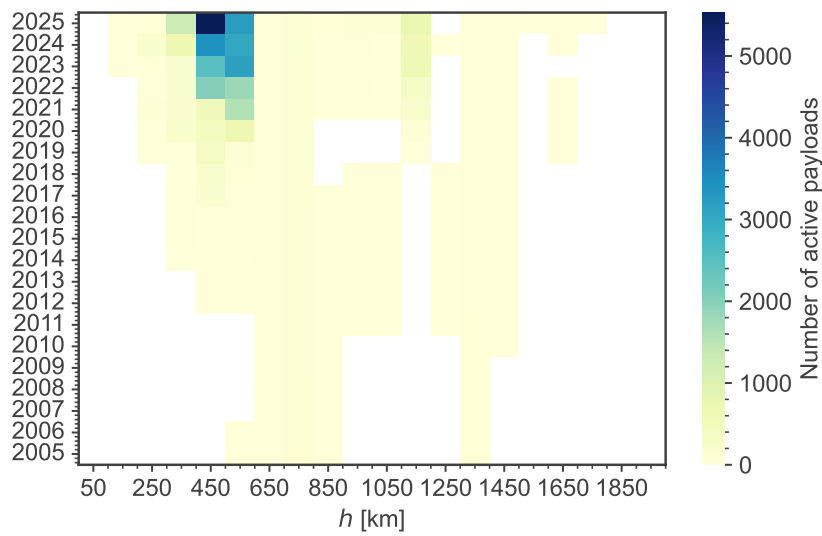


Figure 2.28: Distribution of active payloads belonging to constellations in LEO by year and mean altitude.

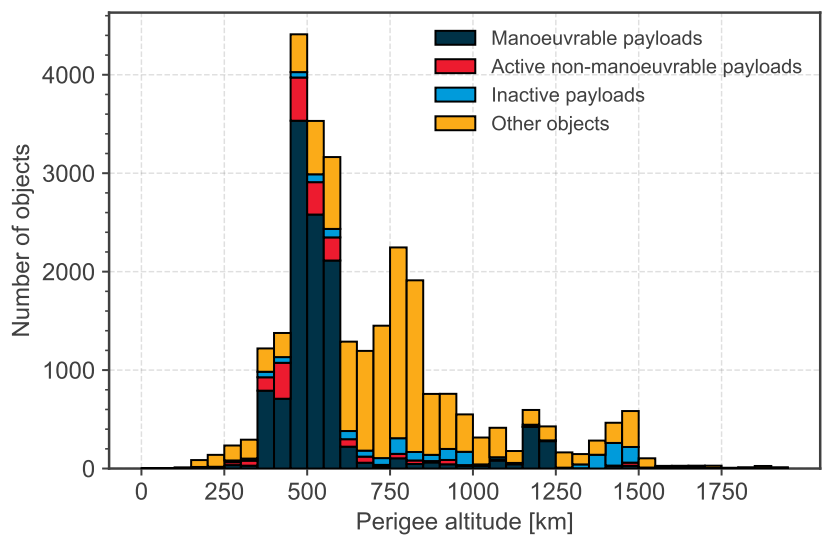


Figure 2.29: Number of manoeuvrable and active objects as a function of the perigee altitude.

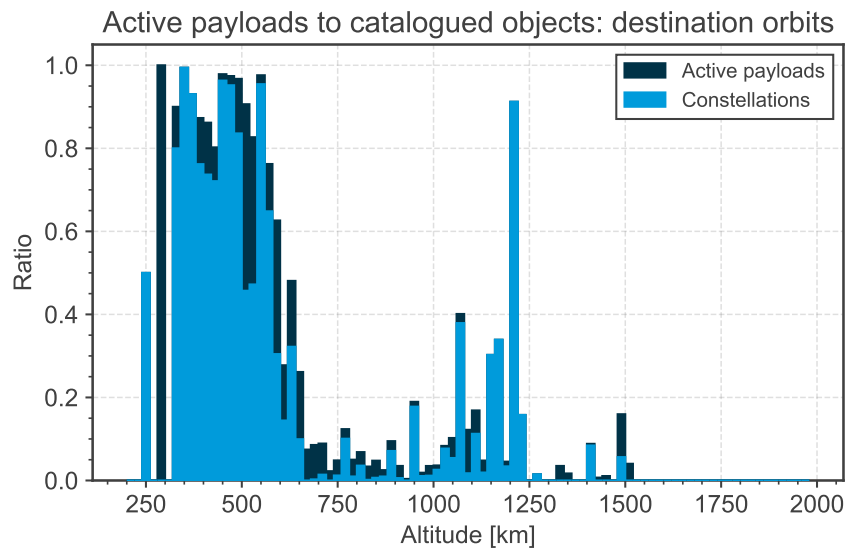


Figure 2.30: Ratio of active and constellation objects over the total number of catalogued objects.

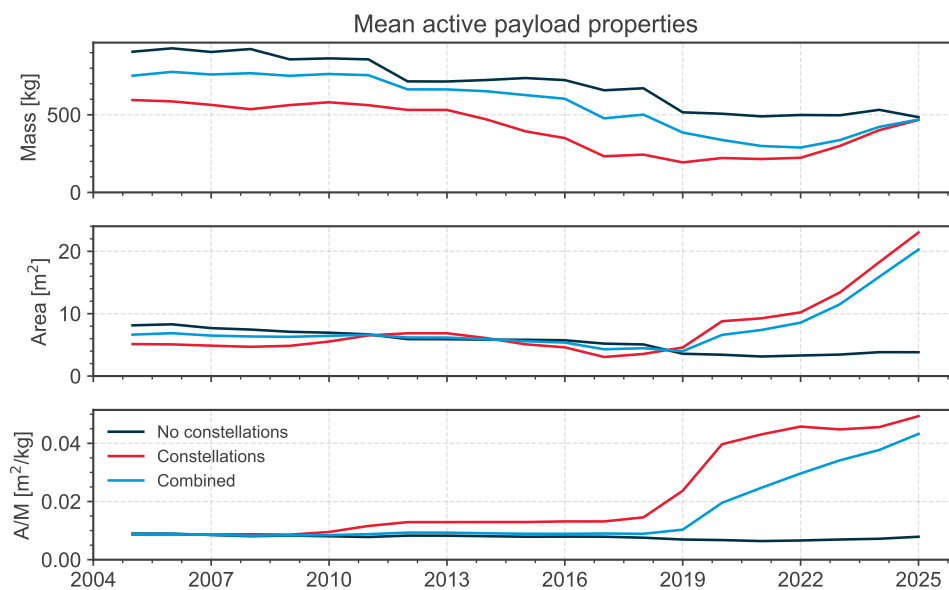
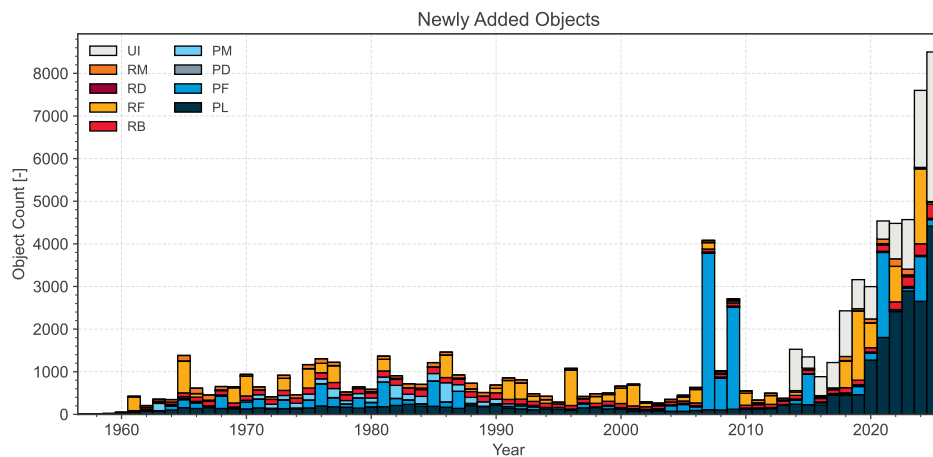
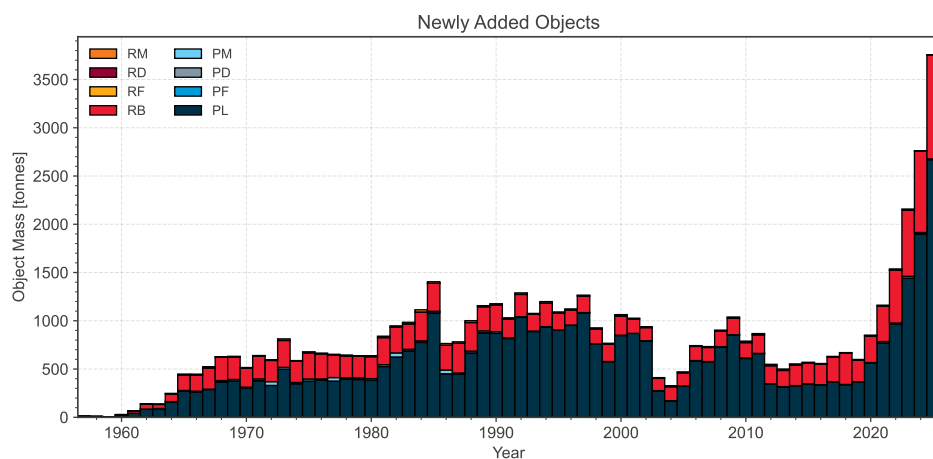


Figure 2.31: Payload parameters for active payloads in LEO over time.

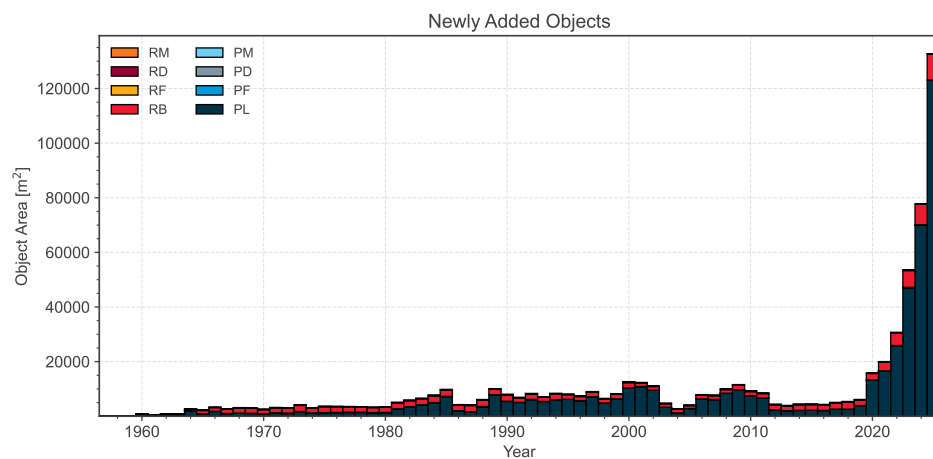
2.8. New Catalogued Objects in the Space Environment



(a) Evolution of newly added object by count.

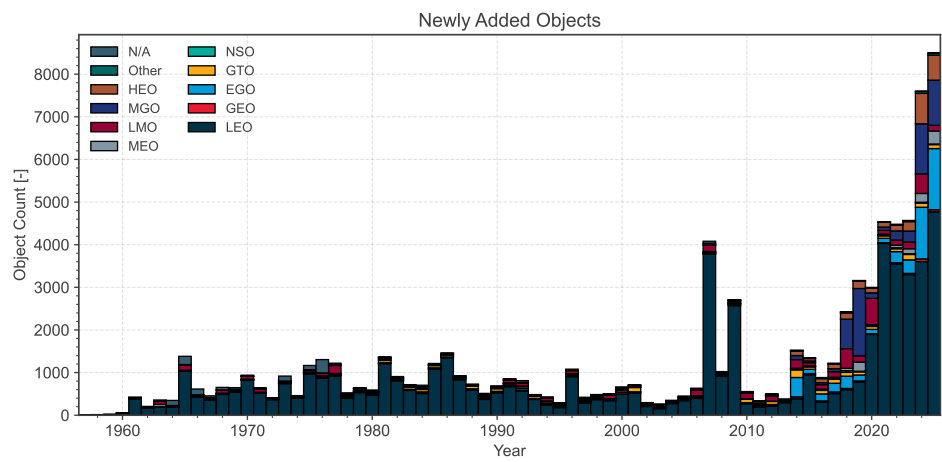


(b) Evolution of newly added mass.

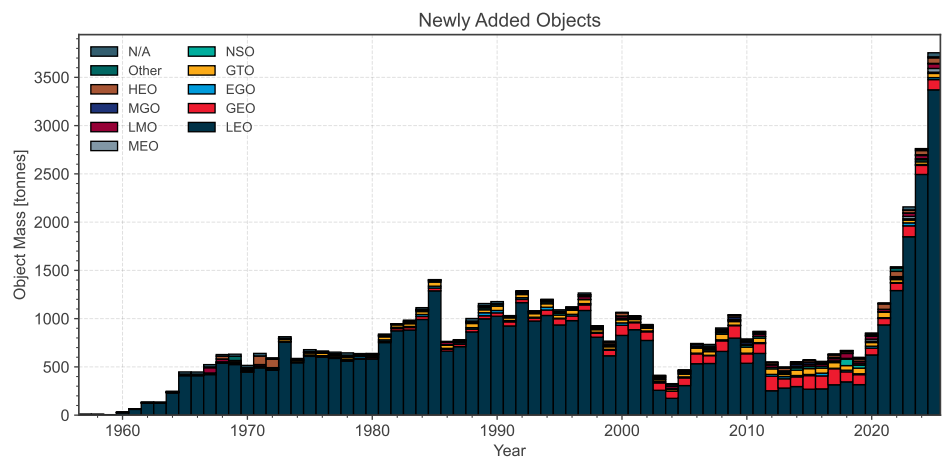


(c) Evolution of newly added area.

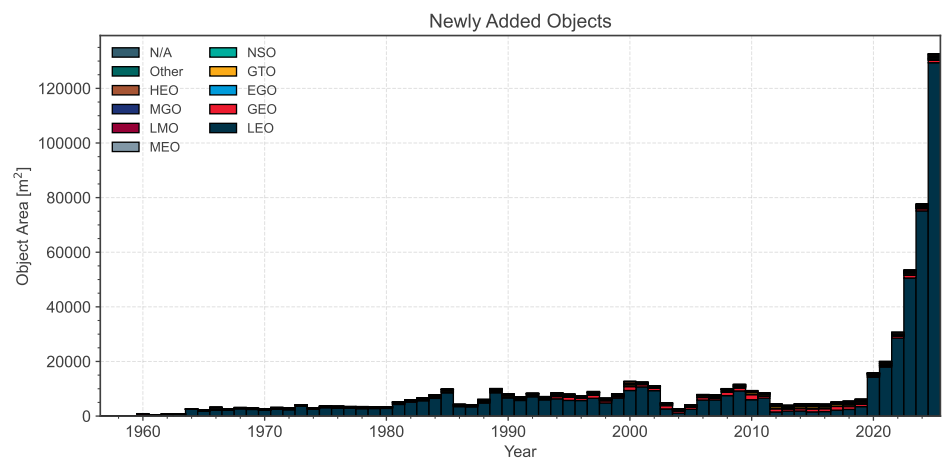
Figure 2.32: Evolution of newly added objects in each year by object type.



(a) Evolution of newly added object by count.



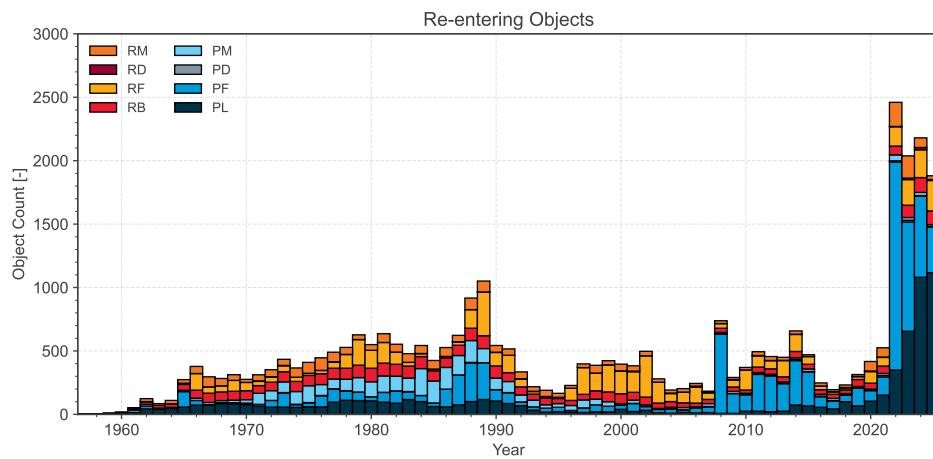
(b) Evolution of newly added mass.



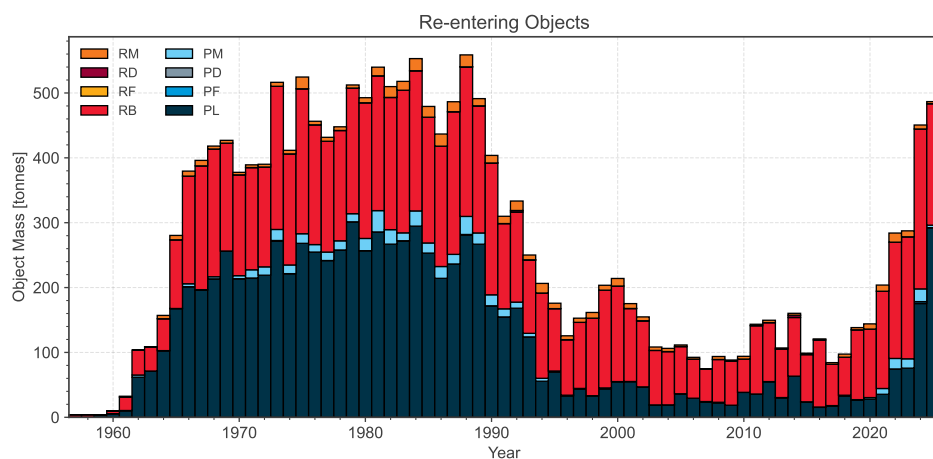
(c) Evolution of newly added area.

Figure 2.33: Evolution of newly added objects in each year by orbit type.

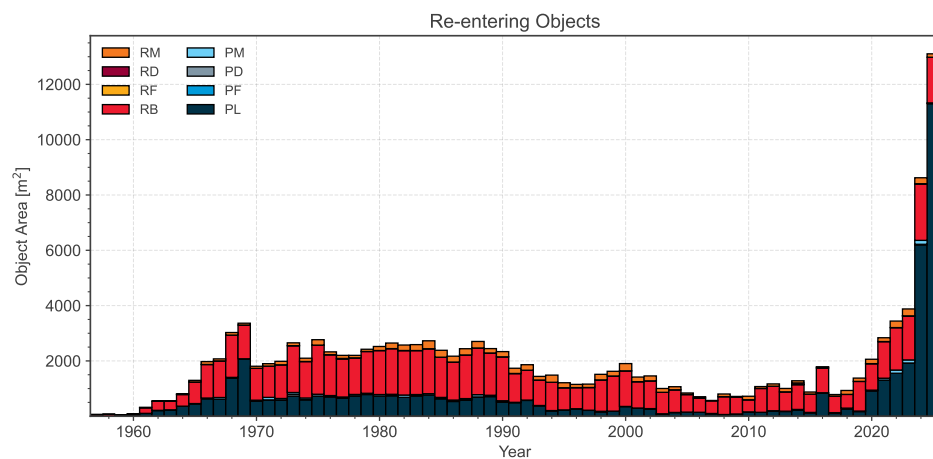
2.9. Objects Removed from the Space Environment



(a) Evolution of re-entered numbers.

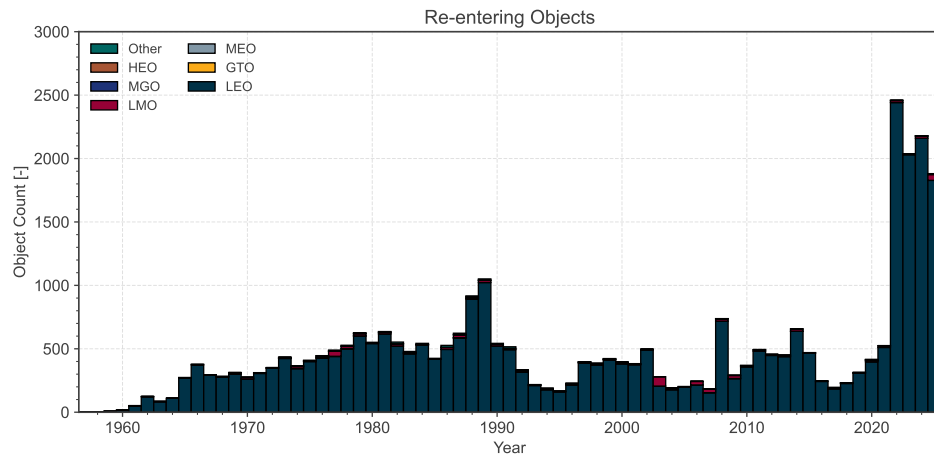


(b) Evolution of re-entered mass.

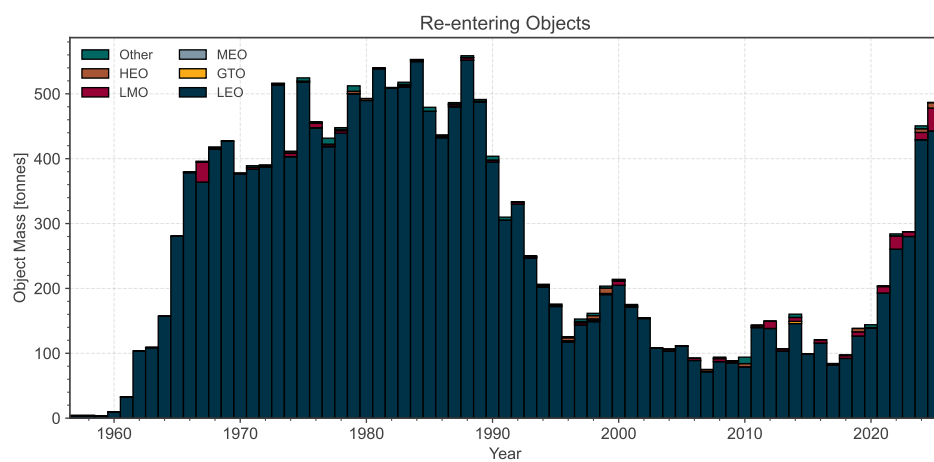


(c) Evolution of re-entered area.

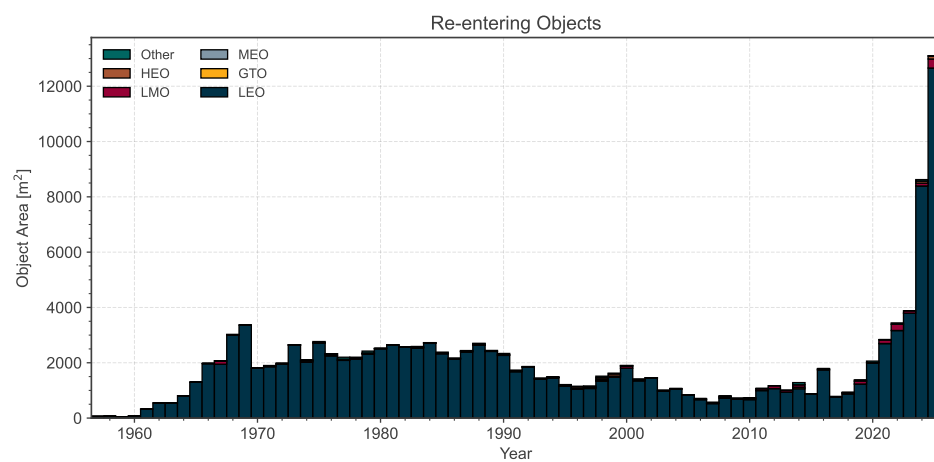
Figure 2.34: Evolution of re-entering objects in each year by object type without human spaceflight.



(a) Evolution of re-entered numbers.

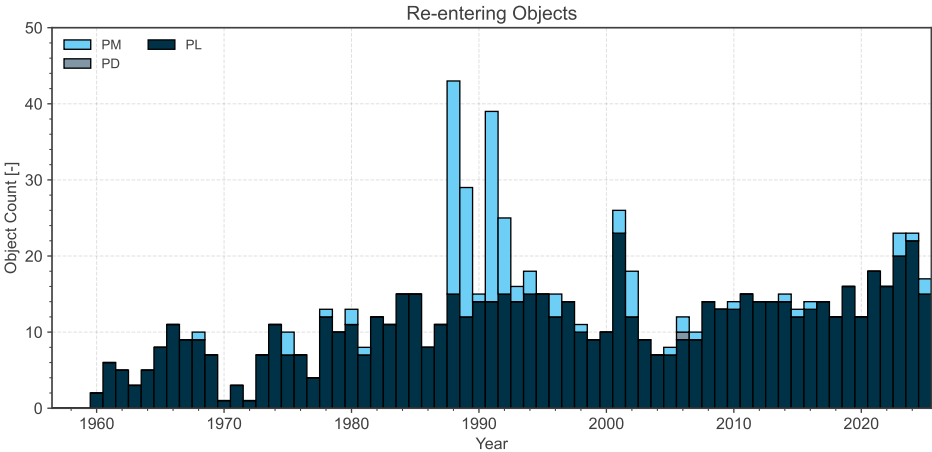


(b) Evolution of re-entered mass.

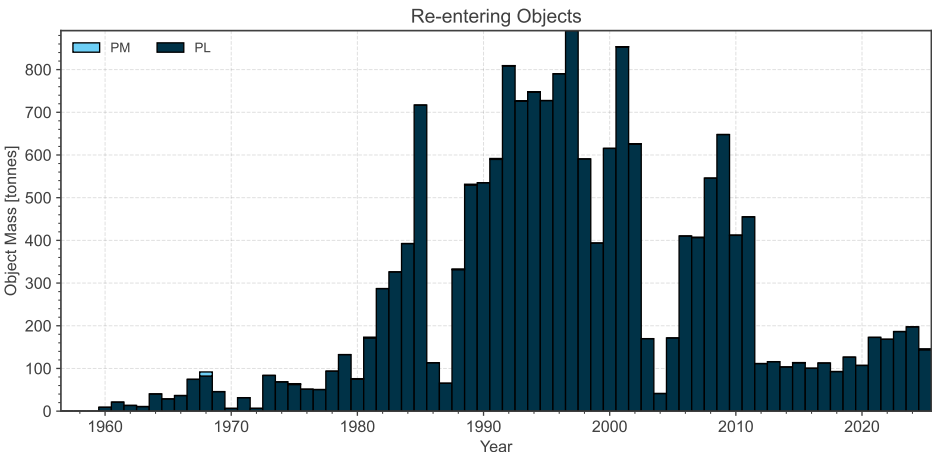


(c) Evolution of re-entered area.

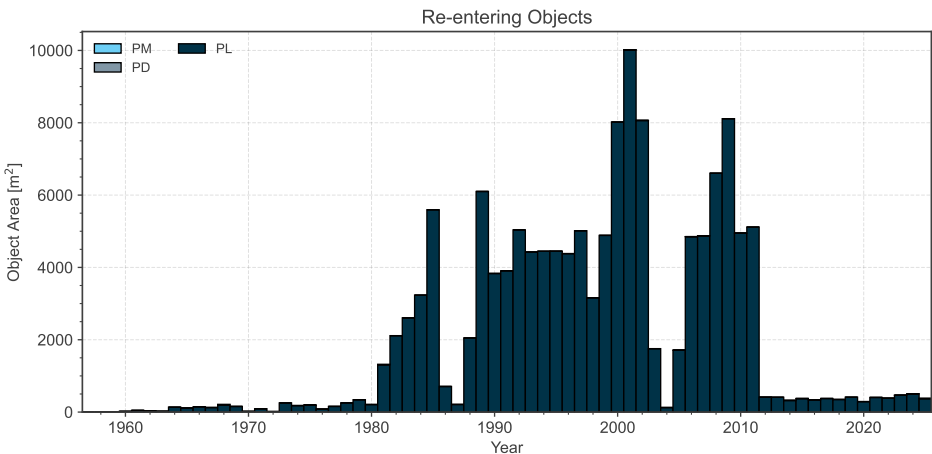
Figure 2.35: Evolution of re-entering objects in each year by orbit type without human spaceflight.



(a) Evolution of re-entered numbers.

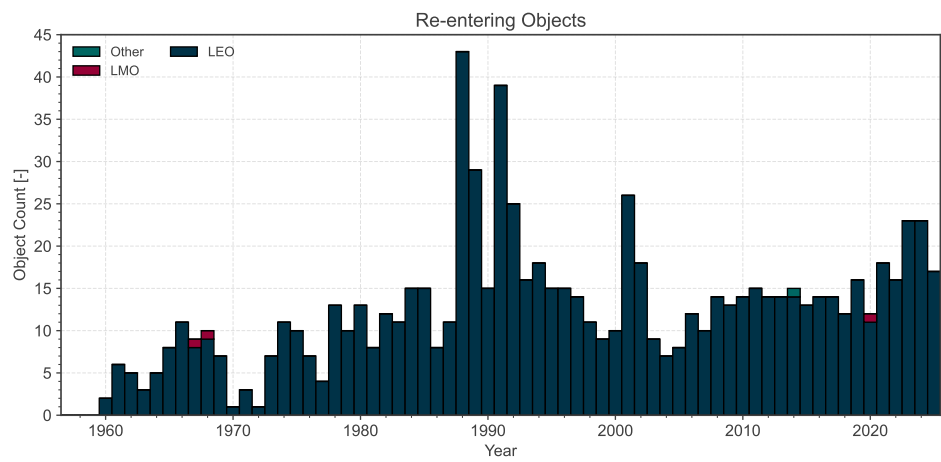


(b) Evolution of re-entered mass.

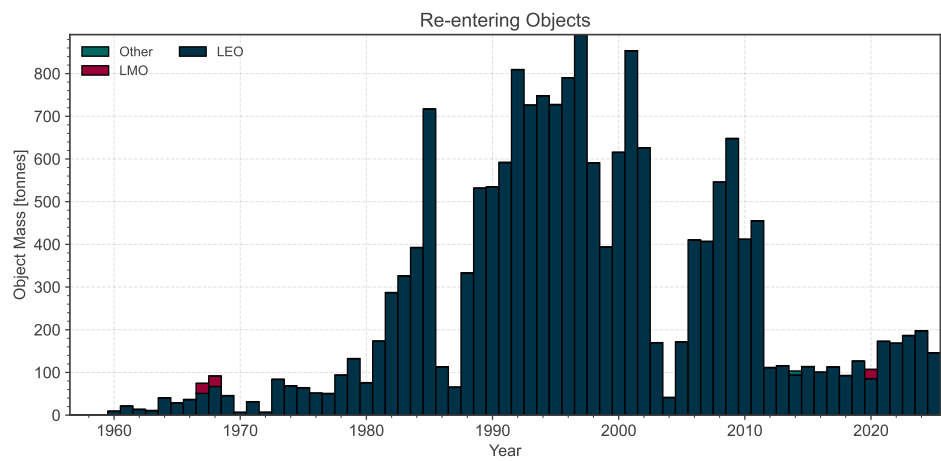


(c) Evolution of re-entered area.

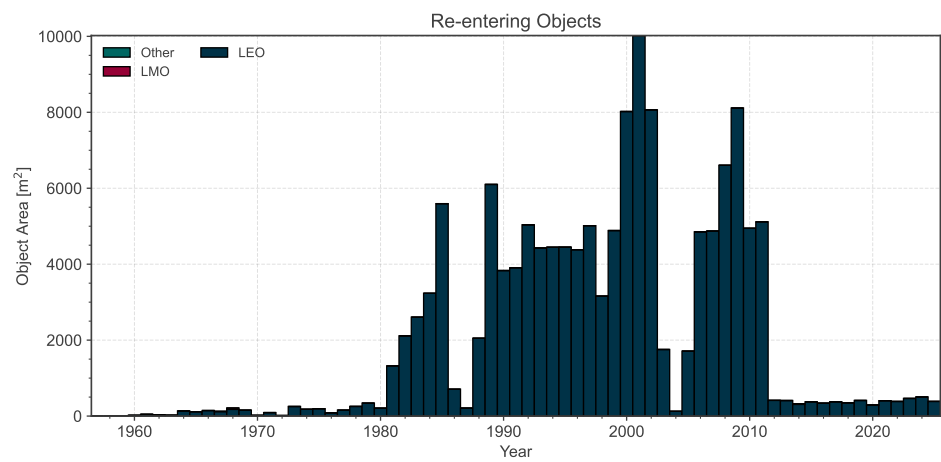
Figure 2.36: Evolution of re-entering human spaceflight objects in each year by object type.



(a) Evolution of re-entered numbers.



(b) Evolution of re-entered mass.



(c) Evolution of re-entered area.

Figure 2.37: Evolution of re-entering human spaceflight objects by orbit type.

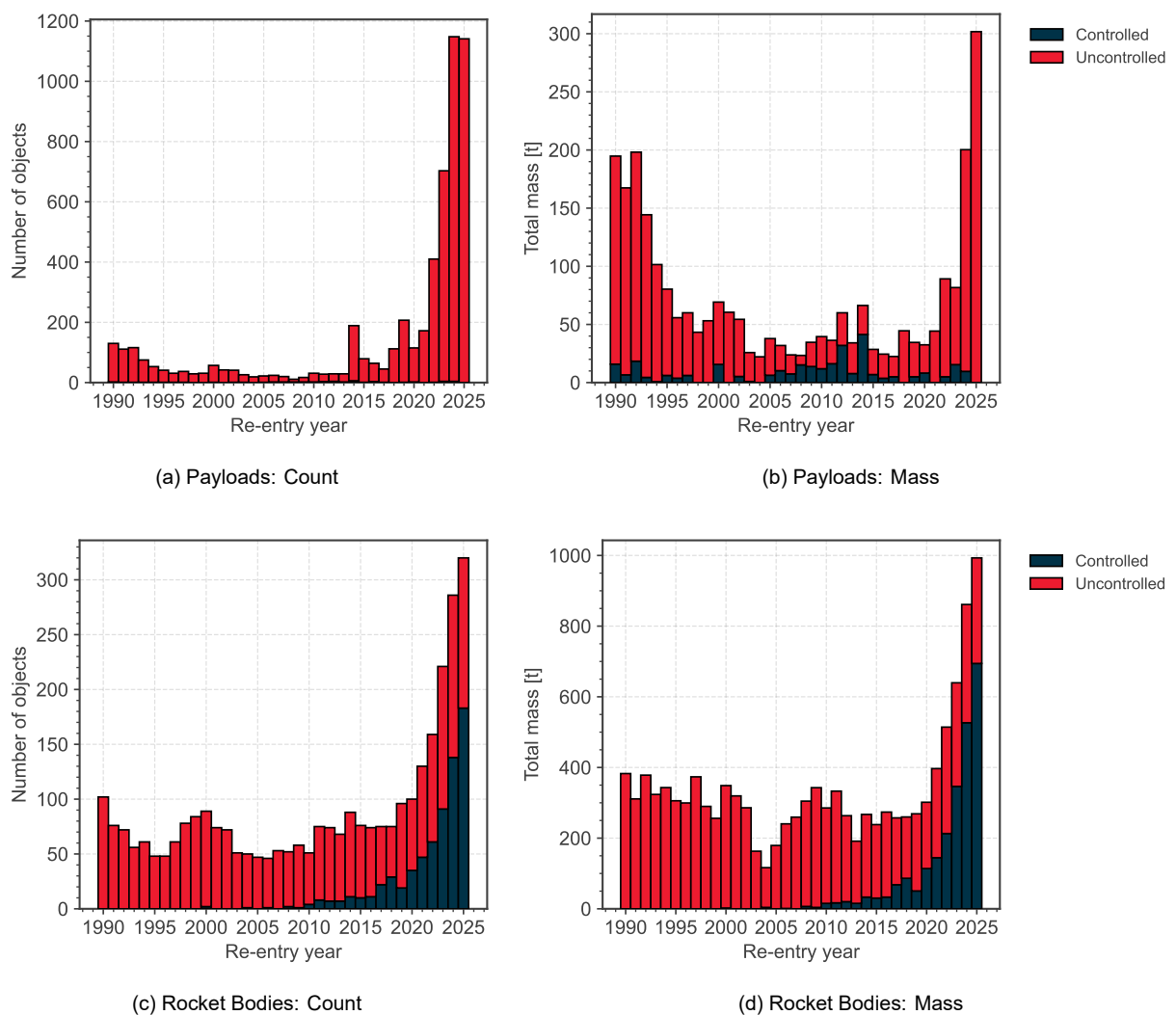


Figure 2.38: Controlled and uncontrolled re-entries for Payloads (top) and Rocket Bodies (bottom).

2.10. On-ground Casualty Risk

During atmospheric re-entry, space objects typically fragment and ablate due to intense aerothermal and mechanical loads, yet some resulting fragments can survive and impact the Earth's surface. To quantify the associated risk to humans on ground, the re-entry casualty risk can be evaluated by considering all impacting fragments with sufficient kinetic energy to cause severe injury (≥ 15 J) [17]. While this constitutes a safety concern to be mitigated against during the design phase of space missions, in which compliance with a 1-in-10,000 expected number of casualties per re-entry is a widely adopted threshold at individual space object level [3, 17, 2], the aggregated re-entry casualty risk is of interest in view of the large number of expected re-entries in future, even when space objects comply with the individual risk requirements.

The casualty risk is generally calculated for the re-entry of a given space object based on: the number and area of surviving fragments; the predicted impact location of the fragments; and the population density at the impact epoch and location.

First, the casualty area may be estimated using empirically derived relationships that correlate casualty area with re-entry mass. In this work, a simulation-informed estimate based on statistical fits to historical re-entry analyses is employed [11], which is valid for uncontrolled circular re-entries. In addition, adjustments were applied for selected constellation payloads for which re-entry safety measures have been reported, such as design-for-demise approaches or targeted re-entry strategies aimed at reducing casualty risk. As constellation payloads now account for a substantial and growing fraction of re-entries, and can therefore strongly influence the aggregate casualty risk, constellation-specific casualty area estimates were corrected to reflect the expected reduction in surviving fragments.

For uncontrolled re-entries from near-circular orbits, the fragment impact location may then be approximated using an analytical latitude-dependent probability distribution primarily constrained by orbital inclination [11], and extended to incorporate the effects of J2 oblateness [18]. This can be combined with population density data to obtain an estimate of the casualty risk, for which the latest median United Nations predictions for the population growth (Rev. 2024) were used.

Applying this methodology to the re-entering population, the evolution of the annual estimated casualty risk from uncontrolled re-entries is shown in Figure 2.39 for payloads and rocket bodies. Objects that perform controlled (direct) re-entry, are in eccentric orbits (> 0.1), or are related to human spaceflight, are excluded. Details on how the end-of-life behaviour is derived, which may be used to determine whether the re-entry was uncontrolled, are provided in Section 6.1.

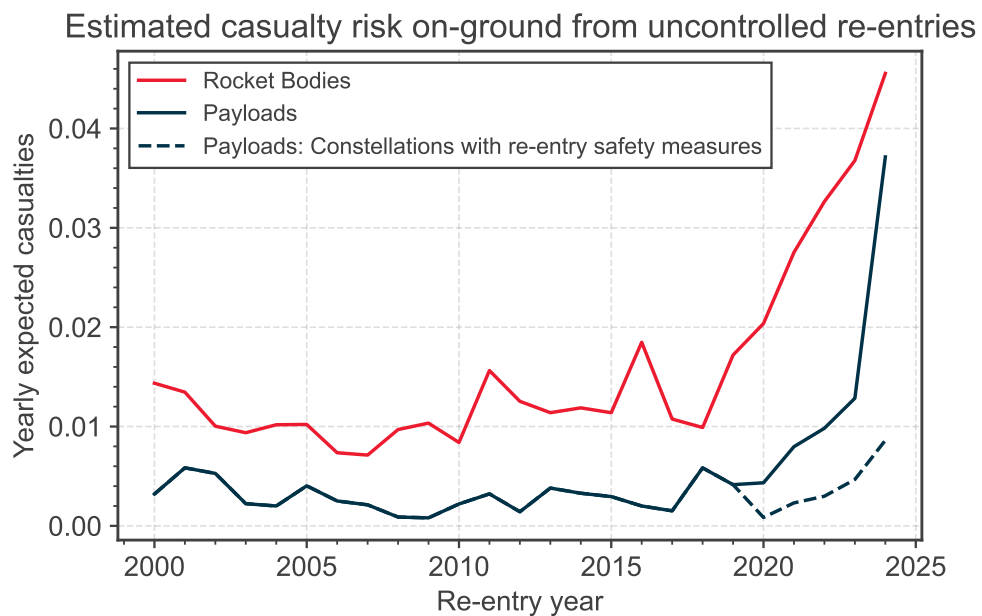


Figure 2.39: Evolution of the estimated on-ground casualty risk from uncontrolled re-entries. Contributions from payloads and rocket bodies, with an assumed correction for constellation payloads with re-entry safety measures.

2.11. Nuclear Power Sources

Nuclear power sources (NPS) have been used in outer space as an efficient way of producing larger quantities of energy or heat, commonly implemented as small fission reactors or radioisotope thermoelectric generators. Since early during the space age such power systems were used in Earth orbit but they have been largely phased out after the 1980s due to safety concerns. The notable exception is the use of NPSs for interplanetary Payloads and planetary exploration.

The safety concerns related to NPSs in Earth orbit related to risks implied when they would re-enter the atmosphere and break-up. To mitigate this risk, the reactor cores were generally injected into orbits with long orbital lifetimes after the end of operations of the Payload. There are 88 objects related to NPSs known to have entered Earth orbit, out of which 9 are asserted but not catalogued. A total of 20 out of those 88 have re-entered, and the orbital distribution on the remainder is presented in Figure 2.40.

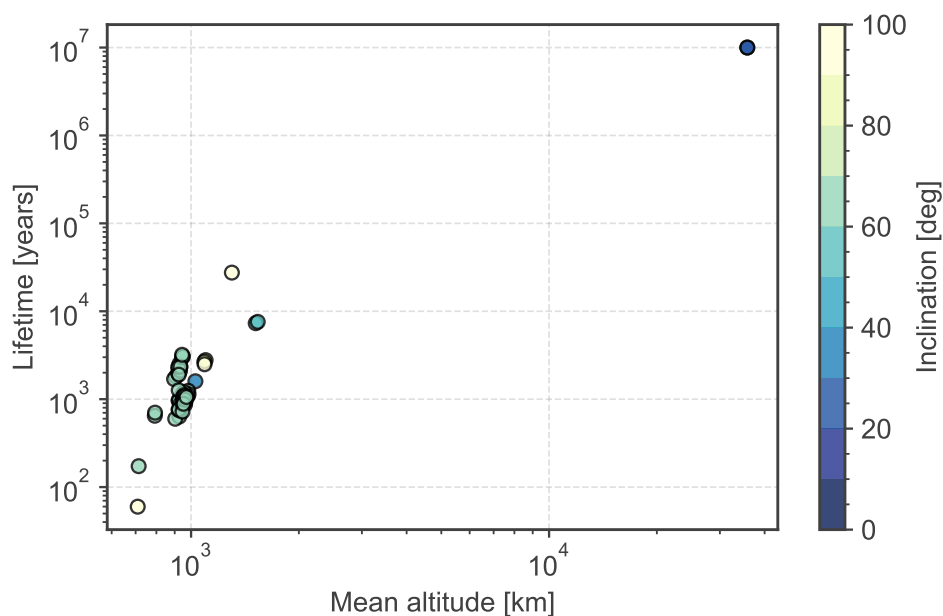


Figure 2.40: Distribution of space objects with nuclear power sources with mean altitude, orbital lifetime, and inclination.

2.12. Registration of Objects Launched in Outer Space

The United Nations Register of Objects Launched into Outer Space [19] and its implementation was established as consequence of the Convention on Registration of Objects Launched into Outer Space [20]. State parties to the treaty are required to establish their own national registries and provide information on their space objects, which in turn creates transparency on space operations. The increasing amount of launching states of time serves as a reminder for the need to coordinate space debris mitigation measures across all those actors, as one failure to do so will affect many others. Notwithstanding the increase in actors, positive trends are the retro-active registration of objects and the reducing time between launch and registration.

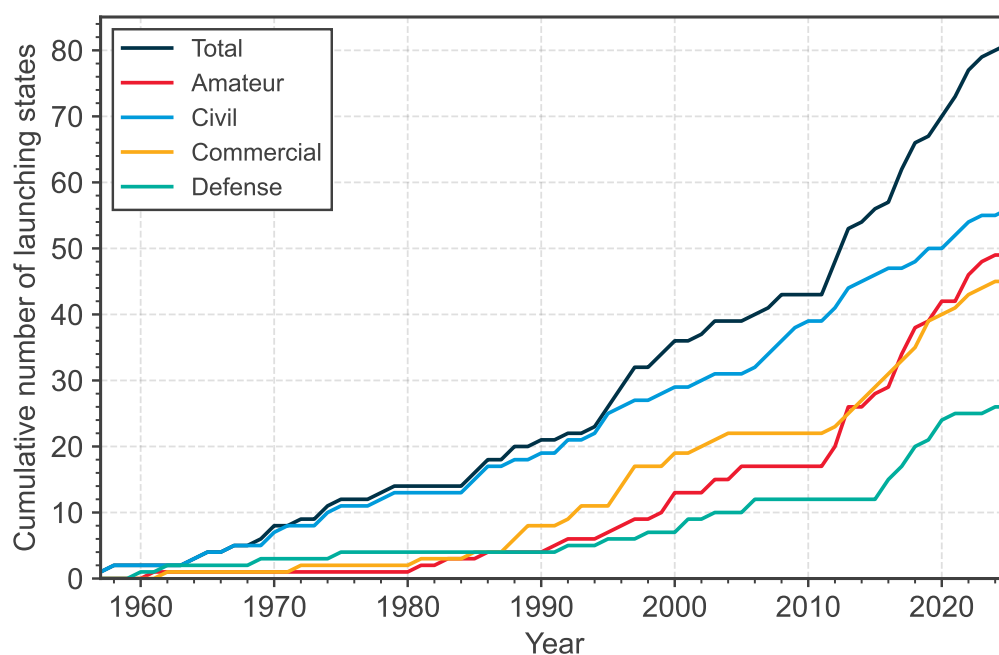


Figure 2.41: Launching states with at least one registered space object over time by category.

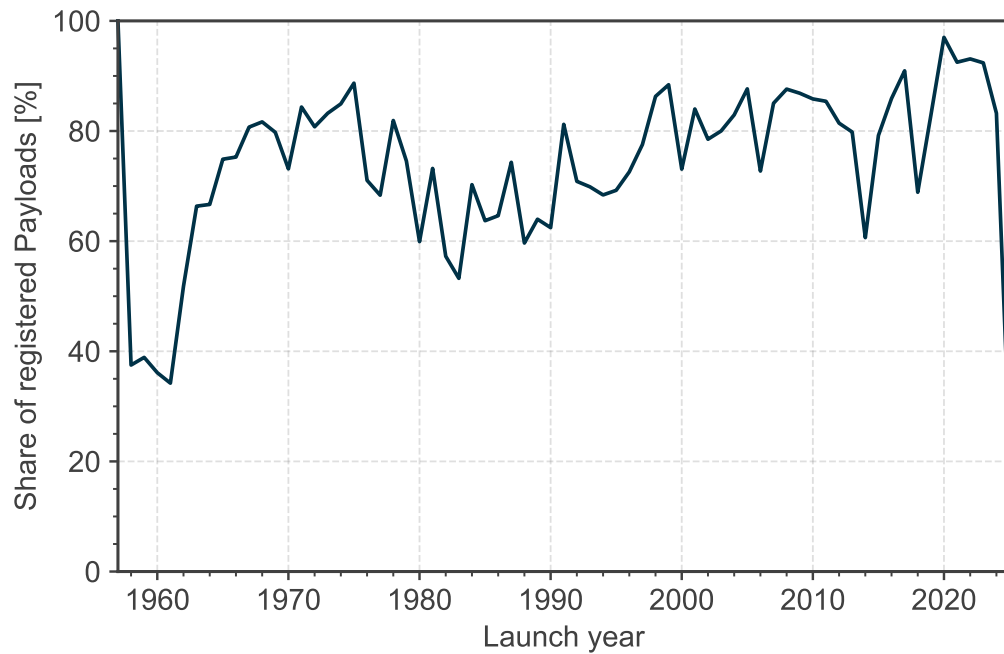


Figure 2.42: Share of registered payloads over the total of launched payloads by launch year.

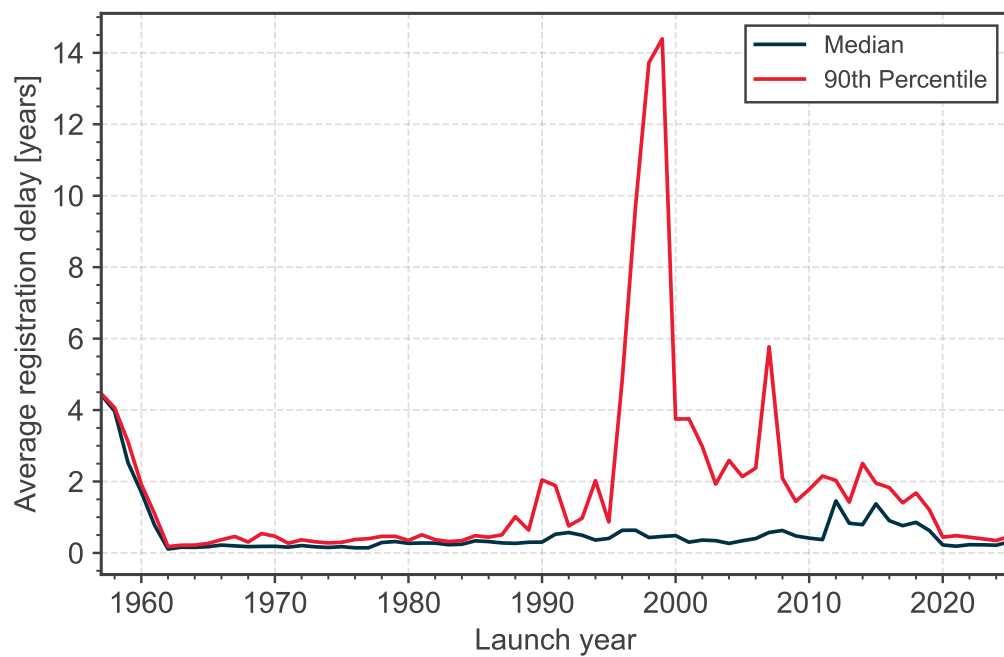


Figure 2.43: Delay between launch and registration by launch year.

3. ENVIRONMENTAL STATUS 2025

In this section, the status of the environment as of end of 2025 is listed and illustrated.

Table 3.1: Number of objects orbiting Earth. Other: IGO, GHO, HAO, UFO, ESO.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
LEO	14906	4714	112	209	957	3584	28	505	45	25060
GEO	799	26	3	8	68	0	0	0	57	961
EGO	571	836	19	53	201	94	3	5	3576	5358
GTO	52	28	1	10	226	199	9	47	740	1312
NSO	296	0	0	1	102	0	0	2	53	454
MEO	80	1	5	53	29	211	1	3	920	1303
LMO	82	133	3	48	260	603	23	210	990	2352
MGO	74	67	1	3	176	2674	5	0	2555	5555
HEO	39	157	0	4	57	133	0	0	1960	2350
Other	47	13	0	4	4	0	0	0	191	259
Total	16946	5975	144	393	2080	7498	69	772	11087	44964

Table 3.2: Absolute and equivalent number of objects intersecting with the protected regions.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
both (abs)	23	62	1	1	83	111	1	16	497	795
LEO_{IADC} (abs)	15056	4927	116	268	1481	4443	60	762	2062	29175
LEO_{IADC} (eqv)	14935	4800	114	222	1009	3727	34	541	180	25562
GEO_{IADC} (abs)	989	996	23	53	321	916	1	17	6351	9667
GEO_{IADC} (eqv)	849	179	9	18	105	41	0	1	458	1661
none (abs)	924	114	6	73	361	2250	9	9	3171	6917

Table 3.3: Mass in tonnes orbiting Earth. Objects of unknown mass do not contribute to the figures presented. Other: IGO, GHO, HAO, UFO, ESO.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
LEO	7215.7	3.0	0.0	2.7	1523.2	0.0	0.0	5.3	0.0	8749.9
GEO	2705.9	0.0	0.0	1.0	139.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2846.8
EGO	1064.8	0.0	0.0	6.6	390.5	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0	1462.3
GTO	103.1	0.0	0.0	1.0	503.9	0.0	0.0	21.0	0.0	629.0
NSO	387.1	0.0	0.0	0.4	232.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	620.0
MEO	105.6	0.0	0.0	0.4	52.9	0.0	0.0	4.2	0.0	163.0
LMO	77.2	0.0	0.0	10.9	542.5	0.0	0.0	87.6	0.0	718.2
MGO	103.6	0.0	0.0	1.9	292.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	398.3
HEO	65.8	0.0	0.0	0.1	147.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	213.2
Other	69.7	0.0	0.0	0.1	12.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	82.3
Total	11898.5	3.0	0.0	25.0	3838.0	0.0	0.0	118.5	0.0	15883.0

Table 3.4: Absolute and equivalent mass in tonnes intersecting with the protected regions.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
both (abs)	40.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	184.2	0.0	0.0	6.3	0.0	230.6
LEO_{IADC} (abs)	7412.6	3.0	0.0	14.6	2677.4	0.0	0.0	114.0	0.0	10221.6
LEO_{IADC} (eqv)	7242.5	3.0	0.0	5.2	1605.5	0.0	0.0	16.6	0.0	8872.8
GEO_{IADC} (abs)	3078.9	0.0	0.0	6.4	632.5	0.0	0.0	6.4	0.0	3724.2
GEO_{IADC} (eqv)	2820.4	0.0	0.0	2.2	209.1	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0	3032.1
none (abs)	1447.0	0.0	0.0	4.0	712.4	0.0	0.0	4.4	0.0	2167.8

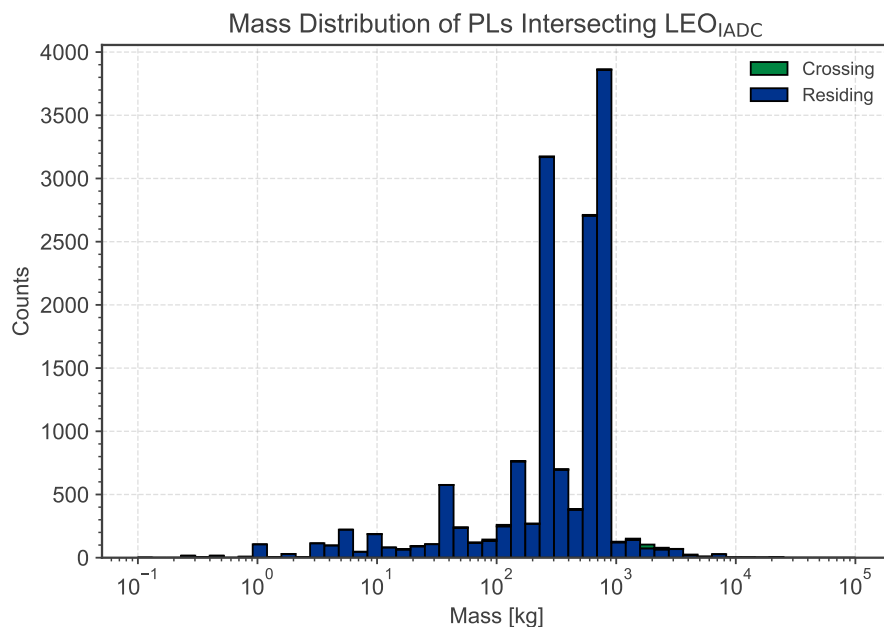
Table 3.5: Area in m^2 orbiting Earth. Objects of unknown area do not contribute to the figures presented. Other: IGO, GHO, HAO, UFO, ESO.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
LEO	275254.2	23.0	0.0	32.6	11305.4	1.3	0.0	206.8	0.0	286823.3
GEO	26155.6	0.0	23.6	8.3	1518.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	27705.6
EGO	13183.4	0.0	0.6	45.1	4472.9	0.0	0.0	9.7	0.0	17711.7
GTO	820.4	0.0	0.0	8.8	5256.2	0.0	0.0	572.9	0.0	6658.3
NSO	3234.1	0.0	0.0	0.8	2027.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5262.3
MEO	1304.2	0.0	0.0	11.2	550.9	0.0	0.0	21.4	0.0	1887.7
LMO	715.3	0.0	0.0	34.9	5675.3	0.6	0.0	1529.1	0.0	7955.1
MGO	994.9	0.0	0.0	14.7	3186.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4196.4
HEO	781.2	0.0	0.0	0.4	1454.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2236.3
Other	525.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	79.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	604.9
Total	322968.4	23.0	24.2	157.2	35527.2	1.9	0.0	2339.8	0.0	361041.7

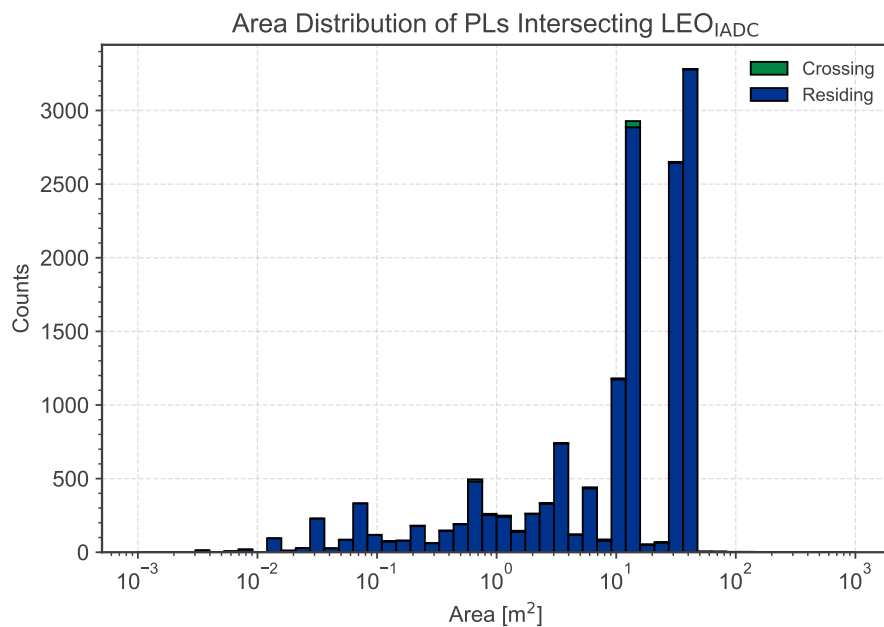
Table 3.6: Absolute and equivalent area in m^2 intersecting with the protected regions.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
both (abs)	245.7	0.0	0.0	0.1	2104.7	0.0	0.0	223.0	0.0	2573.5
LEO_{IADC} (abs)	277012.0	23.0	0.0	76.4	23367.6	1.9	0.0	2308.7	0.0	302789.6
LEO_{IADC} (eqv)	275453.4	23.0	0.0	41.8	12199.9	1.4	0.0	427.1	0.0	288146.5
GEO_{IADC} (abs)	29792.0	0.0	23.6	51.5	6843.9	0.0	0.0	223.7	0.0	36934.7
GEO_{IADC} (eqv)	27253.0	0.0	23.6	18.3	2283.3	0.0	0.0	15.6	0.0	29593.8
none (abs)	16410.2	0.0	0.6	29.4	7420.3	0.0	0.0	30.4	0.0	23890.9

3.1. Status of the Environment in LEO

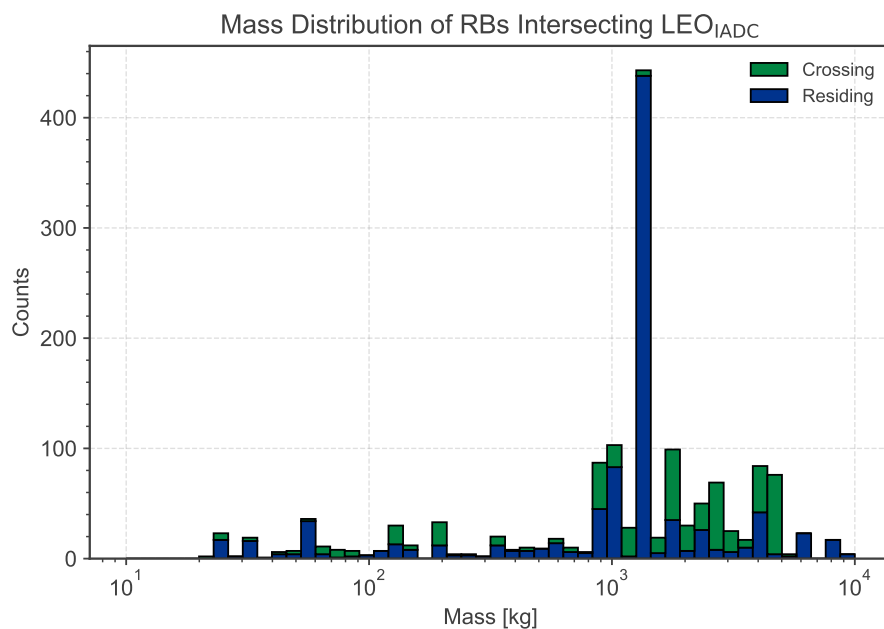


(a) Mass histogram of payloads in LEO.

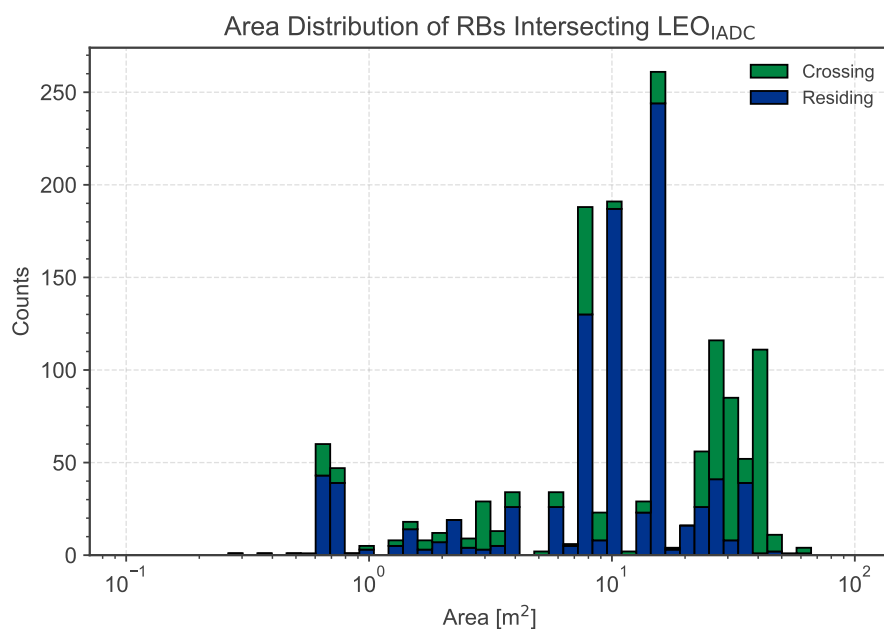


(b) Area histogram of payloads in LEO.

Figure 3.1: Distribution of mass and area of payloads in LEO.



(a) Mass histogram of rocket bodies in LEO.



(b) Area histogram of rocket bodies in LEO.

Figure 3.2: Distribution of mass and area of rocket bodies in LEO.

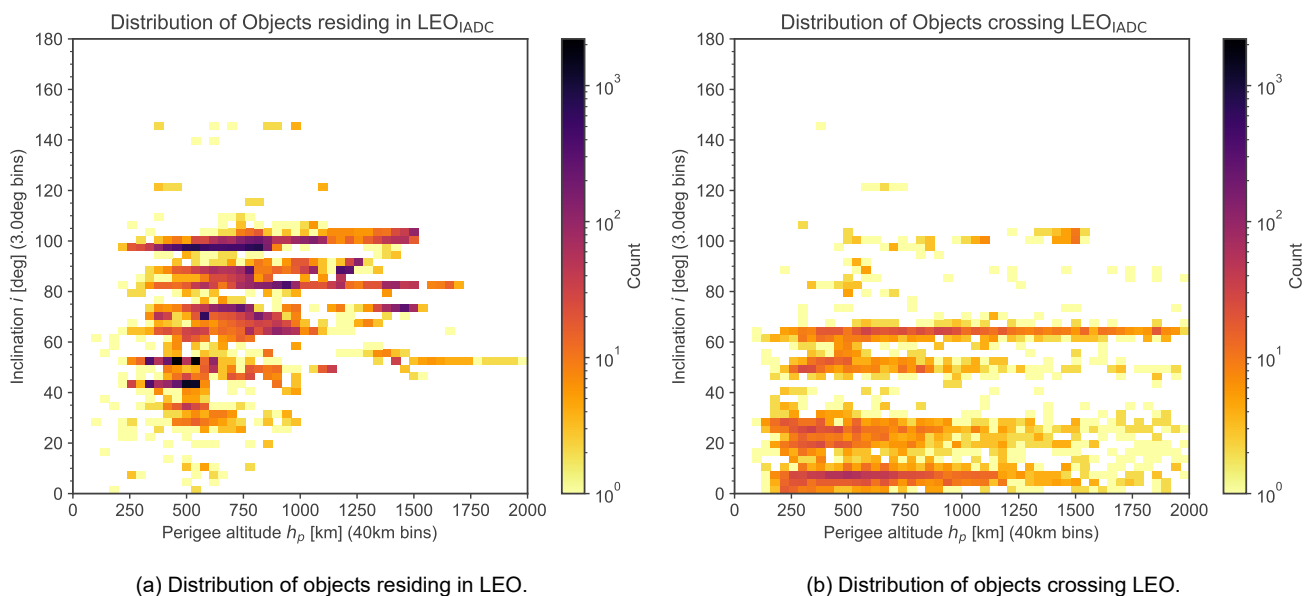


Figure 3.3: Distribution of number of objects in LEO as a function of inclination and perigee altitude.

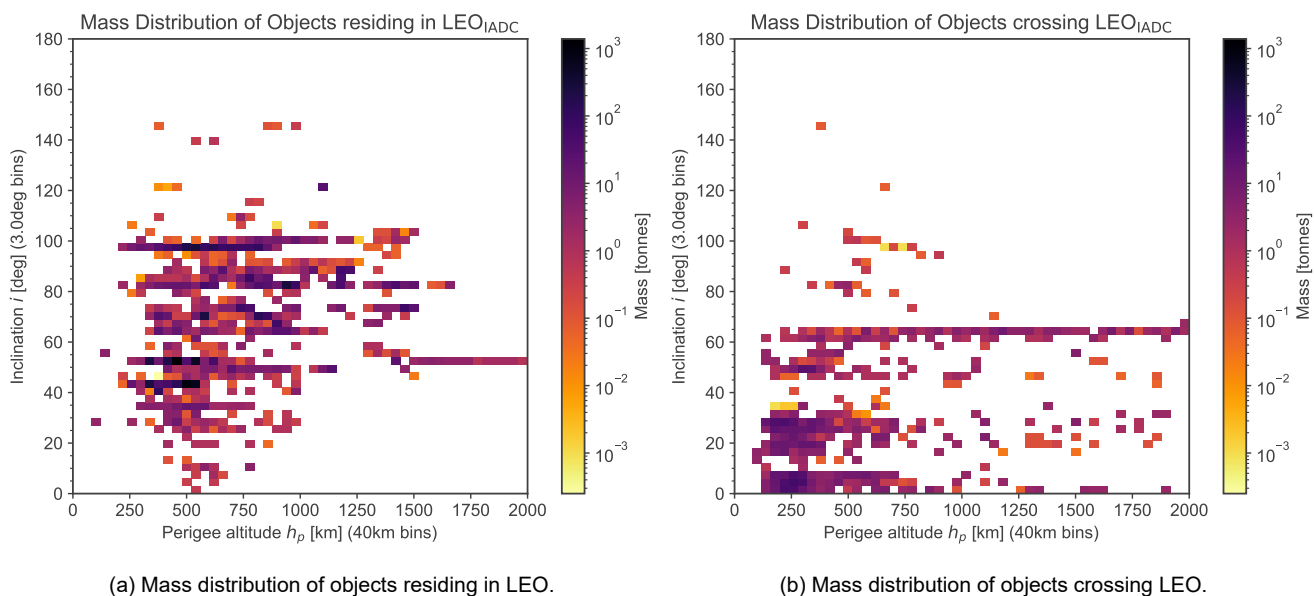


Figure 3.4: Distribution of mass in LEO as a function of inclination and perigee altitude.

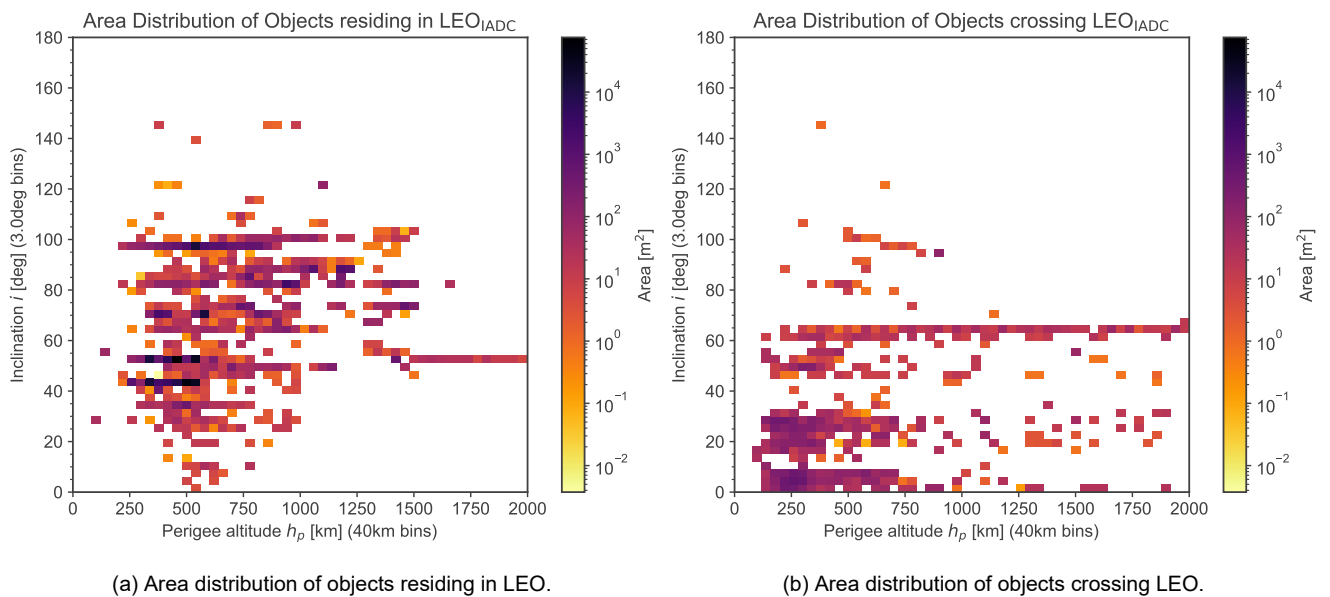


Figure 3.5: Distribution of area in LEO as a function of inclination and perigee altitude.

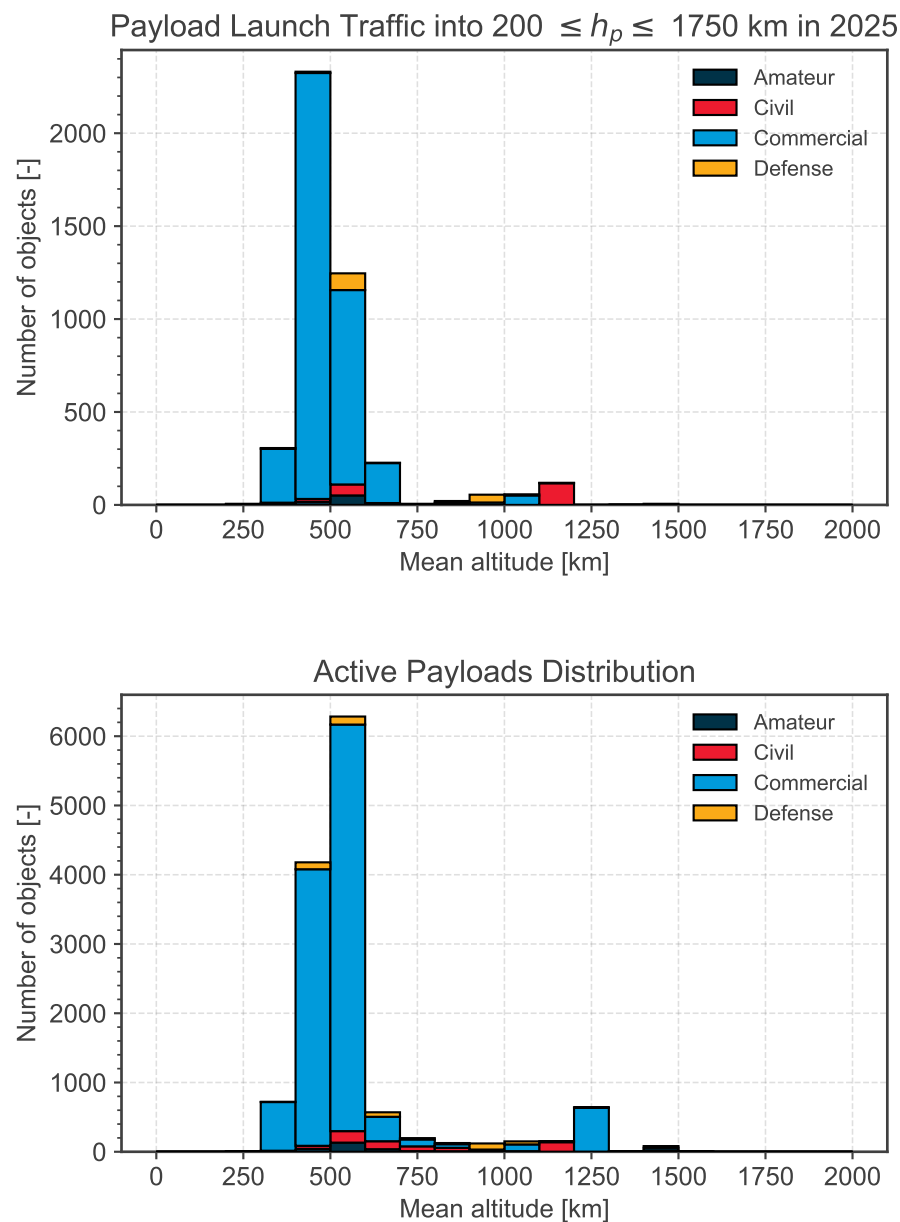


Figure 3.6: Launch traffic in 2025 (top) and distribution of active payloads (bottom) in LEO_{IADC} by mean altitude.

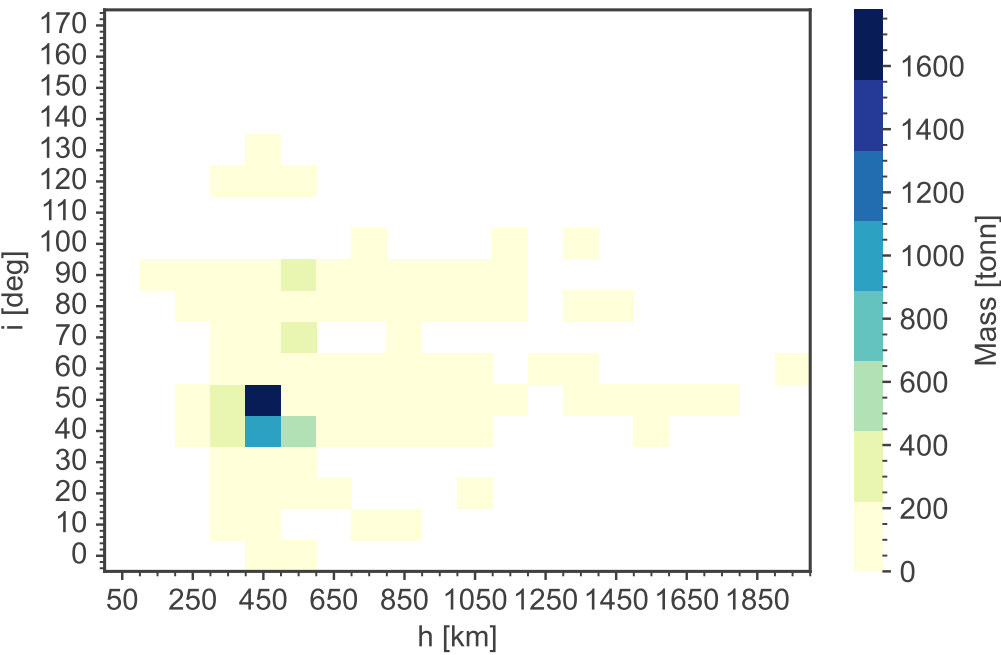
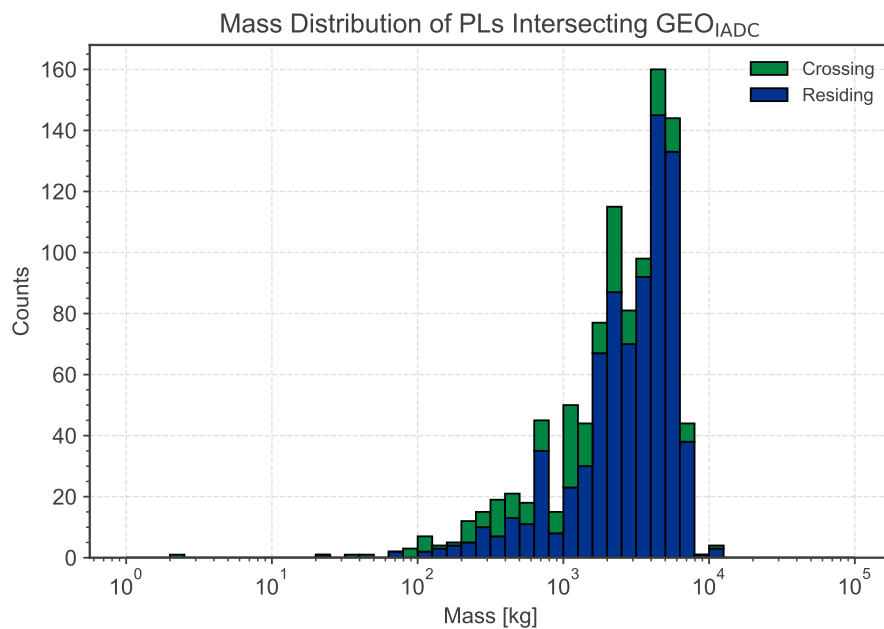
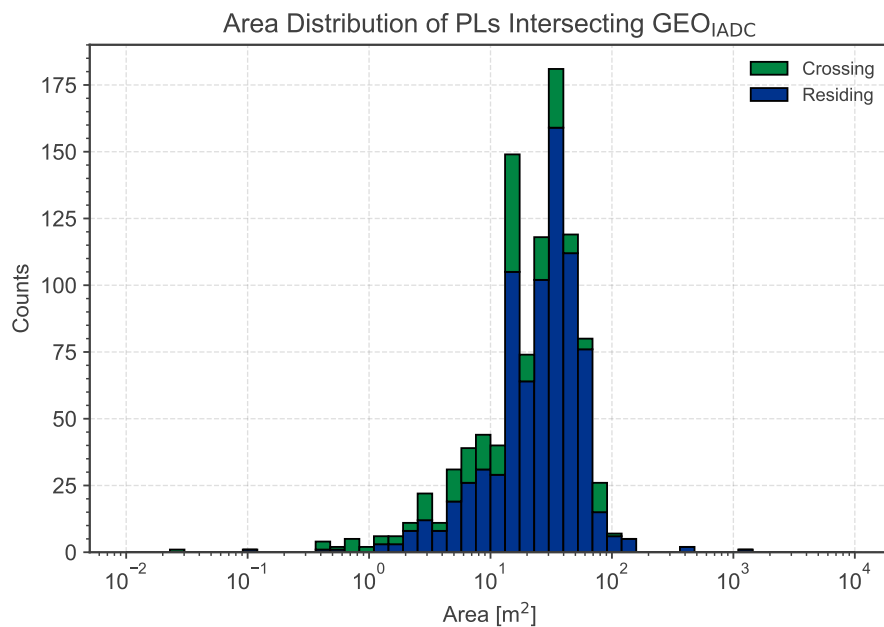


Figure 3.7: Distribution of active payloads in LEO by mean altitude and inclination.

3.2. Status of the Environment in GEO

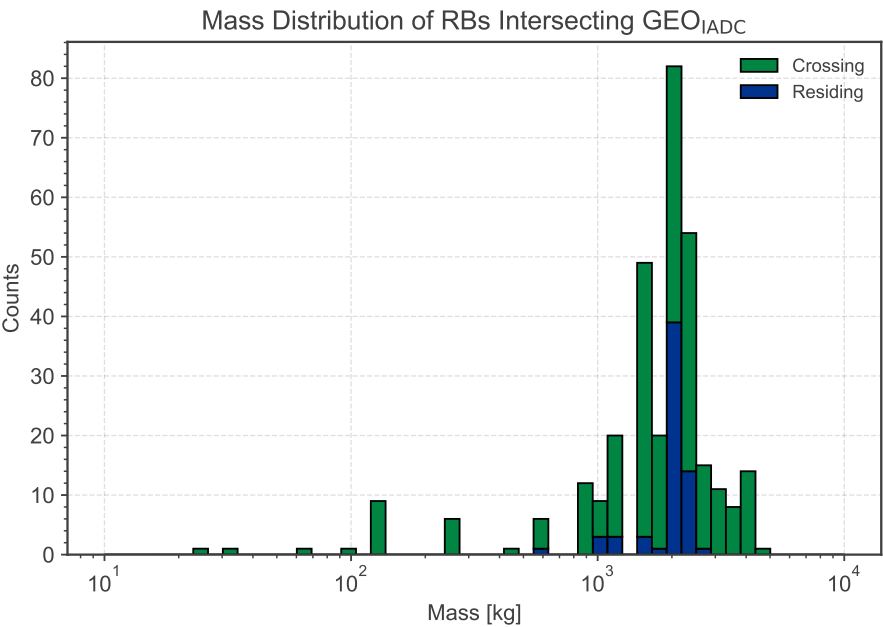


(a) Mass histogram of payloads in GEO.

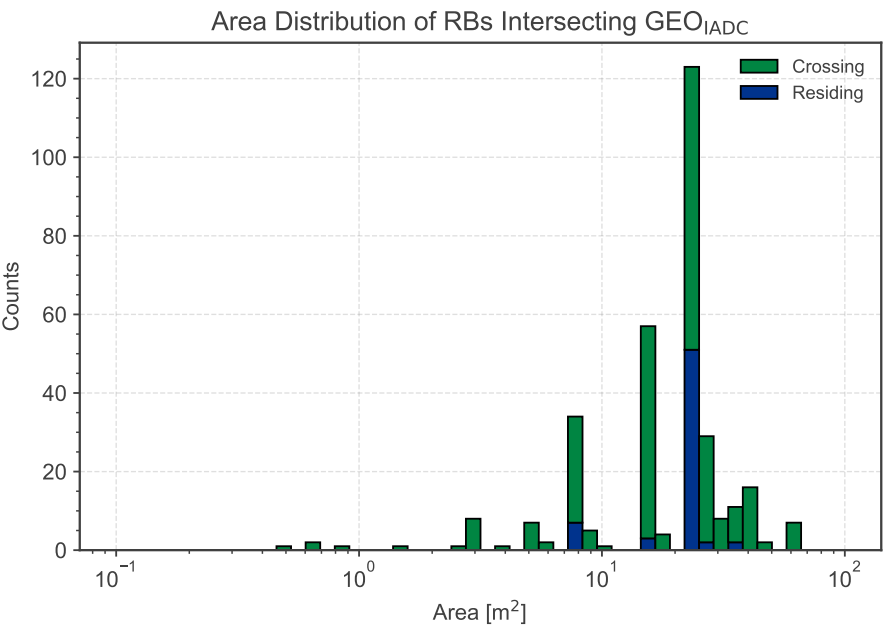


(b) Area histogram of payloads in GEO.

Figure 3.8: Distribution of mass and area of payloads in GEO.



(a) Mass histogram of rocket bodies in GEO.



(b) Area histogram of rocket bodies in GEO.

Figure 3.9: Distribution of mass and area of rocket bodies in GEO.

3.3. Fragmentations in 2025

In Table 3.7 all established fragmentation events of the year 2025 are shown. For a description of the event categories, please consult Section 5. In case no credible source is available on the amount of Asserted Objects associated with a fragmentation event, it is indicated with None. Those Asserted Object are reported by space surveillance networks which can have variable detection limits. A more in-depth overview of the consequences of those events can be accessed online [\[21\]](#).

Table 3.7: Fragmentation events in 2025.

Event epoch	Object type	Mass [kg]	Catalogued objects	Asserted objects	Orbit	Event cause
2025-01-17	Payload	3980	0	67	MEO	Propulsion
2025-06-01	Rocket Body	2020	2	2	EGO	Unknown
2025-12-18	Payload	530	0	10	LEO	Propulsion
Total		6530	0			

3.4. Changes to the Environment in 2025

In this section, the change to the environment during 2025 is listed. The last state of the year is used to classify the object orbit. If no state is available, a destination orbit defined by an analyst is used instead.

Table 3.8: Number of newly added objects orbiting Earth. Other: IGO, GHO, HAO, UFO, ESO.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
LEO	4353	66	3	4	286	42	2	15	1	4772
GEO	24	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	23	49
EGO	3	71	18	4	1	1	0	0	1336	1434
GTO	3	1	0	0	10	0	0	0	79	93
NSO	5	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	6	14
MEO	6	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	294	304
LMO	1	0	0	0	13	0	0	1	120	135
MGO	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1056	1059
HEO	12	9	0	0	8	0	0	1	555	585
Other	1	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	39	43
N/A	7	0	1	1	2	0	2	0	0	13
Total	4409	152	21	8	327	43	2	17	3509	8488

Table 3.9: Absolute and equivalent number of newly added objects intersecting with the protected regions.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
both (abs)	8	6	0	0	4	0	0	0	134	152
LEO_{IADC} (abs)	4364	72	3	4	315	42	2	17	304	5123
LEO_{IADC} (eqv)	4354	66	3	4	289	42	2	15	15	4791
GEO_{IADC} (abs)	40	81	18	1	5	1	0	0	2254	2400
GEO_{IADC} (eqv)	25	13	6	1	0	0	0	0	198	244
none (abs)	13	5	0	3	11	0	0	0	1085	1117

Table 3.10: Newly added mass in tonnes orbiting Earth. Other: IGO, GHO, HAO, UFO, ESO.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
LEO	2448.6	0.0	0.0	4.7	916.1	0.0	0.0	1.2	0.0	3370.6
GEO	106.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	106.3
EGO	13.3	0.0	0.0	1.6	5.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	20.7
GTO	13.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	29.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	43.2
NSO	7.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	12.8
MEO	23.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	14.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	38.7
LMO	6.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	41.3	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	48.6
MGO	4.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.0
HEO	25.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	31.6	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	57.3
Other	1.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.4
N/A	20.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	22.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	42.4
Total	2650.5	0.0	0.0	6.2	1053.6	0.0	0.0	2.2	0.0	3712.6

Table 3.11: Absolute and equivalent newly added mass in tonnes intersecting with the protected regions.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
both (abs)	26.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	42.6
LEO_{IADC} (abs)	2483.8	0.0	0.0	4.7	1011.9	0.0	0.0	2.2	0.0	3502.6
LEO_{IADC} (eqv)	2452.5	0.0	0.0	4.7	927.1	0.0	0.0	1.2	0.0	3385.5
GEO_{IADC} (abs)	157.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	18.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	175.8
GEO_{IADC} (eqv)	111.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	111.8
none (abs)	36.1	0.0	0.0	1.5	39.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	76.9

Table 3.12: Newly added area in m^2 orbiting Earth. Other: IGO, GHO, HAO, UFO, ESO.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
LEO	121432.6	0.0	0.0	32.5	7916.7	0.0	0.0	8.0	0.0	129389.8
GEO	950.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	950.7
EGO	98.2	0.0	0.0	4.5	61.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	163.8
GTO	63.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	353.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	417.2
NSO	39.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	79.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	118.3
MEO	186.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	152.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	338.3
LMO	14.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	455.8	0.0	0.0	8.2	0.0	478.6
MGO	63.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	63.8
HEO	200.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	301.8	0.0	0.0	5.9	0.0	507.7
Other	9.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	45.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	55.4
N/A	50.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	175.7	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	225.9
Total	123058.4	0.0	0.0	37.0	9366.1	0.0	0.0	22.1	0.0	132483.7

Table 3.13: Absolute and equivalent newly added area in m^2 intersecting with the protected regions.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
both (abs)	140.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	166.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	306.9
LEO_{IADC} (abs)	121609.7	0.0	0.0	32.5	8972.8	0.0	0.0	22.1	0.0	130637.1
LEO_{IADC} (eqv)	121444.2	0.0	0.0	32.5	8039.0	0.0	0.0	8.5	0.0	129524.2
GEO_{IADC} (abs)	1292.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	181.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1474.0
GEO_{IADC} (eqv)	985.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	986.8
none (abs)	296.8	0.0	0.0	4.5	378.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	679.5

Table 3.14: Number of re-entered objects. Other: IGO, GHO, HAO, UFO, ESO.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
LEO	1112	355	4	13	98	212	6	28	0	1828
LMO	3	4	0	1	8	27	2	1	0	46
HEO	1	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	4
Other	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3
N/A	1	0	1	0	186	1	1	0	0	190
Total	1117	361	4	14	108	240	8	29	0	1881

Table 3.15: Re-entered mass in tonnes. Other: IGO, GHO, HAO, UFO, ESO.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
LEO	279.6	0.0	0.0	3.9	156.6	0.0	0.0	2.7	0.0	442.8
LMO	11.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	23.4	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0	35.1
HEO	1.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	8.5
Other	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3
N/A	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	714.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	714.9
Total	292.3	0.0	0.0	3.9	187.3	0.0	0.0	3.2	0.0	486.7

Table 3.16: Re-entered area in m^2 . Other: IGO, GHO, HAO, UFO, ESO.

	PL	PF	PD	PM	RB	RF	RD	RM	UI	Total
LEO	11228.5	0.0	0.0	22.8	1309.4	0.0	0.0	96.1	0.0	12656.8
LMO	33.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	266.8	0.0	0.0	27.4	0.0	327.2
HEO	31.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	75.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	106.7
Other	13.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	13.6
N/A	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	6704.6	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	6705.2
Total	11306.6	0.0	0.0	22.8	1651.4	0.0	0.0	123.5	0.0	13104.3

3.5. Conjunction statistics in LEO in 2025

This section aims to provide an assessment of the short-term risk related to space debris, quantified in terms of the number of conjunctions expected in different orbital regions, distinguishing also the type of secondary object involved in the conjunction. For the purpose of this report, a *conjunction* is understood as a geometric close approach between two objects, irrespective of their activity status, triggering an operator analysis but not necessarily an avoidance manoeuvre nor implying a collision.

The first step of the analysis is to define some representative *target* (or primary) objects in the conjunctions. The physical characteristics of the objects are derived from the average parameters of active payloads in LEO_{IADC}, reported in Fig. 2.31. In particular, a mass value of 355 kg and a cross-sectional area of 6 m² were used for the analysis based on the averages for 2020 and applied also to 2025 considering the consistent trend in the properties shown in Fig. 2.31, especially when considering non-constellation payloads. For what concerns the orbital parameters of the targets, two approaches are used here. The first set of representative targets is defined by looking at the distribution of active payloads in LEO_{IADC} in semi-major axis and inclination as shown in Fig. 3.7, and a total of seven targets were defined for this analysis. The second approach is to define a set of targets in the Sun-Synchronous region; in particular, seven targets are defined to cover the region between 400 and 1000 km in altitude. In both cases, twelve values of the initial longitude of ascending nodes are considered and the results presented in the following are the mean across the simulated cases for each target.

In both cases, the trajectory of the targets is propagated for one year (from 1st January 2025 to 31st December 2025) and for each day of the year an analysis is run to detect potential conjunctions with catalogued objects, by using ESA CRASS (Collision Risk ASsessment Software) [22]. For the analysis shown here, General Perturbations (GP) data is retrieved to define the orbits of the secondary objects involved in the conjunctions [23]. The data in DISCOS is used to further characterise the secondary object, for example in terms of its size and its category. In addition to the object categories defined in Section 1.1, the following subcategories are introduced:

- *Payloads* is further distinguished in:
 - *Constellation objects*, payloads belonging to a constellation,
 - *Small satellites*, payloads with a mass smaller than 15 kg,
 - *Other Payloads*, all the other payloads.
 - Each payload category is divided into *active* and *inactive* objects. Objects are considered to be active if a communication link exists and data is collected, implying that space traffic coordination may be achieved even if the active object is not manoeuvrable.
- *Payload fragmentation debris*, four subcategories were defined to collect objects belonging to the fragmentation events with the highest number of catalogued objects.
 - *Fengyun 1C Fragmentation Debris*, objects generated by the fragmentation of [Fengyun 1C](#) (1999-25A), with mass 958.0 kg, on the 11/01/2007 at an altitude between 843.3 and 863.3 km and inclination of 98.6 degrees.
 - *Cosmos-2251 Fragmentation Debris*, objects generated by the fragmentation of [Cosmos-2251](#) (1993-36A), with mass 892.0 kg, on the 10/02/2009 at an altitude between 776.1 and 791.1 km and inclination of 86.4 degrees.
 - *Iridium 33 Fragmentation Debris*, objects generated by the fragmentation of [Iridium 33](#) (1997-51C), with mass 661.0 kg, on the 10/02/2009 at an altitude between 776.2 and 779.4 km and inclination of 86.4 degrees.

- *Cosmos-1408 Fragmentation Debris*, objects generated by the fragmentation of [Cosmos-1408](#) (1982-92A), with mass 2180.4 kg, on the 15/11/2021 at an altitude between 465.0 and 490.5 km and inclination of 82.6 degrees.
- *Other Payload fragmentation debris*, all the other payload fragmentation debris.
- *Rocket fragmentation debris*, four subcategories were defined to collect objects belonging to the fragmentation events with the highest number of catalogued objects.
 - *Centaur-5 SEC Fragmentation Debris*, objects generated by the fragmentation of [Centaur-5 SEC](#) (2018-79B), with mass 2020.0 kg, on the 06/04/2019 at an altitude between 8526.3 and 35092.8 km and inclination of 12.0 degrees.
 - *HAPS Fragmentation Debris*, objects generated by the fragmentation of [HAPS](#) (1994-29B), with mass 96.1 kg, on the 03/06/1996 at an altitude between 584.1 and 818.9 km and inclination of 82.0 degrees.
 - *L-15 (YF115) Fragmentation Debris*, objects generated by the fragmentation of [L-15 \(YF115\)](#) (2022-151B), with mass 6000.0 kg, on the 12/11/2022 at an altitude between 813.5 and 847.1 km and inclination of 98.8 degrees.
 - *L-15 (YF115) Fragmentation Debris*, objects generated by the fragmentation of [L-15 \(YF115\)](#) (2024-140U), with mass 6000.0 kg, on the 06/08/2024 at an altitude between 797.9 and 855.7 km and inclination of 89.0 degrees.
 - *Other Rocket fragmentation debris*, all the other rocket fragmentation debris.

Additional information on the fragmentation events can be found in [ESA Fragmentation Database](#) [21].

For each conjunction, the encounter geometry (i.e. the relative orientation of the orbits and time of closest approach) is retrieved from CRASS, whereas the computation of the collision probability is performed using Alfriend-Akella's method [24]. The values of positional uncertainty required for the collision probability calculation are obtained with the methodology in [25], where the covariance for an object is dependent on its size, orbit (i.e. perigee altitude, eccentricity, inclination) and time between the assessment and the Time of Close Approach (TCA).

In the results in the following, the conjunctions are grouped in *events*, where an event is defined by a pair of primary and secondary objects and a given TCA. The number of conjunction events with collision probability above 10^{-6} within three days to TCA is shown in Fig. 3.10 and Fig. 3.11, which refer, respectively, to targets defined based on the distribution of payload objects and to targets defined along the Sun-Synchronous region. The threshold at 10^{-6} is usually well below the reaction threshold for payloads in LEO_{IADC} (i.e. the events in Fig. 3.10 and Fig. 3.11 will not all result in collision avoidance manoeuvres), but this threshold could be already representative of events where increased monitoring of the conjunction is activated.

In addition to the yearly statistics, the analysis has been systematically repeated yearly since 2015. This shows, particularly in the lower LEO_{IADC} regime, the increase of conjunction events that require coordination between active operators due to the change in space traffic, whereas higher orbits remain dominated by space debris related events.

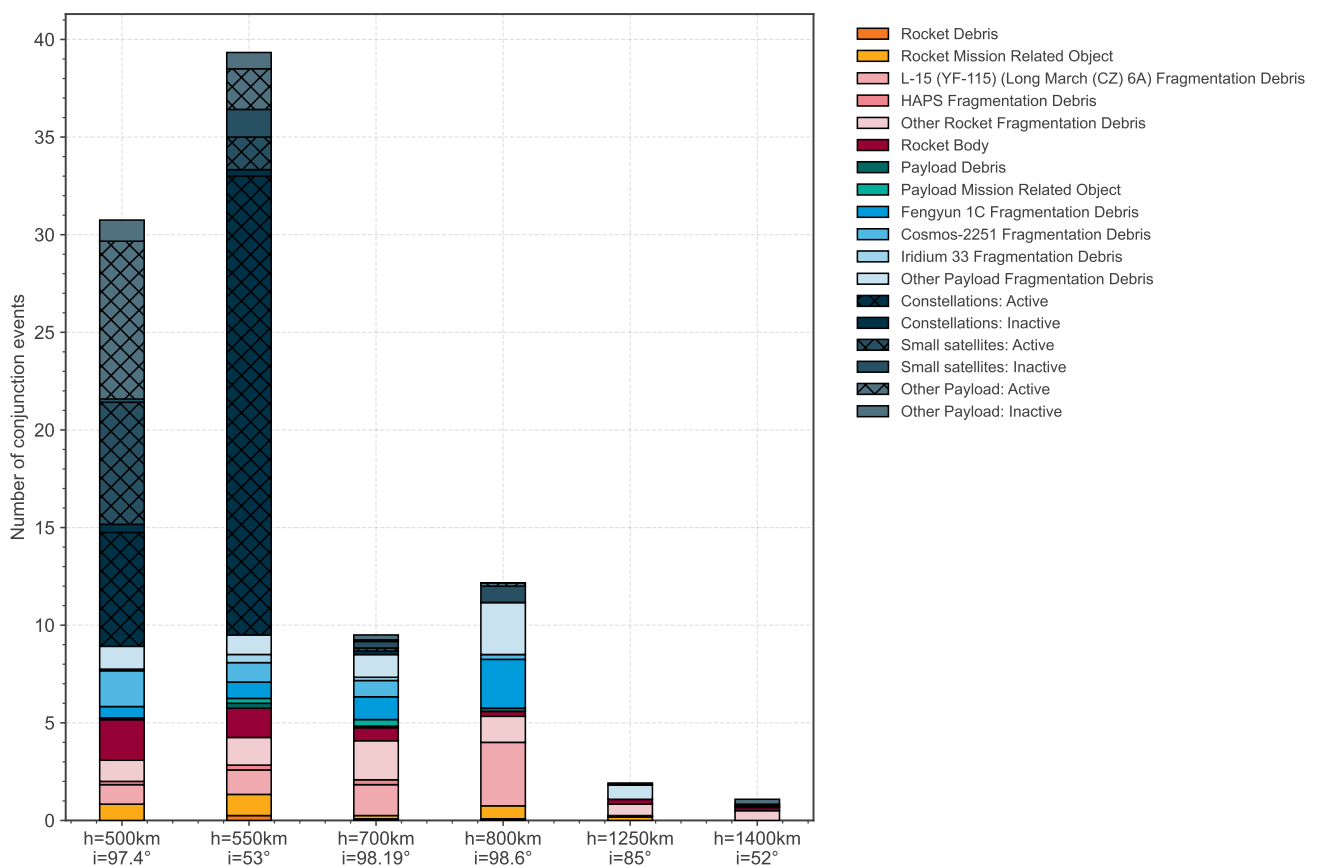


Figure 3.10: Conjunction events with collision probability above 10^{-6} , and corresponding chaser classification, for a set of representative targets over 2025.

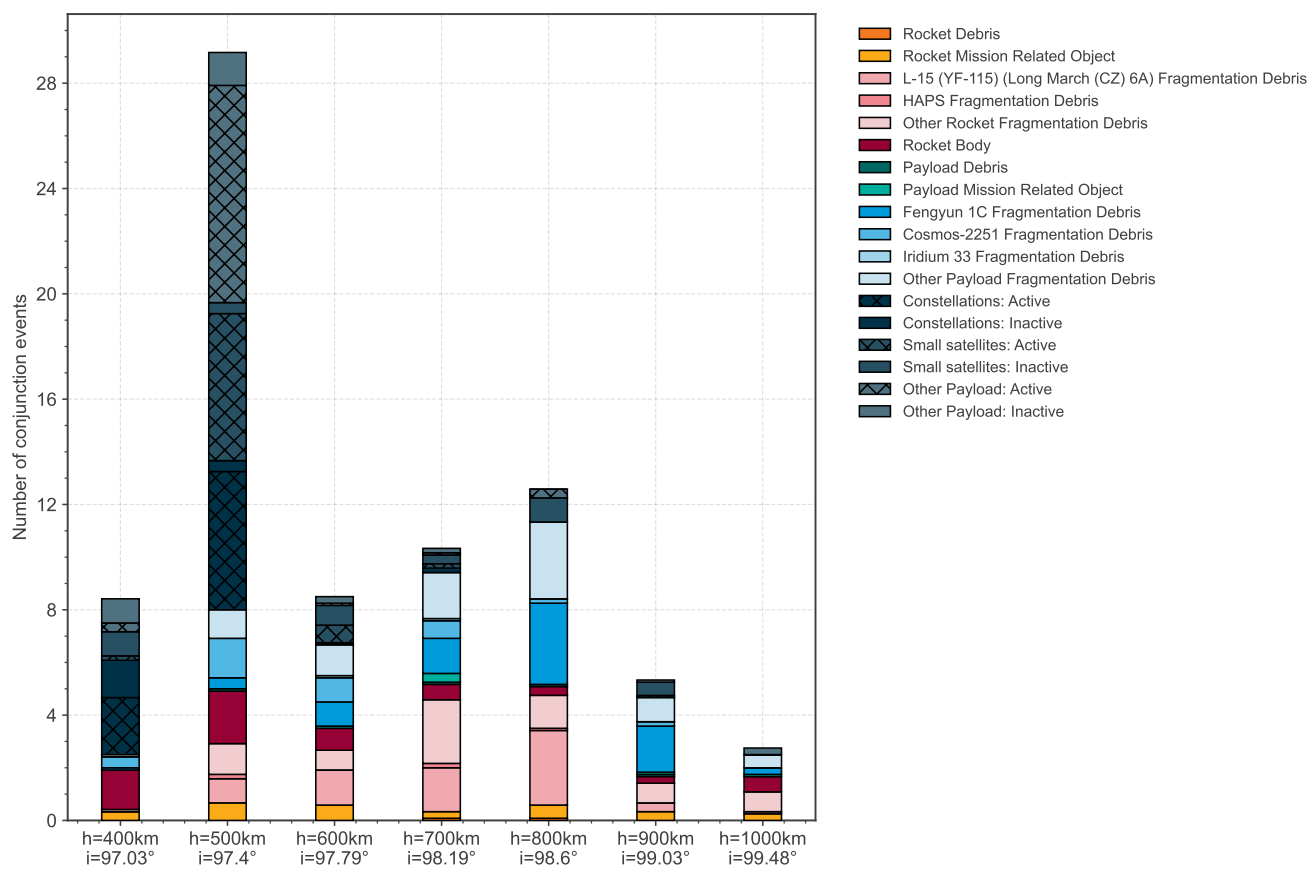


Figure 3.11: Conjunction events with collision probability above 10^{-6} , and chaser classification, for a set of representative targets in Sun-synchronous orbits over 2025.

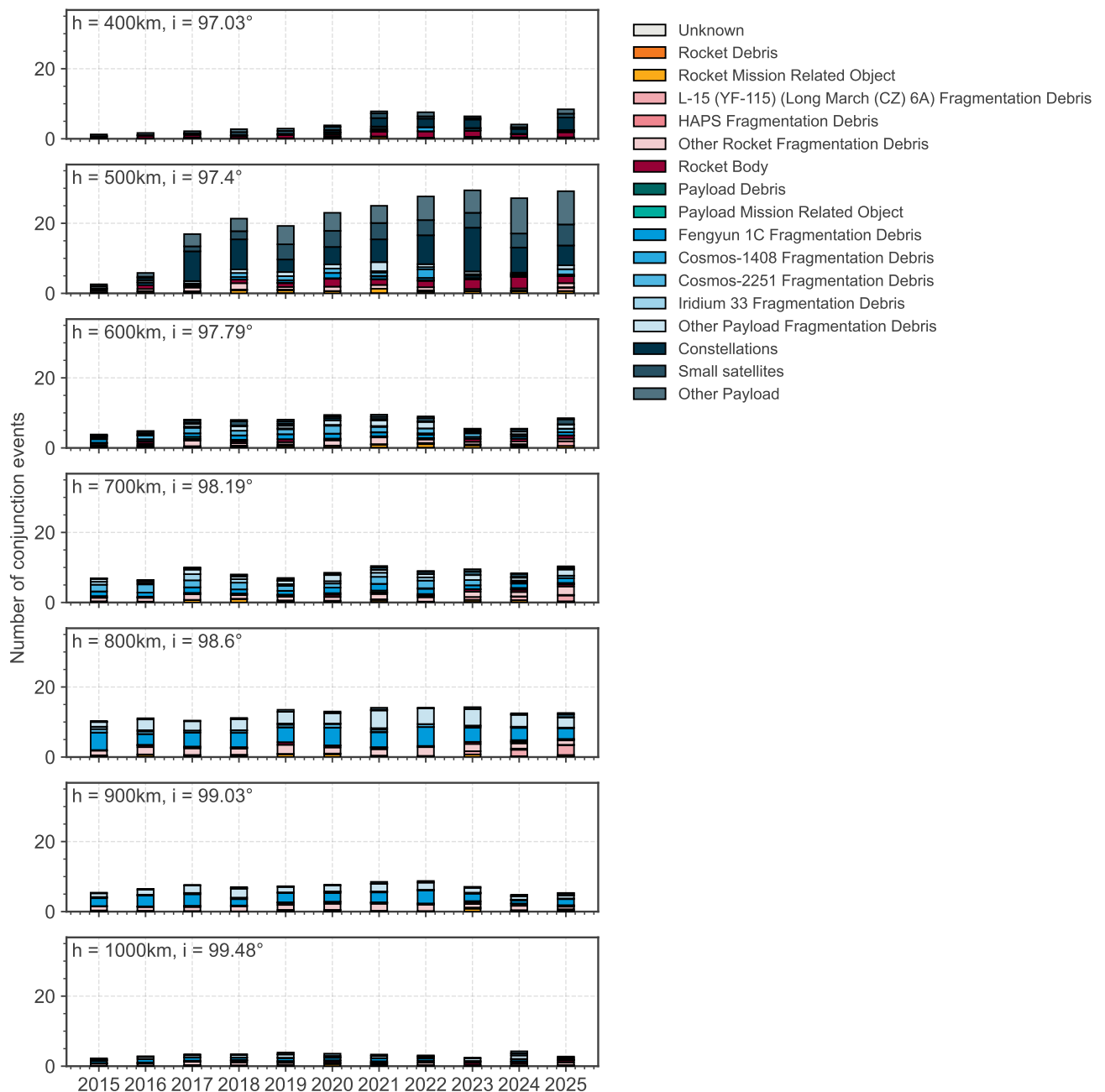


Figure 3.12: Conjunction events with collision probability above 10^{-6} , and chaser classification, for a set of representative targets in Sun-synchronous orbits over multiple years.

4. INTENTIONAL OBJECT RELEASE

A major part of the space debris mitigation measures are dedicated to the avoidance of intentionally releasing space debris of a rocket body or payload as part of the mission. This type of mission related objects can generally be sub-categorised into functional parts that are designed to be released after they are no longer required, e.g. covers protecting instruments during launch, or combustion related products that support the main mission, e.g. slag from solid rocket motors, or pyrotechnics. Objects from both subcategories can generally be avoided by design changes on the rocket bodies or payloads. For example, camera covers can be opened and folded away instead, or pyrotechnically expelled and solid rocket motor slag can be avoided by using on-board chemical or electrical propulsion systems. Small, i.e. sub millimetre, combustion related particles do contribute to the space debris environment but are not considered a threat. Most pyrotechnic devices fall under this case.

In this section, the evolution in terms of occurrence of this type of space debris is illustrated.

4.1. Mission Related Objects

As metric for the adherence to space debris mitigations guidelines, the release of catalogued mission related objects can be used. For every single payload and rocket body, the amount of released and catalogued mission related objects are counted. Furthermore, the fraction of payloads and rocket bodies releasing mission related objects to the total amount of payloads and rocket bodies launched in given year is presented.

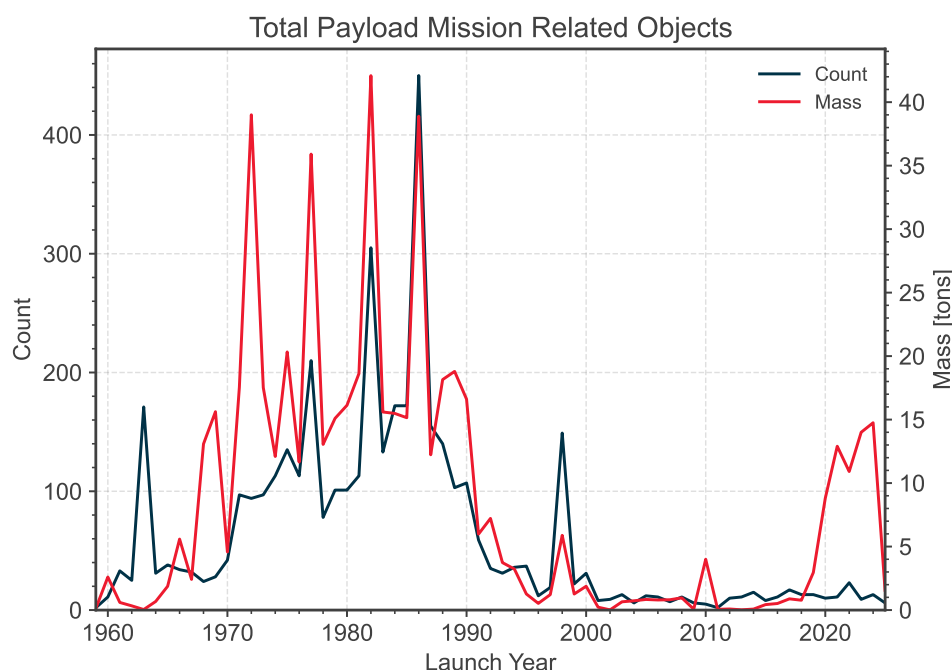


Figure 4.1: Total number and mass of catalogued mission related objects released from payloads.

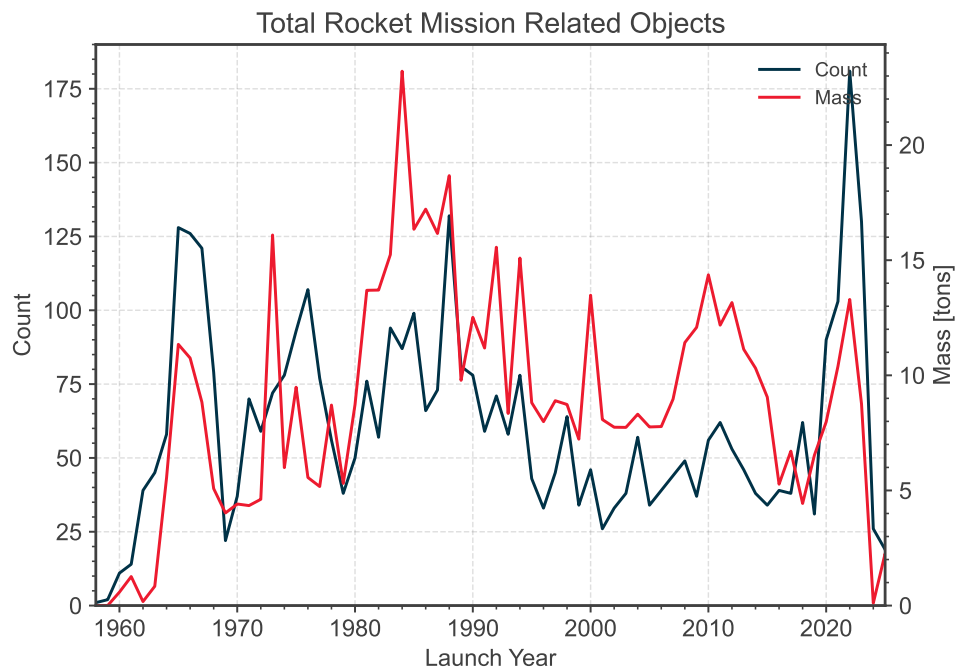


Figure 4.2: Total number and mass of catalogued mission related objects released from rocket bodies.

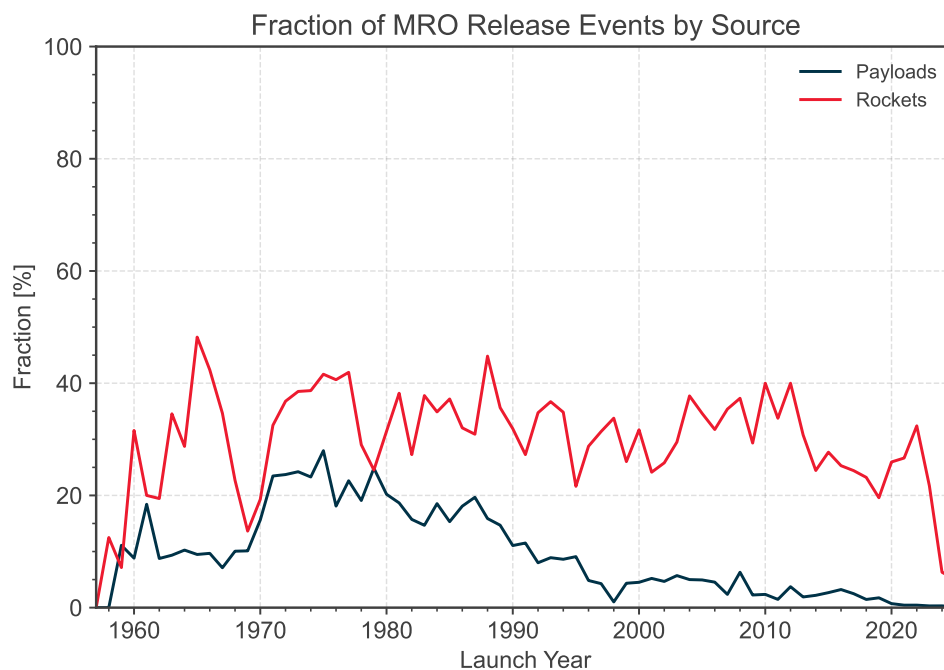


Figure 4.3: Fraction of mission related objects releases per year w.r.t. the total amount of payloads and rocket bodies injected into the space environment during that year.

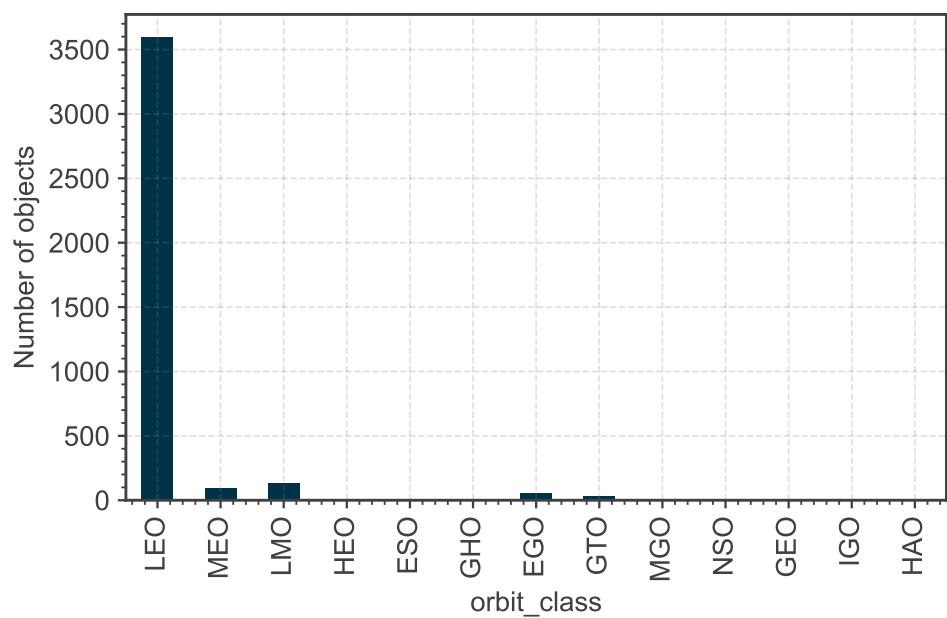


Figure 4.4: Distribution of release orbits for Payload Mission Related Objects since the start of the space age.

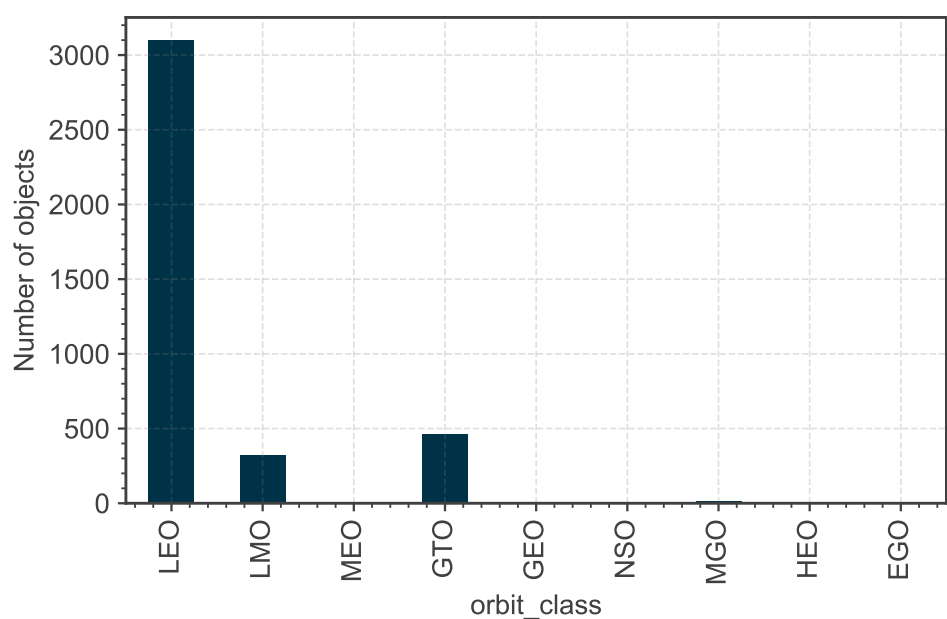


Figure 4.5: Distribution of release orbits for Rocket Body Mission Related Objects since the start of the space age.

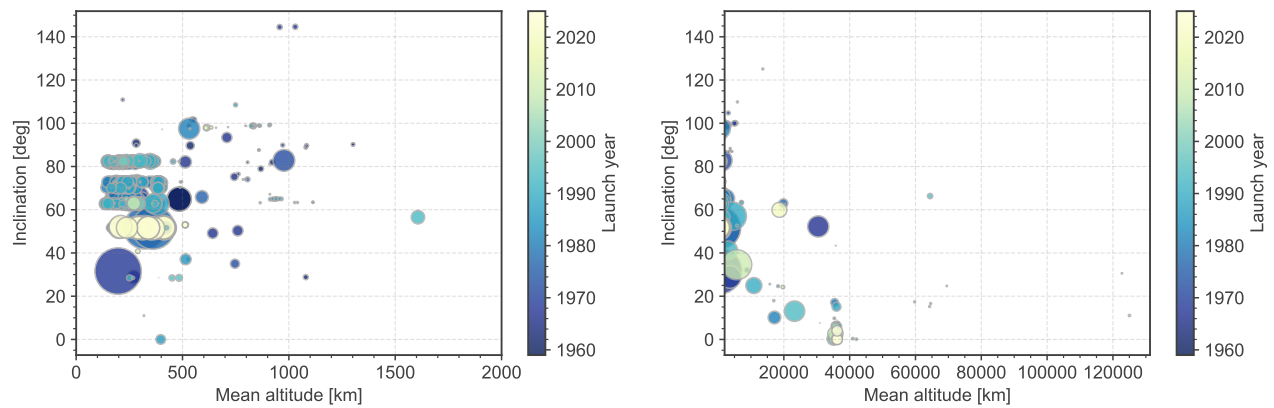


Figure 4.6: Distribution of release orbits for Payload Mission Related Objects in LEO (left) and outside LEO (right). The size of the marker is proportional to the object mass.

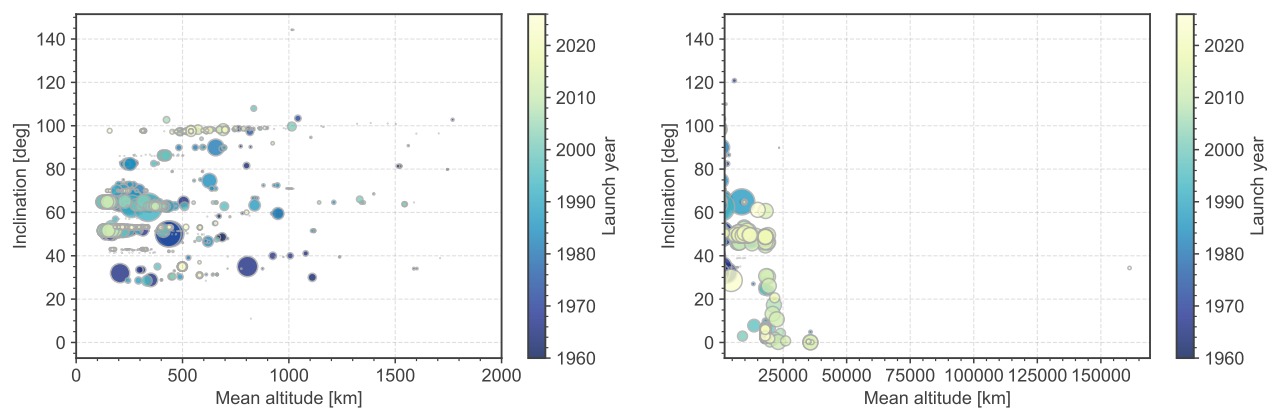


Figure 4.7: Distribution of release orbits for Rocket Body Mission Related Objects in LEO (left) and outside LEO (right). The size of the marker is proportional to the object mass.

4.2. Solid Rocket Motor Firings

As a metric of the adherence to space debris mitigations guidelines the amount of solid rocket motor firings for asserted objects can be used. The propellant mass associated with each firing is given versus the date of the firing. Not all solid rocket motor firings are equally damaging for the space environment, i.e. solid rocket motor fuels which do not create large slag particles have been developed. However, such an identification is not made in this section.

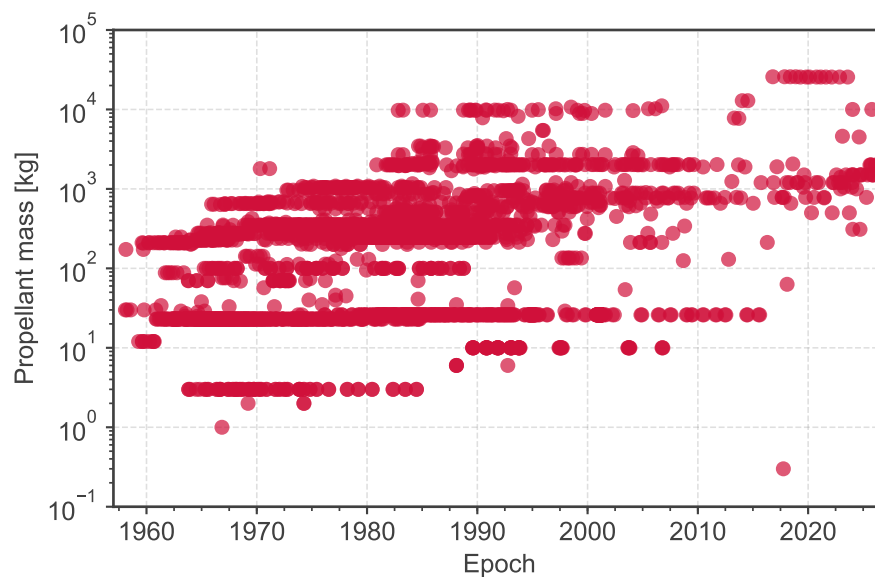


Figure 4.8: Evolution solid rocket motor firings.

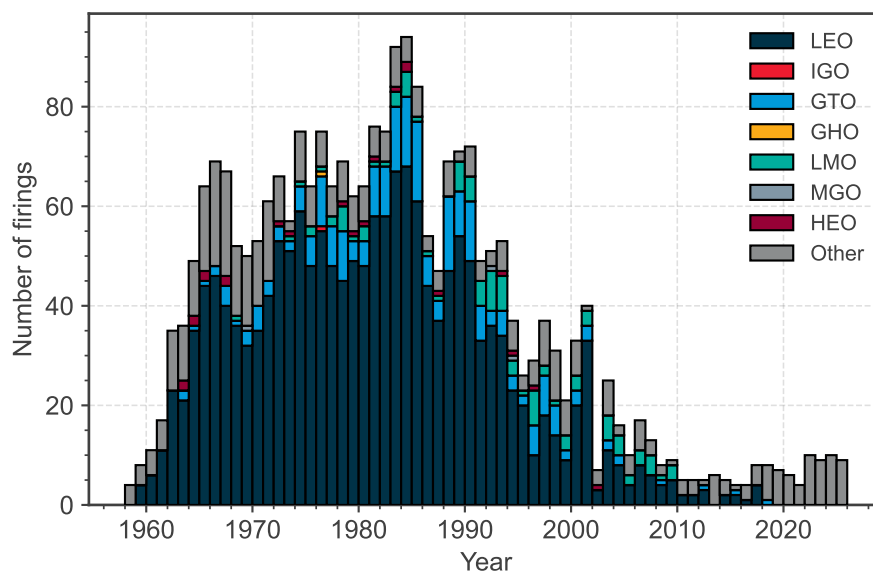


Figure 4.9: Evolution solid rocket motor firings by orbit type.

5. FRAGMENTATION HISTORY

Since the beginning of the space age until the end of 2025, there have been 661 confirmed on-orbit fragmentation events. In Fig. 5.2, the historical trend of the amount of fragmentation events per year is shown, as a function of the event date and the launch date, respectively. Fragmentation events are currently being categorised in main and sub-classes according to the assessed break-up cause. In the first list of classes, the break-up cause is fairly well known:

Accidental: Subsystems that showed design flaws ultimately leading to breakups in some cases. This includes, for example, the breakup of Hitomi (Astro-H) in 2016 or the sub-class of Oko satellites.

Cosmos 862 Class (Explosive Charge): The Oko missile early warning satellites were launched into Molniya orbits. Each satellite carried an explosive charge in order to destroy it in case of a malfunction. Reportedly, the control of this mechanism was unreliable.

Aerodynamics: A breakup most often caused by an overpressure due to atmospheric drag.

Collision: There have been several collisions observed between objects. A sub-class are so-called small impactors.

Small Impactor: Caused by a collision, but without explicit evidence for an impactor. Changes in the angular momentum, attitude and subsystem failures are, however, indirect indications of an impact.

Deliberate: All intentional breakup events.

ASAT: Anti-satellite tests.

Cosmos 2031 Class: The Orlets reconnaissance satellites were introduced in 1989 and employed detonation as a standard procedure after the nominal mission.

Payload Recovery Failure: Some satellites were designed such that they exploded as soon as a non-nominal re-entry was detected.

RORSAT Reactor Core Ejection Class: Between 1980 and 1988, the Soviet Union re-orbited their Radar Ocean Reconnaissance Satellites (RORSAT) after a successful mission to a sufficiently high orbit around 900 km altitude. The manoeuvre was followed by a reactor core ejection, which resulted in an opening of the primary coolant loop (Sodium-Potassium or NaK alloy) and an associated release of NaK droplets.

Electrical: Most of the events in this category occurred due to an overcharging and subsequent explosion of batteries. A sub-class is defined based on the satellite bus.

Battery: Battery-related explosions may occur due to over-charging, over-temperature, short-circuits, over-discharging, structural issues or damage, in each cases leading to a thermal run-away and subsequent breakup.

DMSP/NOAA Class: Based on the Television and InfraRed Observation Satellite (TIROS-N) satellite bus, some of the satellites in this series suffered from battery explosions.

Propulsion: Stored energy for non-passivated propulsion-related subsystems might lead to an explosion, for example due to thermal stress. Several sub-classes are defined for rocket stages that showed repeated breakup events.

Ariane Upper Stage: Breakups for the H8 and H10 cryogenic stages were observed, most likely due to overpressure and subsequent bulkhead rupture. Passivation was introduced in 1990.

Briz-M: The fourth stage of the Proton rocket which is used to insert satellites into higher orbits.

CZ-6A Upper Stage: The second stage of the Long March (CZ) 6A launcher (L-15 YF-115). Energetic break-up events soon after launch assumed to be Propulsion related.

Delta Upper Stage: There were several events for Delta second stages due to residual propellants until depletion burns were introduced in 1981.

Proton Ullage Motor: The Blok D/DM upper stages of the Proton rocket used two ullage motors to support the main engine. They were released as the main engine performed its final burn.

Titan Transtage: The upper stage of the Titan 3A rocket used a hypergolic fuel oxidizer combination.

Tsyklon Upper Stage: The third stage of the Tsyklon-3 launcher used a hypergolic fuel oxidizer combination.

Zenit-2 Upper Stage: The second stage of the Zenit 2 launcher used an RP-1/Liquid oxygen propellant.

A second list of classes relates to break-ups where the cause has not been well established. Events or sub-classes within these classes could be reclassified in the future:

Anomalous: Defined as the unplanned separation, usually at low velocity, of one or more detectable objects from a satellite that remains essentially intact. This may include debris shedding due to material deterioration, which includes insulation material or solar panels all of which have been observed from ground in the past. Events with sufficient evidence for an impact of debris or micrometeoroids are classified under Small Impactor. Sub-classes for anomalous events are defined, as soon as events occur multiple times for the same spacecraft or bus type.

Cosmos-3 Class: Soviet/Russian launcher for small satellites.

Delta 4 Class: Events with several catalogued objects for the Delta Cryogenic Second Stages (DCSS).

ERS/SPOT Class: Both the ERS-1 and -2 satellites, as well as the SPOT-4 satellite had confirmed anomalies and fragments were catalogued.

Meteor Class: Russian meteorological satellite family.

Scout Class: Refers to the Altair upper stage of the Scout rocket family.

TOPAZ Leakage Class: There are two known events for TOPAZ satellites where NaK droplets have been observed in the vicinity of the parent object presumably due to leakage [26].

Transit Class: Satellites of the U.S. Navy's first satellite navigation system operational between 1964 and 1996.

Vostok Class: Refers to the upper stage of the Vostok rocket (Blok E).

Assumed: Introduced for the MASTER model. Currently the only assumed events are in the GEO region, backed by information obtained during survey campaigns [27].

Unconfirmed: A provisional status until an event is confirmed and classified accordingly.

Unknown: Is assigned whenever there is lacking evidence to support a more specific classification.

Cosmos 699 Class (EORSAT): For many of the ELINT Ocean Reconnaissance Satellites (EORSAT) a breakup was observed during the orbital decay.

H-IIA Class: The second stage of the H-IIA launcher used a cryogenic propellant.

L-14B Class: The third stage of the Long March 4B (CZ-4B) launcher used a hypergolic propellant.

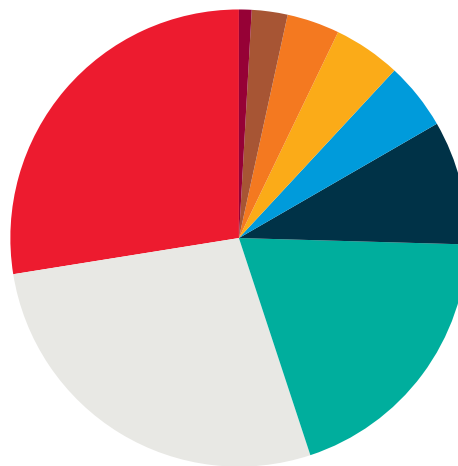
5.1. All fragmentation events

A summary of the statistics on the recorded fragmentation events is reported in Table 5.1, where *Assumed* and *Unconfirmed* were excluded from the aggregation. A breakdown of the observed fragmentation events grouped by the main classes in terms of frequency and resulting catalogued debris is given in Fig. 5.3 and Fig. 5.4, respectively.

Table 5.1: Statistics on fragmentation events.

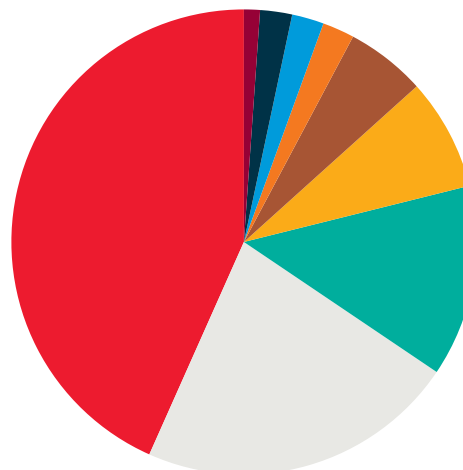
	All history	Last 20 years
Number of events	661	207
Non-deliberate events per year	9.3	9.8
Yearly rate of events where 50% of the generated fragments have a lifetime of greater than 10 years	2.3	1.5
Yearly rate of events where 50% of the generated fragments have a lifetime of greater than 25 years	1.7	1.2
Mean time (years) between launch and fragmentation	5.7	9.9
Median time (years) between launch and fragmentation	1.0	5.2

Propulsion - 27.53 %	Unknown - 27.53 %	Anomalous - 19.49 %	Deliberate - 8.78 %
Aerodynamics - 4.76 %	Electrical - 4.76 %	Accidental - 3.72 %	Small Impactor - 2.53 %
Collision - 0.89 %			



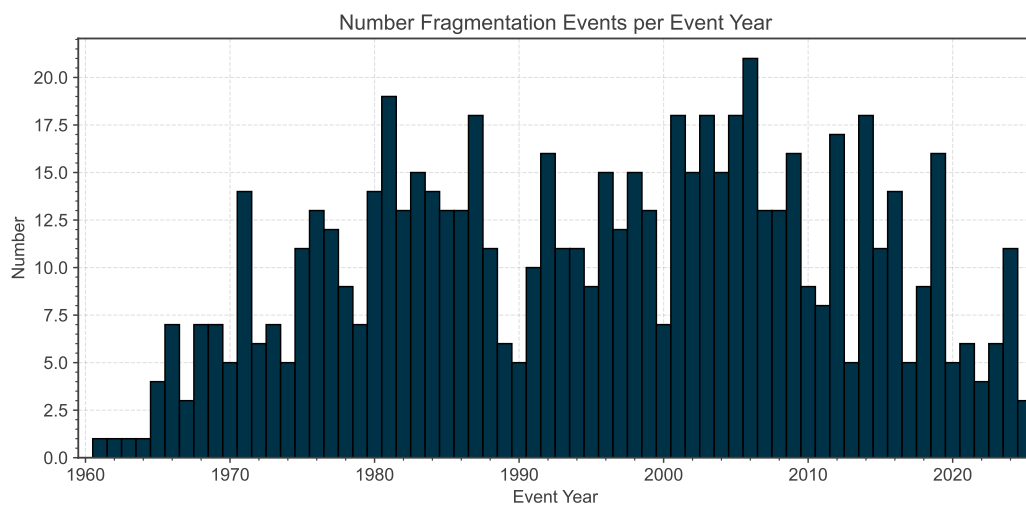
(a) Whole history.

Propulsion - 43.33 %	Unknown - 22.22 %	Anomalous - 13.33 %	Electrical - 7.78 %
Small Impactor - 5.56 %	Accidental - 2.22 %	Aerodynamics - 2.22 %	Deliberate - 2.22 %
Collision - 1.11 %			

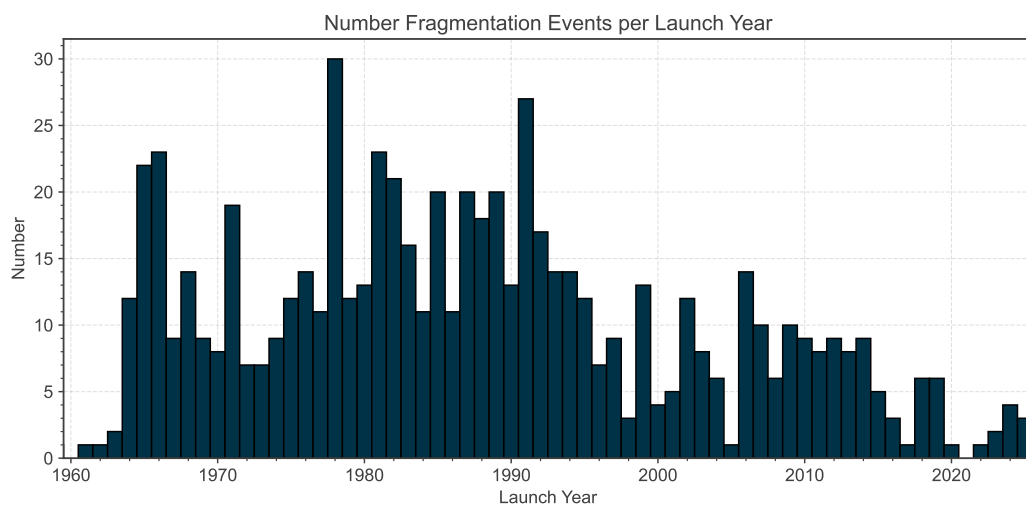


(b) Last 10 years.

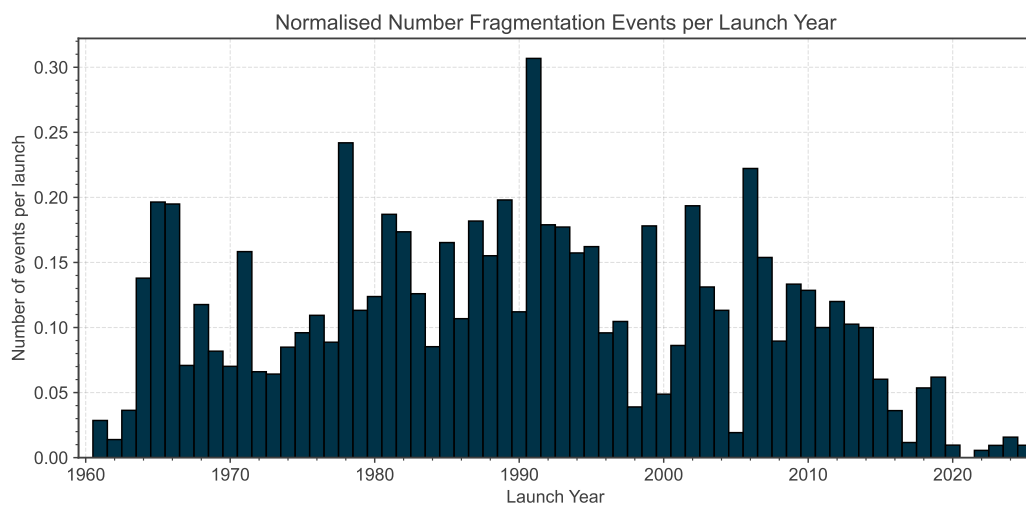
Figure 5.1: Event causes and their relative share for all past fragmentation events.



(a) Number of fragmentation events per event year.

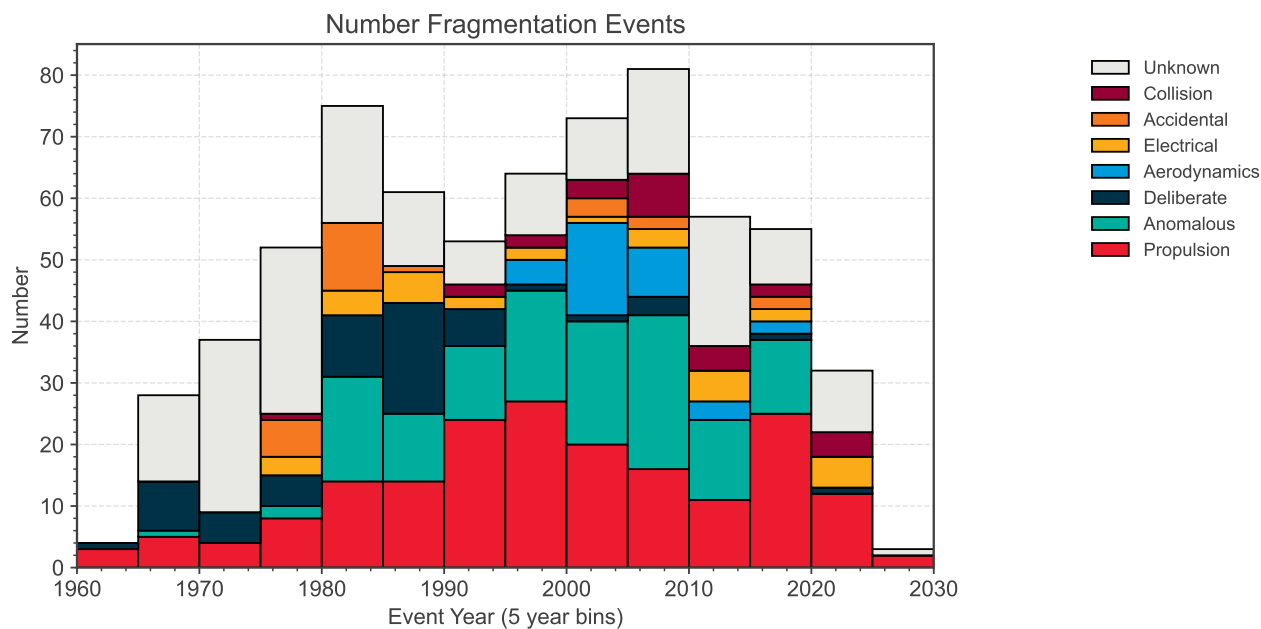


(b) Number of fragmentation events per launch year.

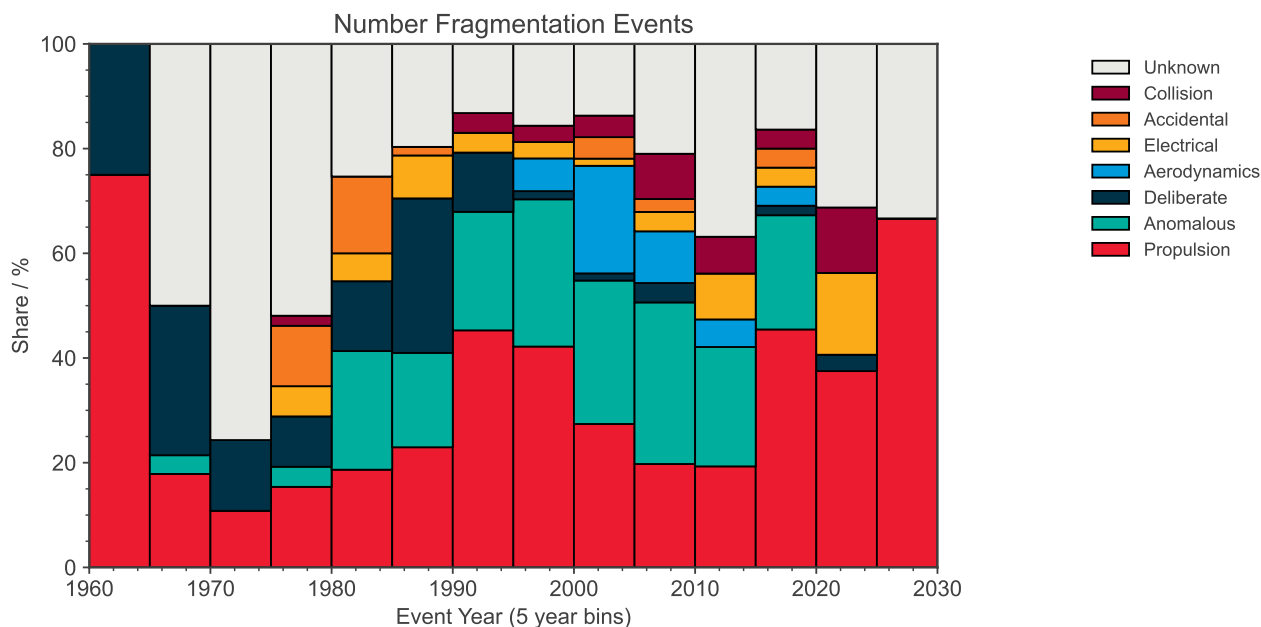


(c) Number of fragmentation events per launch year normalised by the number of launches in that year.

Figure 5.2: Historical trend of fragmentation events.

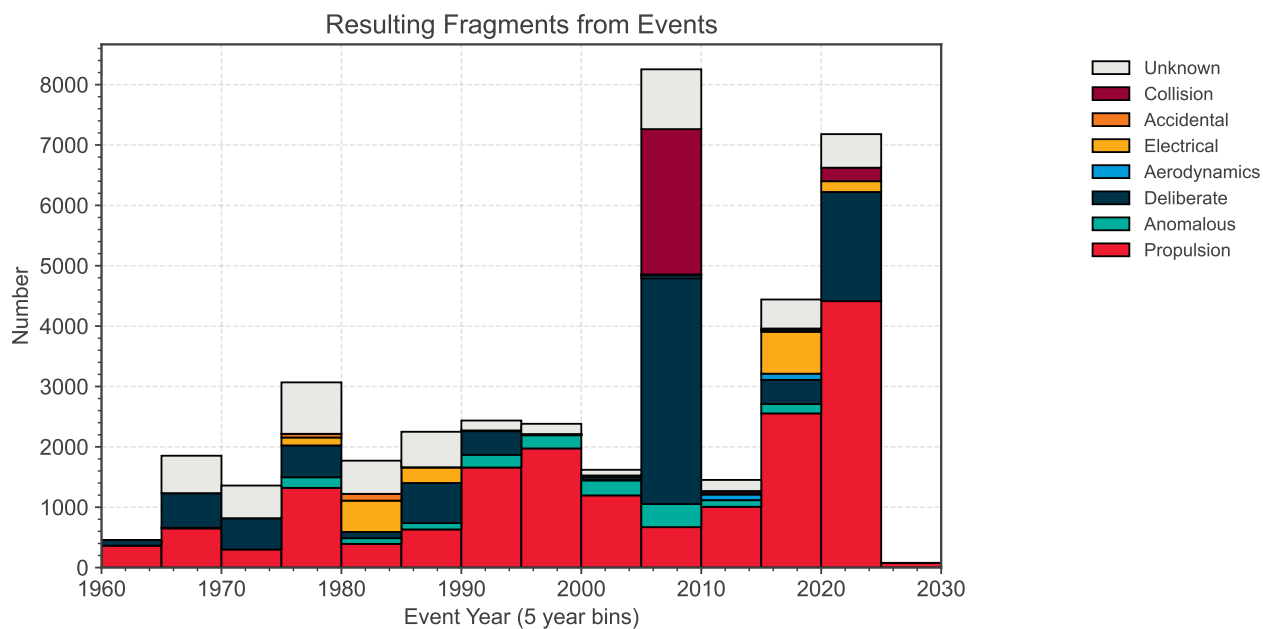


(a) Absolute number of fragmentation events per event cause.

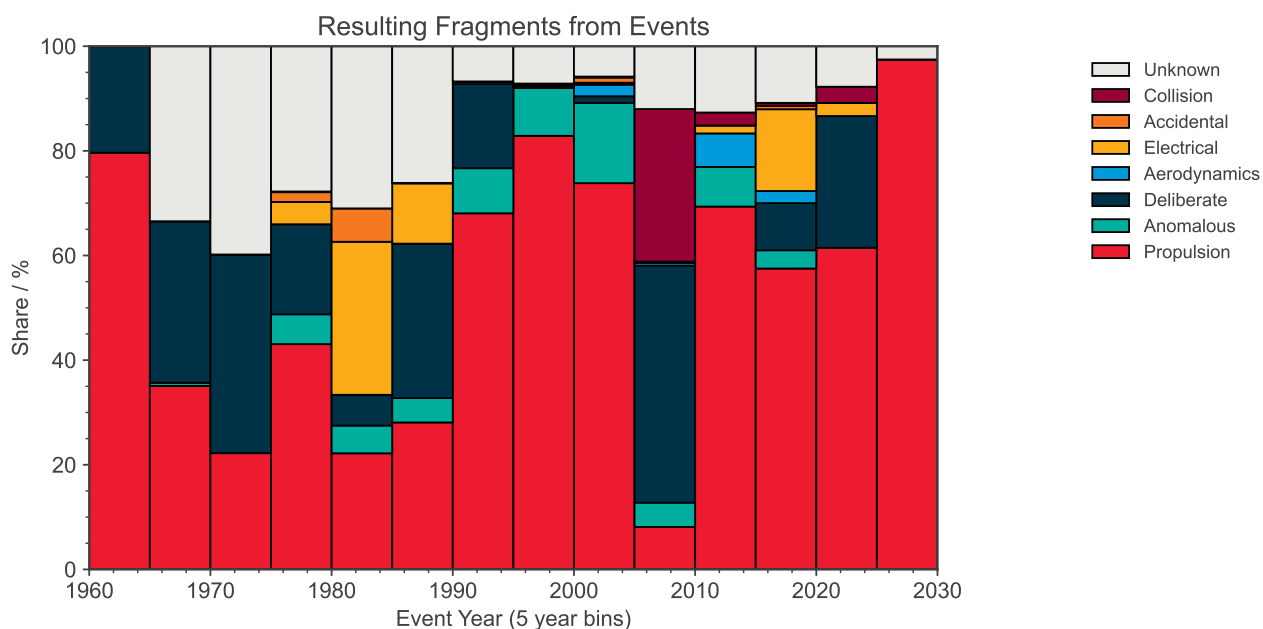


(b) Relative number of fragmentation events per event cause.

Figure 5.3: Historical trend of fragmentation events per event cause.



(a) Absolute number of resulting fragments per event cause.



(b) Relative number of resulting fragments per event cause.

Figure 5.4: Historical trend of numbers of fragments produced by fragmentation events.

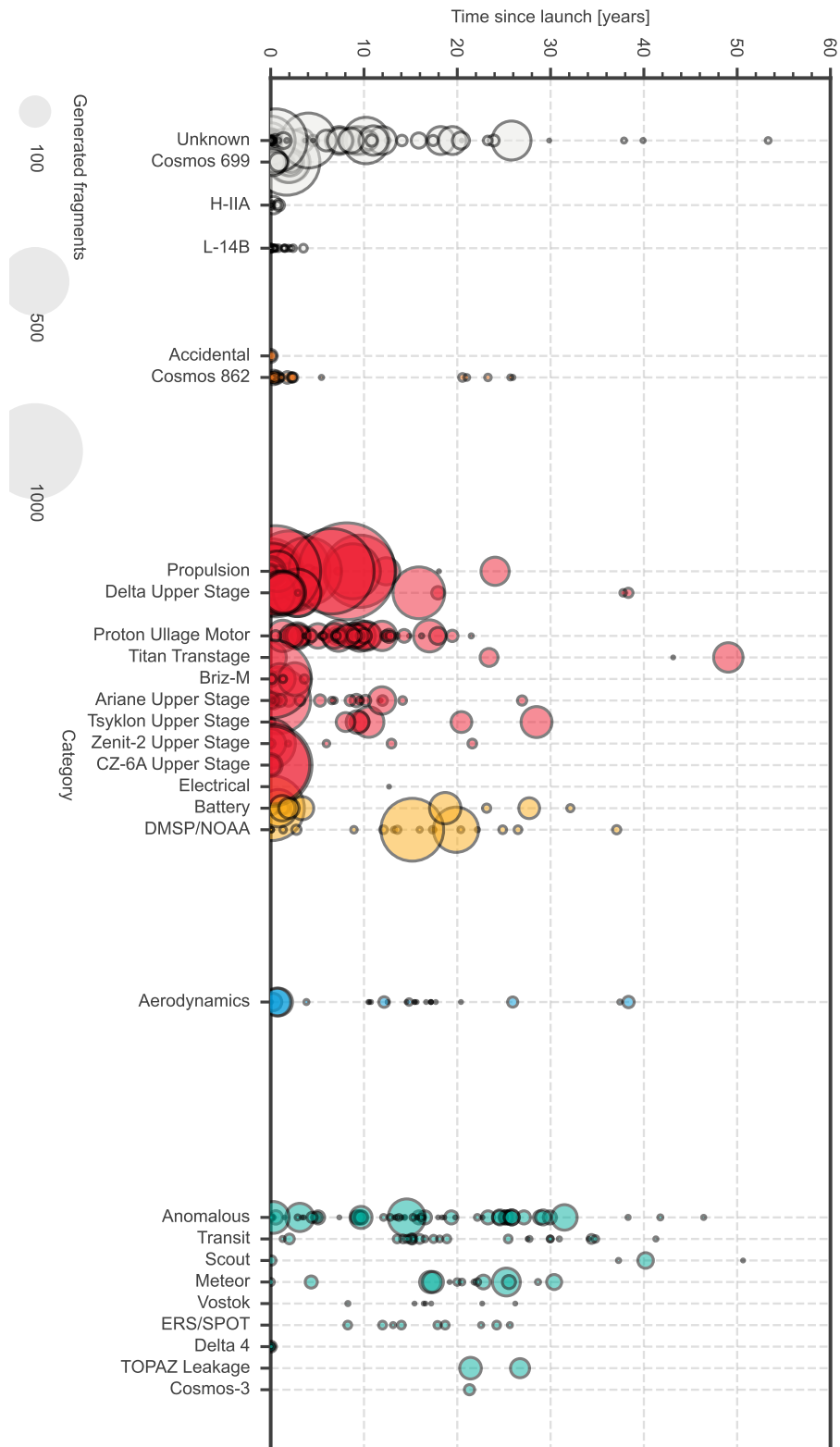


Figure 5.5: Elapsed time between fragmentation and launch by category. The bubble size indicates the number of generated fragments.

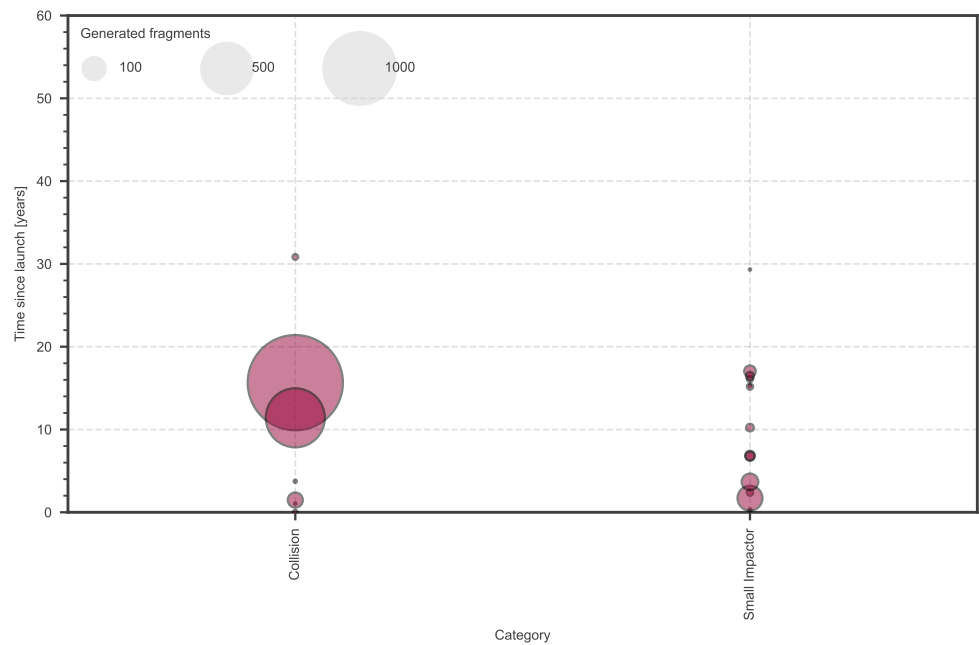


Figure 5.6: Elapsed time between fragmentation and launch for collision events. The bubble size indicates the number of generated fragments.

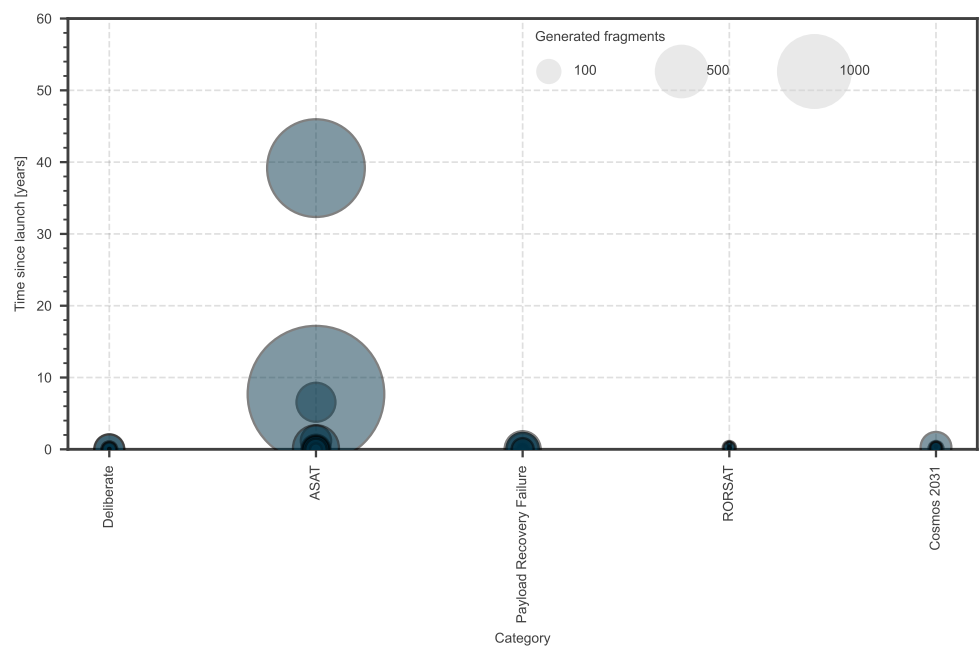


Figure 5.7: Elapsed time between fragmentation and launch for deliberate events. The bubble size indicates the number of generated fragments.

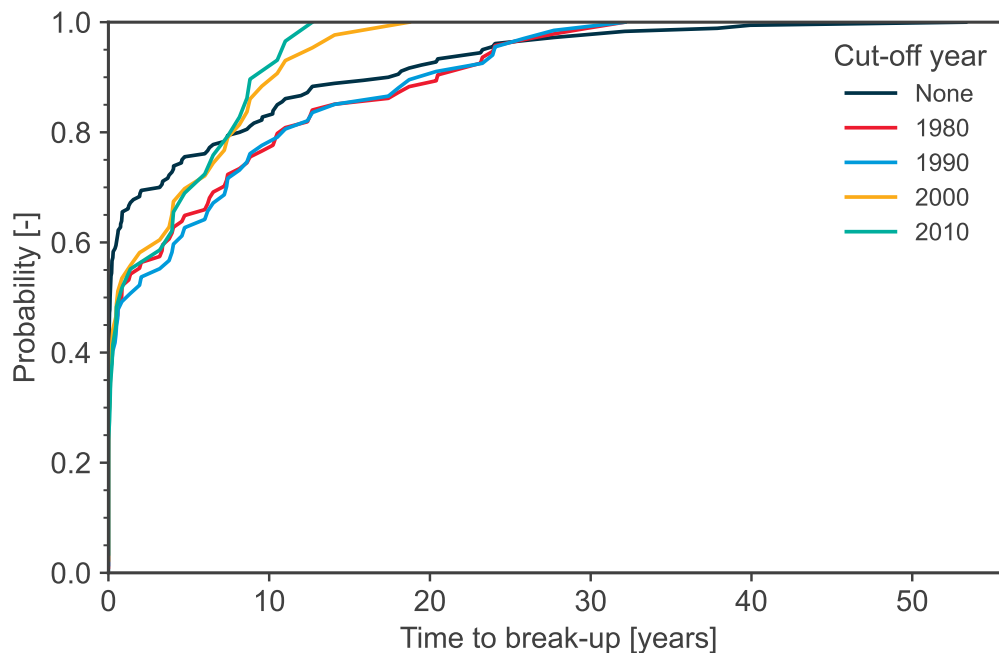


Figure 5.8: Cumulative distribution function (CDF) for the elapsed time between fragmentation and launch for non-system related fragmentation events, with different cut-off values on the launch year.

5.2. Non-system related fragmentation events

As also described when introducing the classes for fragmentation events, not all events are similar in nature and hence the consequences on the environment and for mitigation measures can vary. In particular, events caused by a technical flaw in the design of a (sub-)system that is re-used for many Rocket Bodies or Payload platforms, so-called *system related* events as for battery-related classes, are not representative for the space environment as a whole and need targeted counter measures, e.g. it as was done for certain launch vehicle related classes. To understand the likelihood of fragmentation events occurring in the environment as single stochastic events, i.e. a background risk for any intact space object, it is instructive to analyse the non-system related fragmentation events in isolation. In this sense, we can group the data from the fragmentation classes Unknown, Accidental, Propulsion, Electrical, Battery, excluding their sub-classes.

A relation between the time to a fragmentation event and the launch epoch can be observed for non-system related classes in Fig. 5.8. A causal relationship with the orbital region in which these object resided at the time of the fragmentation event could not be derived, as shown in Fig. 5.9. The derived statistics for the non-system related fragmentations are significantly lower than those for the entire population as observed in the previous sub-section, and reported in Table 5.2. Based on the recent trend analysis, a value of 18 years is adopted as time limit after which the explosion probability for a recently launched space object, due to non-systematic design flaws, can be considered as effectively 0.

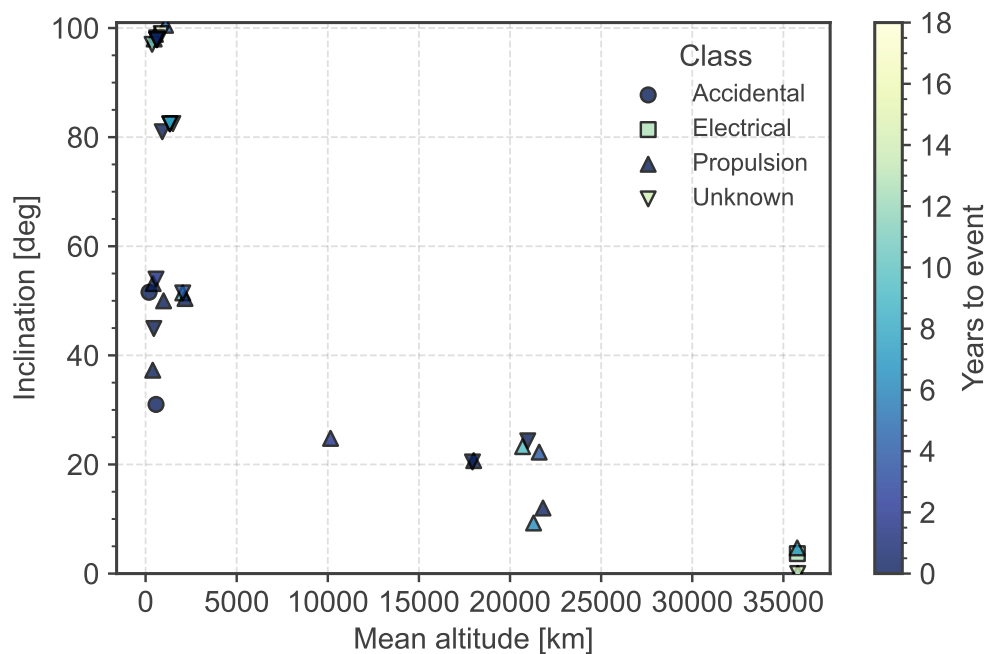


Figure 5.9: Distribution of non-system related fragmentation events in mean altitude, inclination, and time to fragmentation.

Table 5.2: Statistics on non-system related fragmentation events.

	All history	Last 18 years
Number of events	181	53
Non-deliberate events per year	2.7	2.8
Yearly rate of events where 50% of the generated fragments have a lifetime of greater than 10 years	0.6	0.4
Yearly rate of events where 50% of the generated fragments have a lifetime of greater than 25 years	0.4	0.3
Mean time (years) between launch and fragmentation	5.6	10.3
Median time (years) between launch and fragmentation	1.3	4.5

6. END-OF-LIFE OPERATIONS HISTORY

Post mission disposal mitigation measures are specifically aimed at reducing the long term interference an object in the space environment could have on the two protected regions, LEO_{IADC} and GEO_{IADC}. These mitigation measures are associated with time criteria, i.e. so-called orbital lifetimes or clearance of orbital regions, and hence require evaluating the long term evolution of orbits. For both protected regions, different mitigation measures imply different end-of life operations. The reported years for payload clearance of LEO_{IADC} goes up to 2024, for rocket body clearance of LEO_{IADC} goes up to 2025, and for payload clearance of GEO_{IADC} goes up to 2025.

6.1. End-Of-Life Operations in Low Earth Orbit

Due to the presence of atmospheric drag in the lower levels of the LEO region, a natural cleansing of space debris from these regions occurs. A payload or rocket body operating in the LEO Protected region, with either a permanent or periodic presence, shall limit its post-mission presence in the LEO Protected region to a maximum of 25 years from the end of mission, or significantly shorter [10]. This limit by itself will not lead to a long-term reduction in the amount of space debris, as will be shown in Section 7.2, but is an important step towards limiting the space debris growth rate in LEO_{IADC} [16]. In this context, there is also growing consensus that stricter mitigation practices need to be implemented globally, and in 2023, ESA released its Space Debris Mitigation Standard and associated policy [3, 4]. Among the measures introduced by this Standard, was the reduction of the post-mission maximum lifetime limit from 25 down to 5 years. Specifically, the Standard requires that the orbit clearance of a spacecraft or launch vehicle orbital element from the LEO protected region shall satisfy both following conditions: first, that the orbit lifetime is less than 5 years; and secondly, that the cumulative collision probability from end of life until re-entry with space objects larger than 1 cm is below 10^{-3} [3]. While this is only binding for ESA projects, one goal of the Zero Debris Approach is to lead by example, and thus compliance to both the 25- and 5-year thresholds is reported here, in Sections 6.1.2 and 6.1.3 respectively. Various Standards provide an order of preference for methodologies for achieving compliance to these mitigation measures (respectively the so-called 25- and 5-year *rules*) i.e. controlled re-entry, accelerated natural orbital decay, etc.

For catalogued objects, the orbital activity of a payload or rocket body can be derived and the orbital lifetime estimated. This method is preferred over direct investigation, intelligence, or communication with the owners of a payload or a rocket body, which could increase the accuracy of the prediction, but it might be unbalanced as the request for such data might not be answered nor can all owners be clearly identified and approached. As some rocket bodies have been found to perform direct re-entries before they can be considered catalogued objects, additional asserted objects are used as to make sure that such positive cases are correctly considered in the resulting statistics. The methodology to determine the end of the operational phase of an object in LEO employed here is described in depth in [28].

For satellites without orbit control capacity (OCC), i.e. no propulsion system, or for satellites that never exhibited any orbit manoeuvre otherwise, the assessment of the mission end is not possible from orbit information alone. Therefore, a statistical approach is pursued for those objects. The source of the statistics for mission lifetimes are the *measurable* missions with orbit control capacity. Observed mission lifetimes are processed into histograms by mission category, e.g. science, communications, military, etc. They are then applied to generate missions lifetime estimations for the objects without orbit control capacity of the same category.

The boundaries between having an orbital control capacity or not is not always clearly defined by the underlying technology. This is because the effects observed by the space surveillance system may not be reliably discerned in all cases. Impulsive manoeuvres, multi-revolutions use of electrical propulsion, and large drag sail deployments are reliably picked up and hence objects exhibiting those features are categorised as having OCC.

On the other hand, smaller orbital changes, such as drag sailing, where the change in ballistic coefficient is smaller

than the error margin or the orbit determination capacity of the space surveillance system, are not picked up. However, the most important metric w.r.t. the implementation is to remove an object from LEO_{IADC} within the maximum lifetime limit, which is measured independently of the OCC categorisation.

In order to estimate the orbital lifetime of an object after reaching its end of life, the general processes as laid out in Standards [15, 3] are followed. To apply these processes to all catalogued objects, a Ballistic Coefficient (BC) needs to be estimated for each of them. The BC estimation is based on least root-mean-square orbit fitting during the longest periods free from estimated manoeuvres, generally after end of life is reached in case of OCC classified objects. In case this can't be achieved, the BC is defined based in the available physical properties in DISCOS.

The lifetime is then assessed for each object by propagating the last orbital state, at the end of 2025, until re-entry in combination with a long-term space weather forecast [29]. The introduction of a 5-year lifetime limit necessitates a probabilistic approach to lifetime estimation that considers the variability of solar activity, a key driver of orbit evolution in LEO, over a full 11-year solar cycle. Therefore, objects with an estimated lifetime of between 5 and 50 years (to ensure robust assessment to both the 5- and 25-year thresholds) are assessed probabilistically by uniformly sampling the solar cycle. In practice, this involves varying the start epoch of the propagation with yearly steps over the 11-year solar cycle. The lifetime used for compliance assessment is then taken to be the median for circular orbits, while the significant influence of the atmosphere on the spread in orbital predictions for eccentric orbits (> 0.3) is captured by using the 90th percentile, according to [3]. The used values and obtained results are stored in DISCOS and distributed on request [12]. The process itself is subject to a significant amount of stochastic assumptions which are described in [30]. Hence, the reported orbital lifetimes are procedurally defined and need to be understood as a *current* best-estimate that can vary between different versions of this report, as discussed in Section 6.1.4.

In case of payload objects, at least one calendar year without orbit control actions needs to pass for an object to be classified as reaching end-of-life unless it performs a controlled re-entry. This is done to mitigate the implications of the detection algorithm described above, and to avoid a potentially large amount of reclassifications in subsequent editions of this report as some operators implement less frequent actions near the end-of-life. In practice, this means that the reported years for the payload clearance of LEO_{IADC} goes up to 2024 instead of 2025.

It is important to note that for this report, where conformance to a time-limitation guidelines is to be evaluated, the categorisation of each object becomes fixed after 25 years. Unpredicted events, such as increased solar activities or missions which actively remove large pieces of space debris, will thus be accounted for only when they materialise.

Relocations from LEO_{IADC} into orbits with a perigee altitude above 2000 kilometres are no longer viable end-of-life debris mitigation practices [10]. While such relocations were relatively rare for Payload objects and only a minor historical entry in the dataset of this section, they have been more commonly used to raise the perigee of Rocket Bodies when, e.g. eccentric destination orbits such as GTO were targeted.

Human spaceflight (HS) related missions are analysed separately, as they skew results in terms of mass and count affected. These missions include crew vehicles as well as cargo payloads, but not the rocket bodies that bring them into orbit.

Throughout this section, *Stage* is used as synonym for *Rocket Body*.

The end-of-life behaviour of space objects can be categorised in seven behavioural classes to illustrate disposal success rates:

- **NCWO: (Not Compliant WithOut attempt)** the lifetime limit is not met by the mission orbit and no disposal action has been taken;

- **NCWFB:** (*Not Compliant With attempt False Before*) the lifetime limit rule is not met by the mission orbit, a disposal action has been attempted but it was unsuccessful or insufficient;
- **NCWTB:** (*Not Compliant With attempt True Before*) the lifetime limit rule was met by the initial mission orbit, a disposal action has been attempted but it was unsuccessful or the mission orbit was otherwise altered, and the new orbit is not compliant;
- **CWFB:** (*Compliant With attempt False Before*) the lifetime limit rule is not met by the mission orbit, but a disposal action has been taken and was successful;
- **CWTB:** (*Compliant With attempt True Before*) the mission orbit allowed to meet the lifetime limit, but a disposal action has been taken nonetheless;
- **CWO:** (*Compliant WithOut attempt*) the mission orbit allowed to meet the lifetime limit, no action was taken (nor needed);
- **CD:** (*Compliant With Direct Re-entry*) a controlled re-entry has been performed.

In summary, clearance of the LEO protected region by payloads and rocket bodies will be presented as:

- **Naturally Compliant** if injected into an orbit that fulfils the 25- or 5-year lifetime measure (CWO, CWTB),
- **Successful Attempt** when compliant after an attempt to reduce its orbital lifetime (CD, CWFB),
- **Insufficient Attempt** when not compliant but having attempted to reduce its orbital lifetime (NCWFB, NCWTB),
- **No Attempt** when not compliant with no attempt at all (NCWO).

It should therefore be noted that 'disposal' here is defined according to lifetime and does not include passivation aspects, which, as discussed in Section 1.3, cannot currently be reliably derived from observational data.

6.1.1. Evolution of compliance shares

In Figures 6.1 - 6.3, we show the share of compliance (in terms of space object count) for payloads and rocket bodies for the two lifetime limits (25 years and 5 years). Here, adherence is achieved by a *Successful Attempt* as defined above, as well as *Naturally Compliant* for the plots including naturally compliant space objects. The plot represents the compliance share using the median (or 90th percentile for objects with eccentricity > 0.3) lifetime, according to [3].

More details on the levels of adherence to each of the 25 and 5 year lifetime limits are given in Sections 6.1.2 and 6.1.3 respectively.

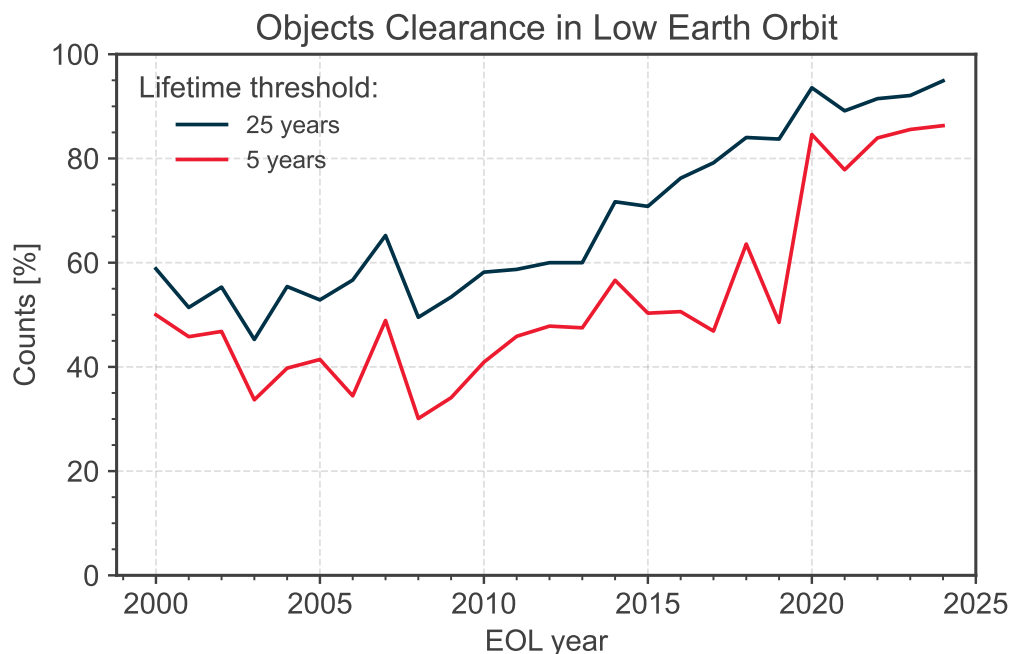
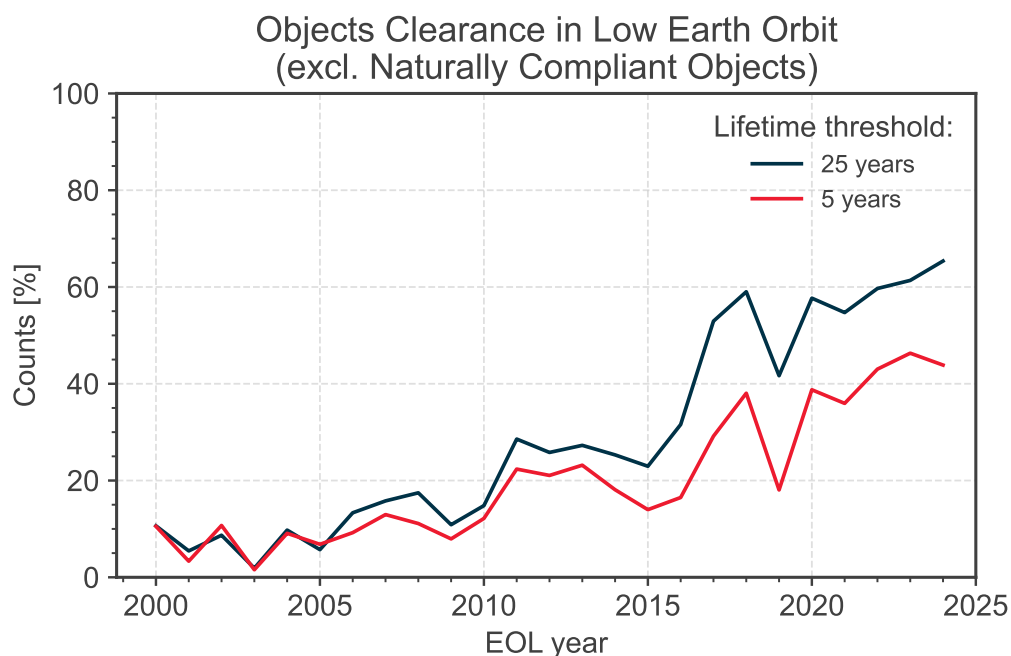
(a) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC}.(b) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} excluding naturally compliant objects.

Figure 6.1: Trend of adherence to clearance of LEO_{IADC} over time to 5 and 25 year lifetime limits by share of space object count, excluding space objects associated with human spaceflight, including (top) and excluding (bottom) naturally compliant space objects.

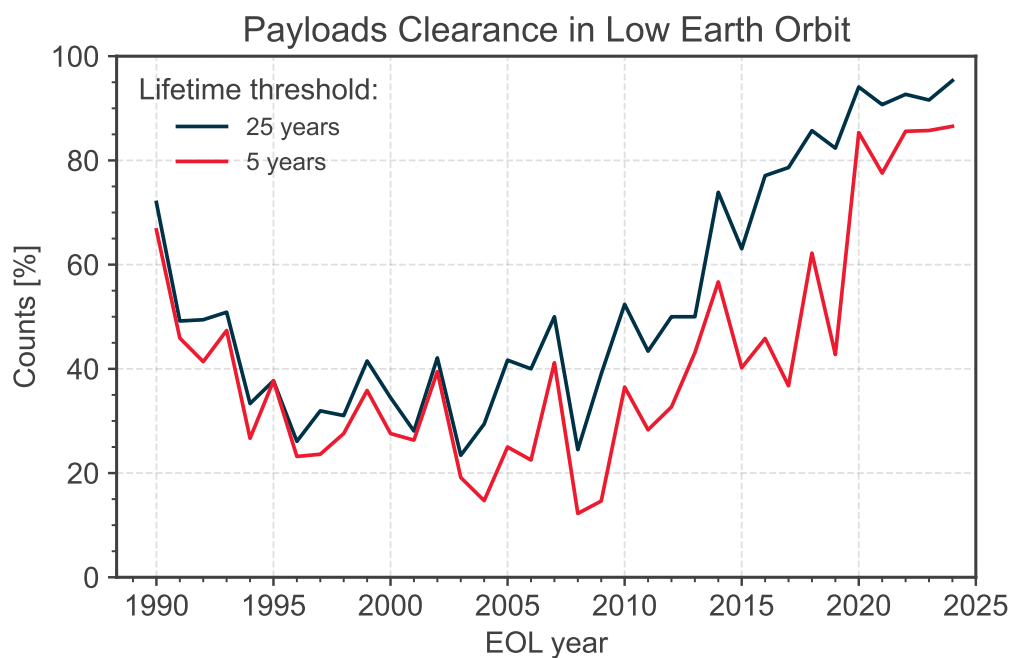
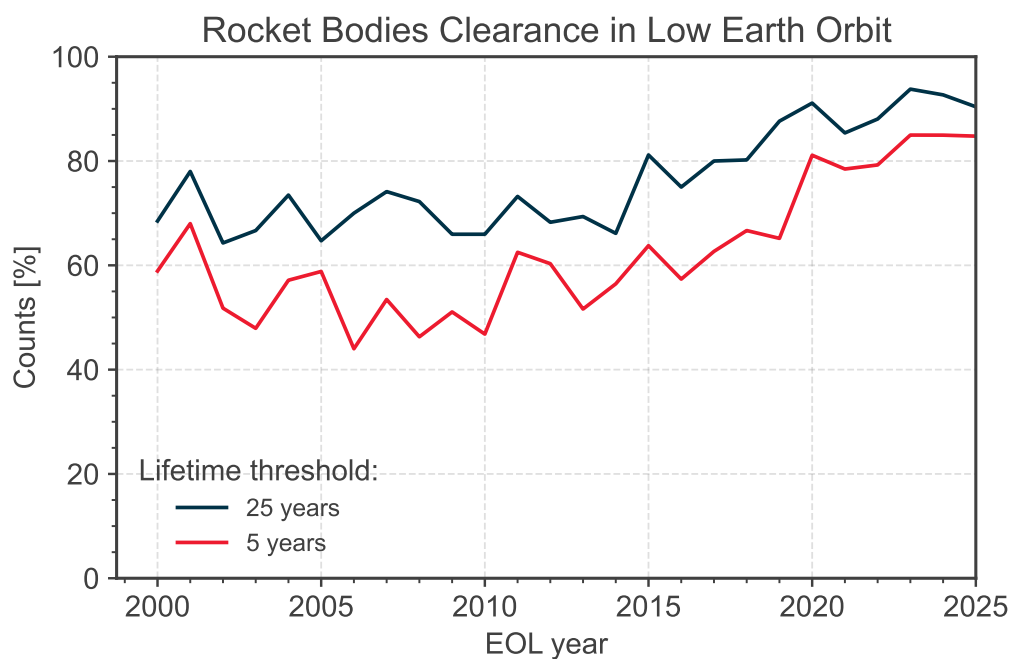
(a) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by payloads.(b) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by rocket bodies.

Figure 6.2: Trend of adherence to clearance of LEO_{IADC} over time to 5 and 25 year lifetime limits by share of space object count, excluding space objects associated with human spaceflight.

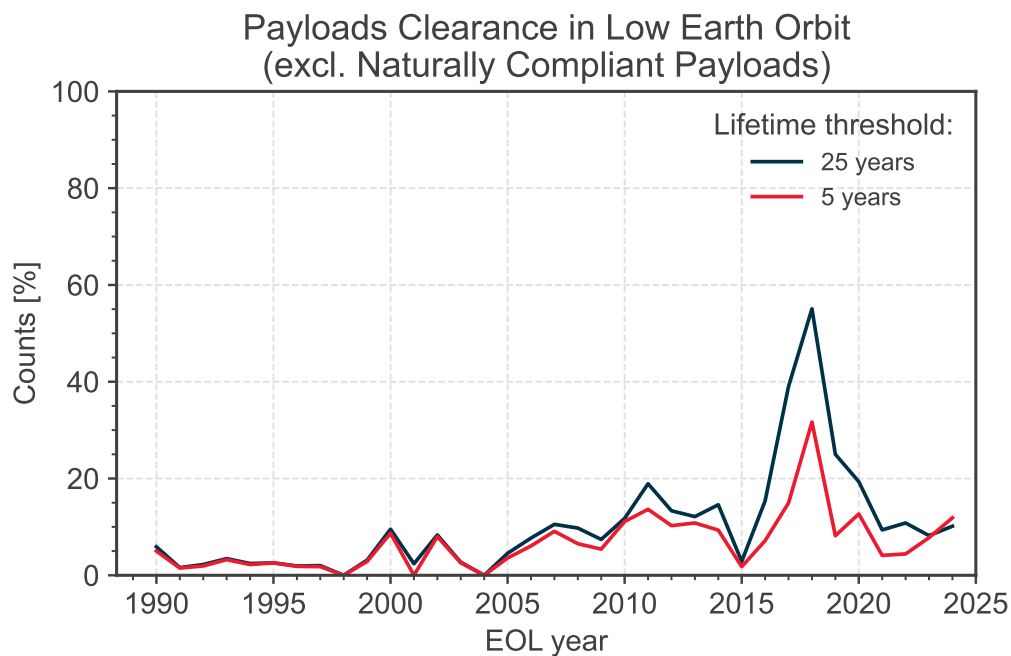
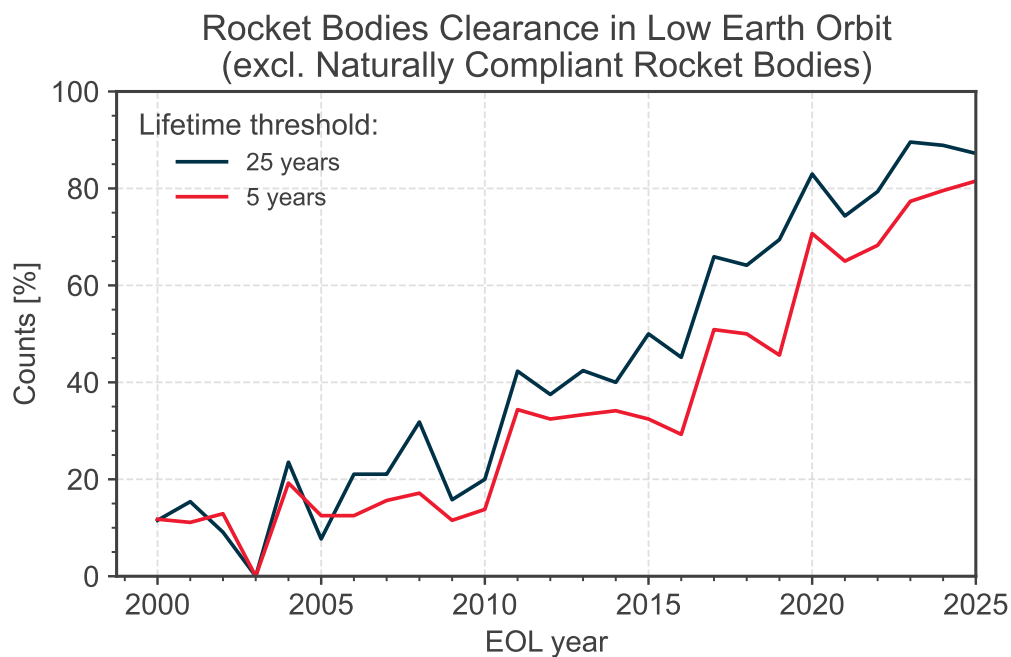
(a) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by payloads.(b) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by rocket bodies.

Figure 6.3: Trend of adherence to clearance of LEO_{IADC} over time to 5 and 25 year lifetime limits by share of space object count, excluding naturally compliant space objects, and space objects associated with human spaceflight.

6.1.2. Compliance to a 25-year lifetime limit

6.1.2.1. Evolution of compliance shares

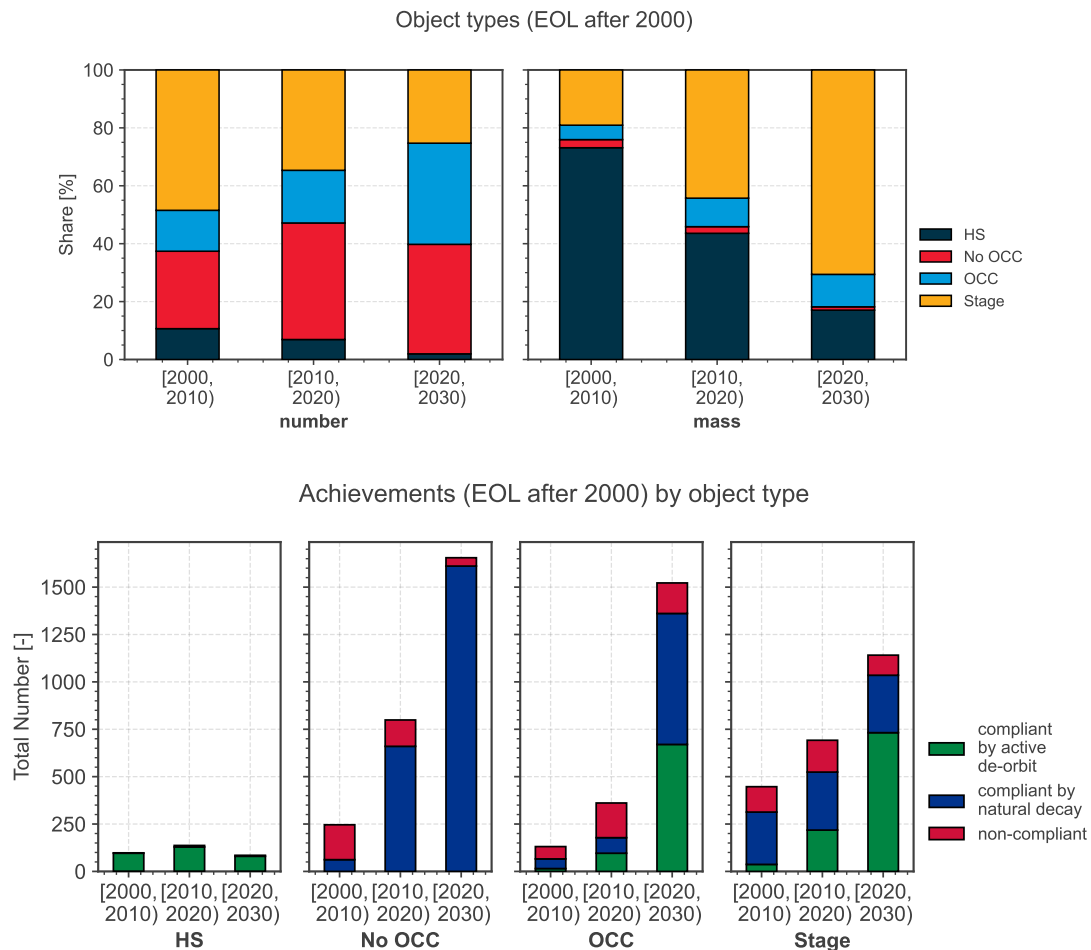


Figure 6.4: Share of payloads and rocket bodies in terms of mass and number (top) and compliance in terms of clearing the LEO protected region (bottom). The reported years for payload clearance of LEO_{IADC} goes up to 2024, for rocket body clearance of LEO_{IADC} goes up to 2025, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

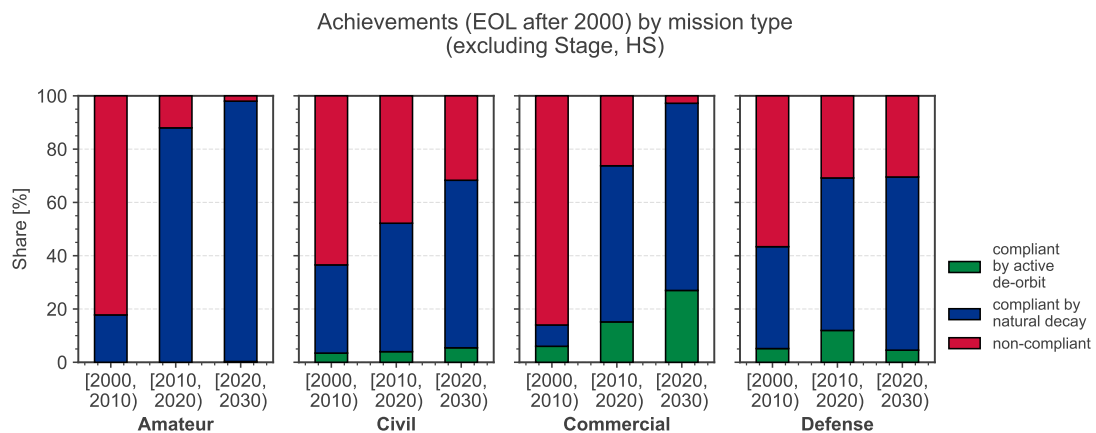


Figure 6.5: Share of compliance in terms of clearing the LEO protected region by mission type, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

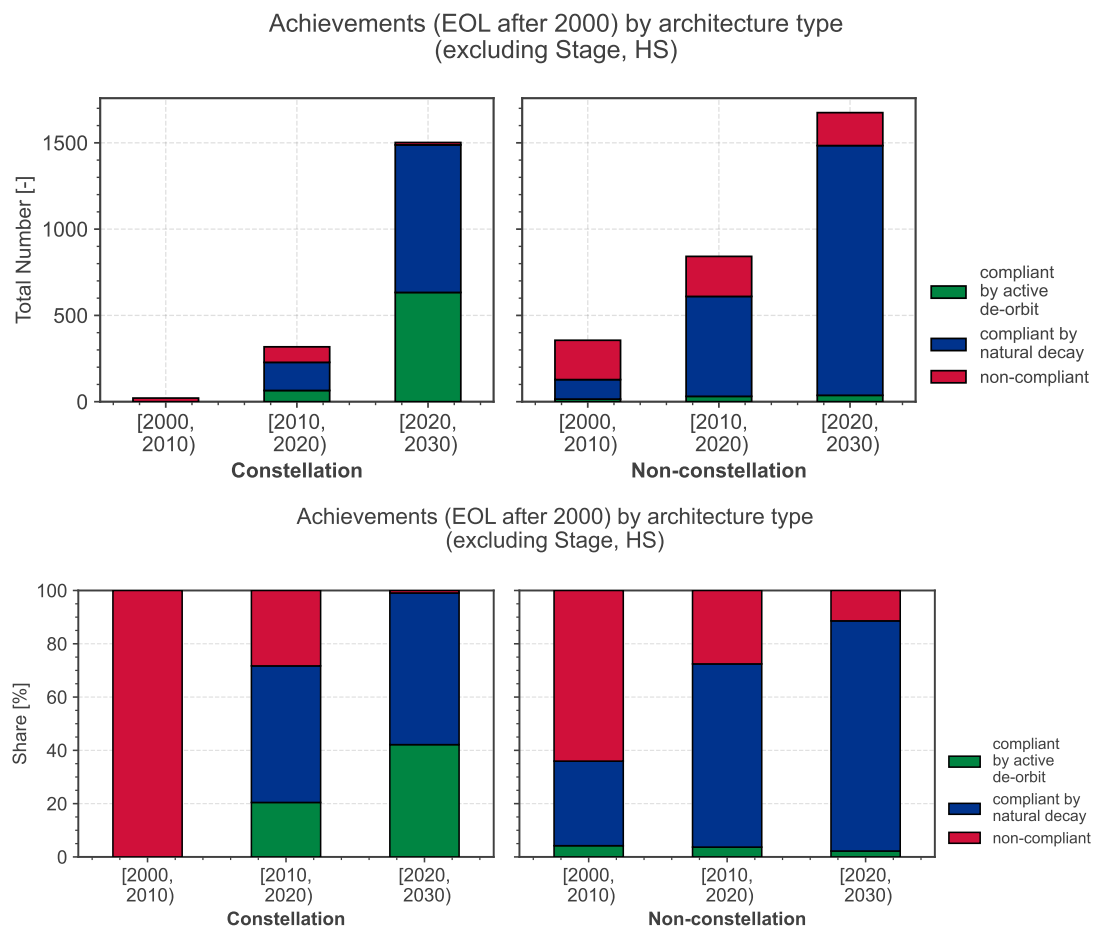


Figure 6.6: Compliance in terms of clearing the LEO protected region for constellation and non-constellation objects, in absolute numbers and in relative share, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

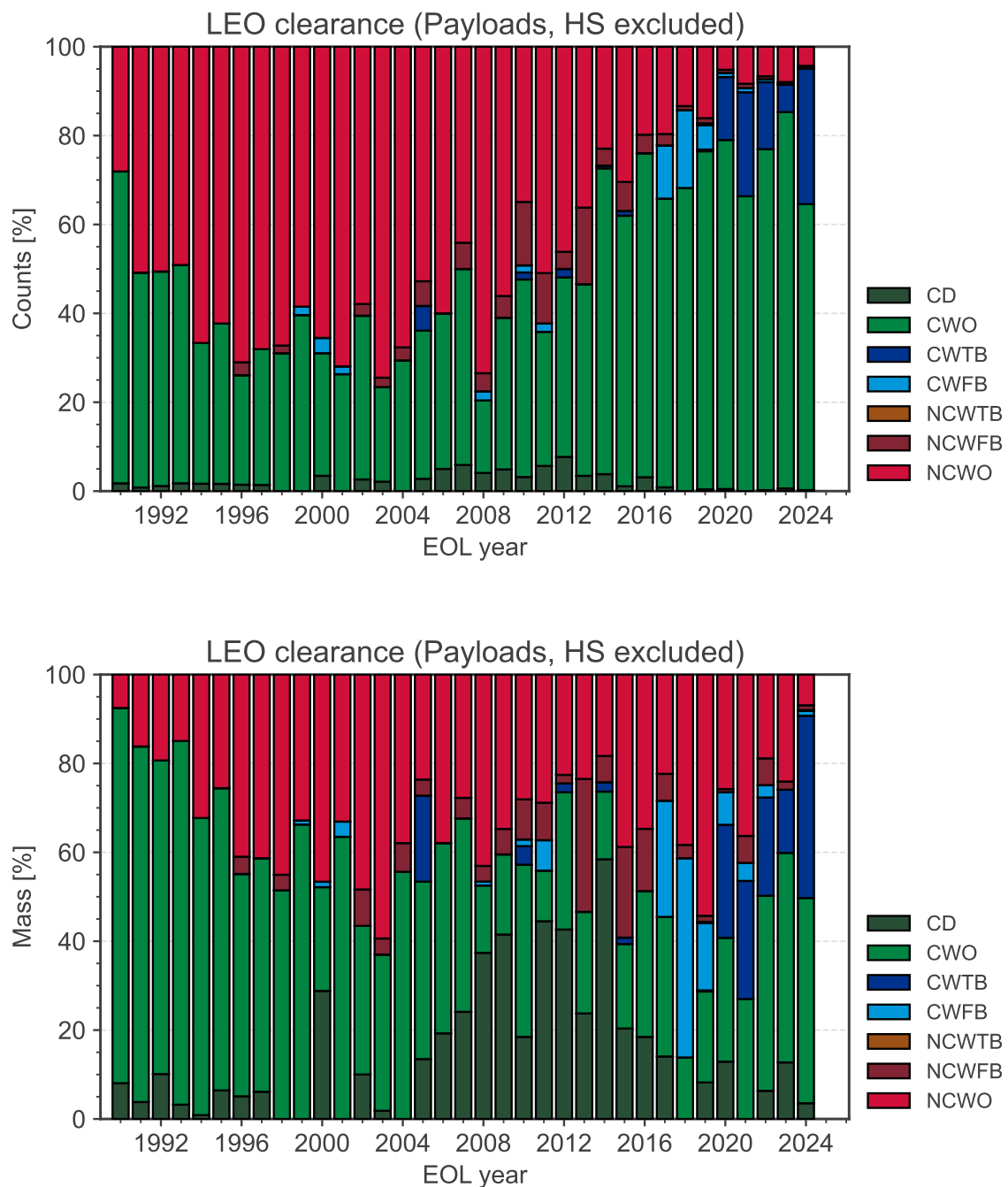


Figure 6.7: Relative share of disposal behaviour classes over time in terms of number (top) and mass (bottom) for payloads in LEO, excluding objects associated with human spaceflight by end-of-life year, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

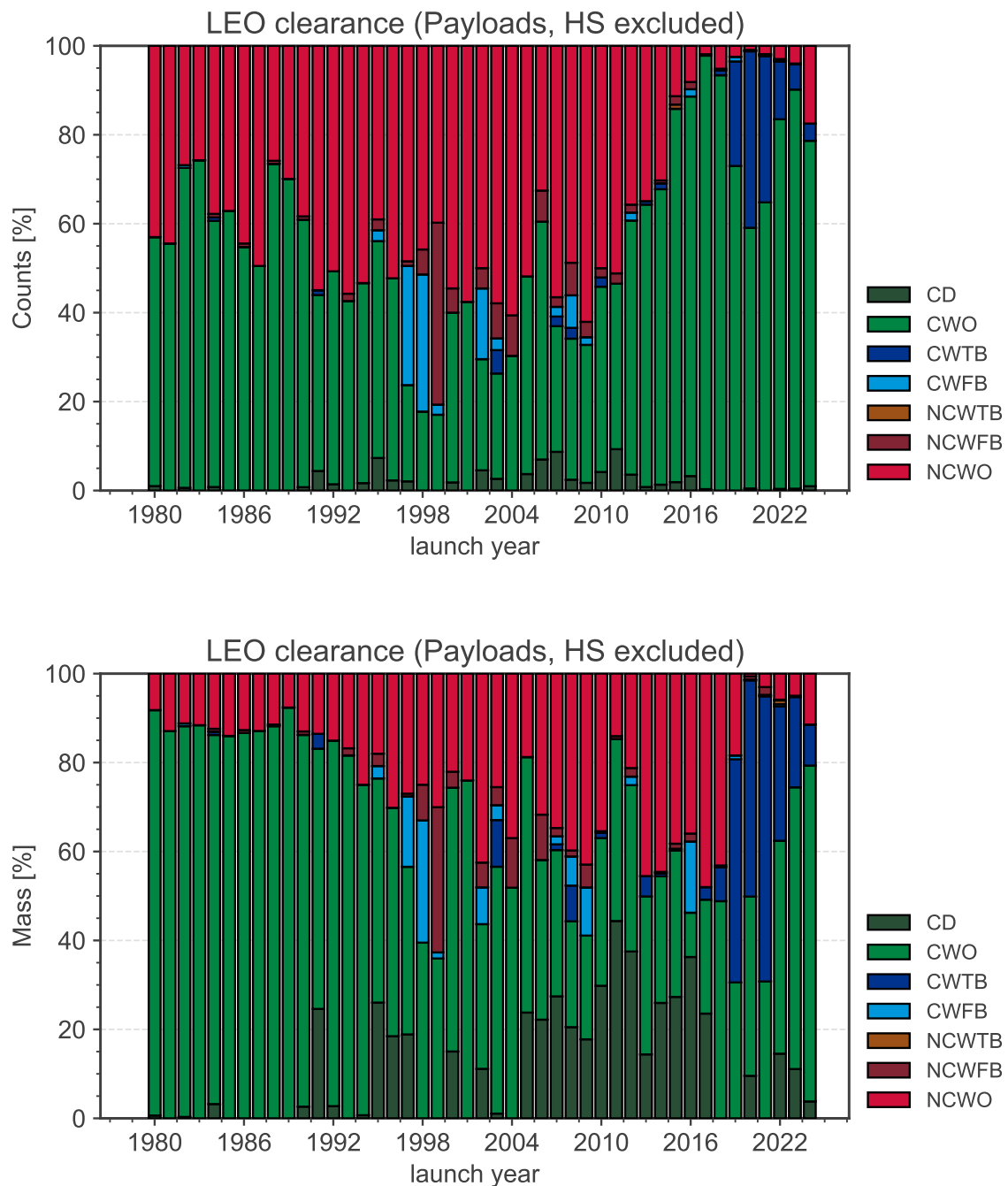


Figure 6.8: Relative share of disposal behaviour classes over time in terms of number (top) and mass (bottom) for payloads in LEO, excluding objects associated with human spaceflight by launch year, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

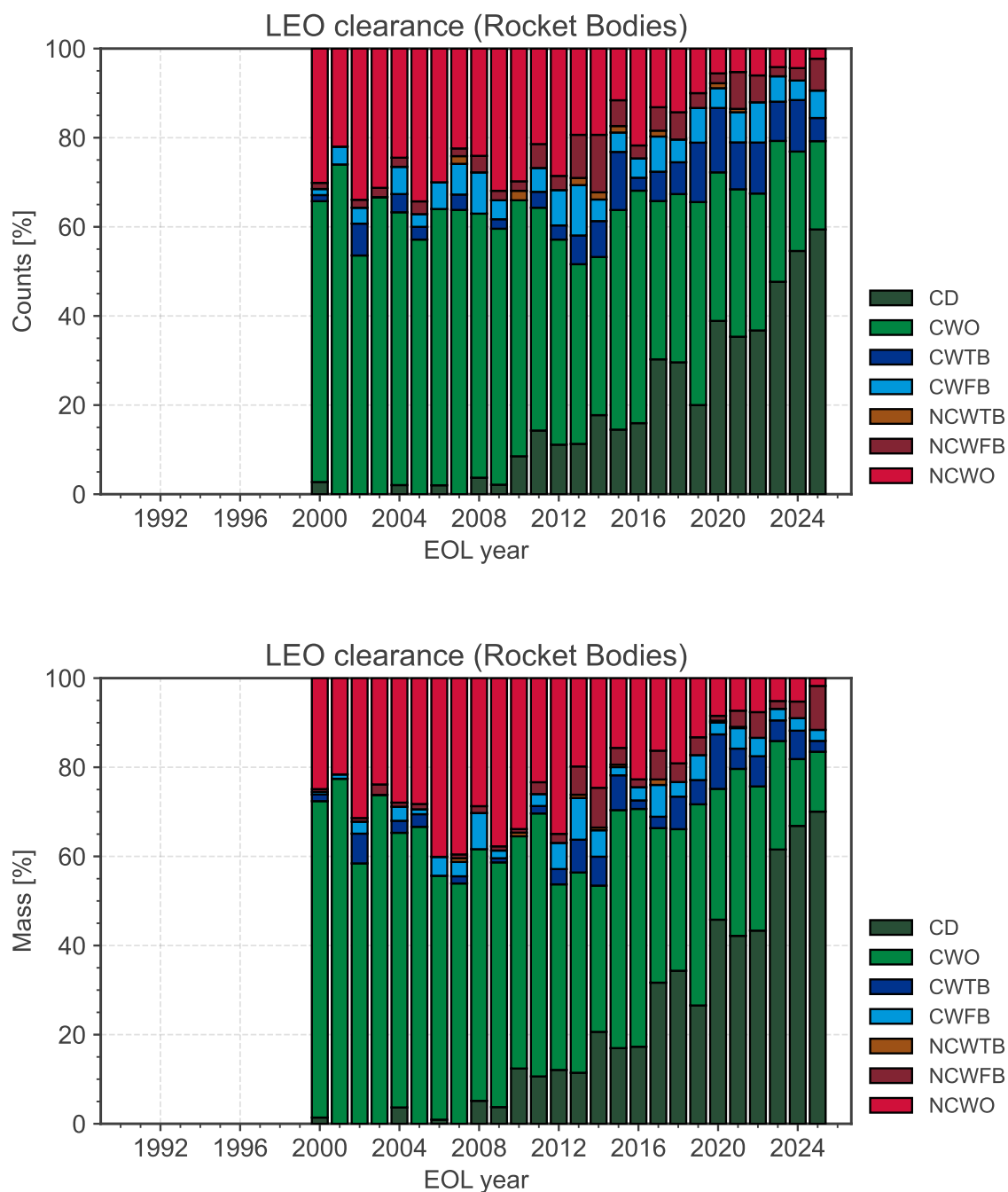


Figure 6.9: Relative share of disposal behaviour classes over time in terms of number (top) and mass (bottom) for Rocket Bodies in LEO by end-of-life, i.e. launch year, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

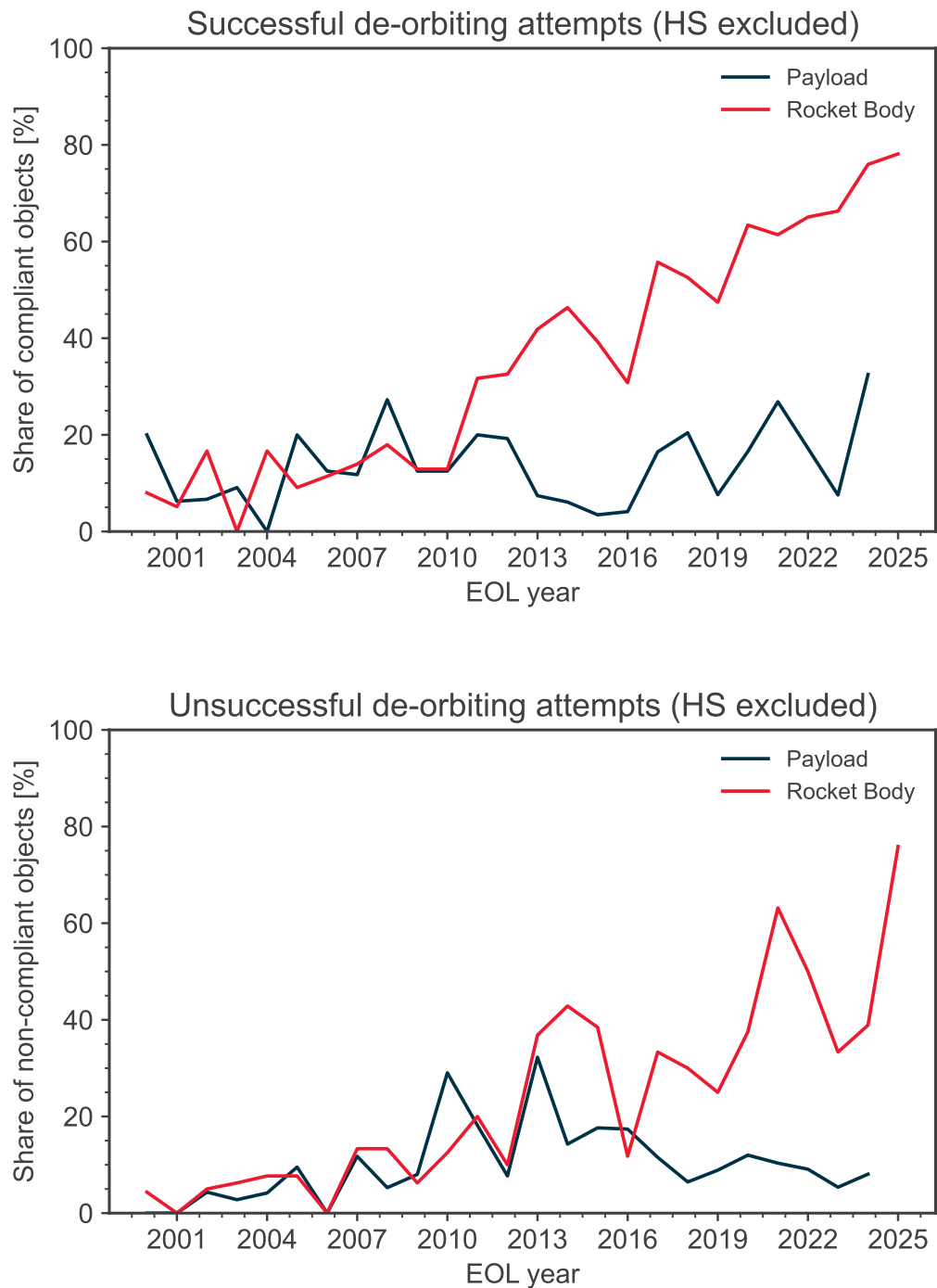


Figure 6.10: Relative shares of success w.r.t. compliance (top) and non-compliance (bottom) over time, excluding objects associated with human spaceflight, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

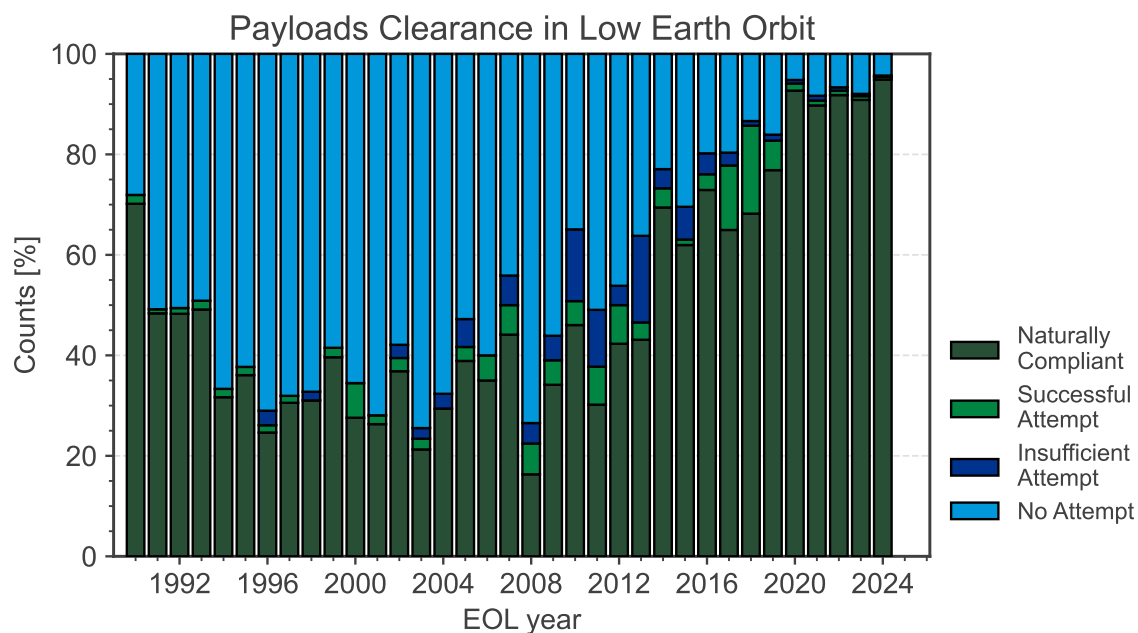
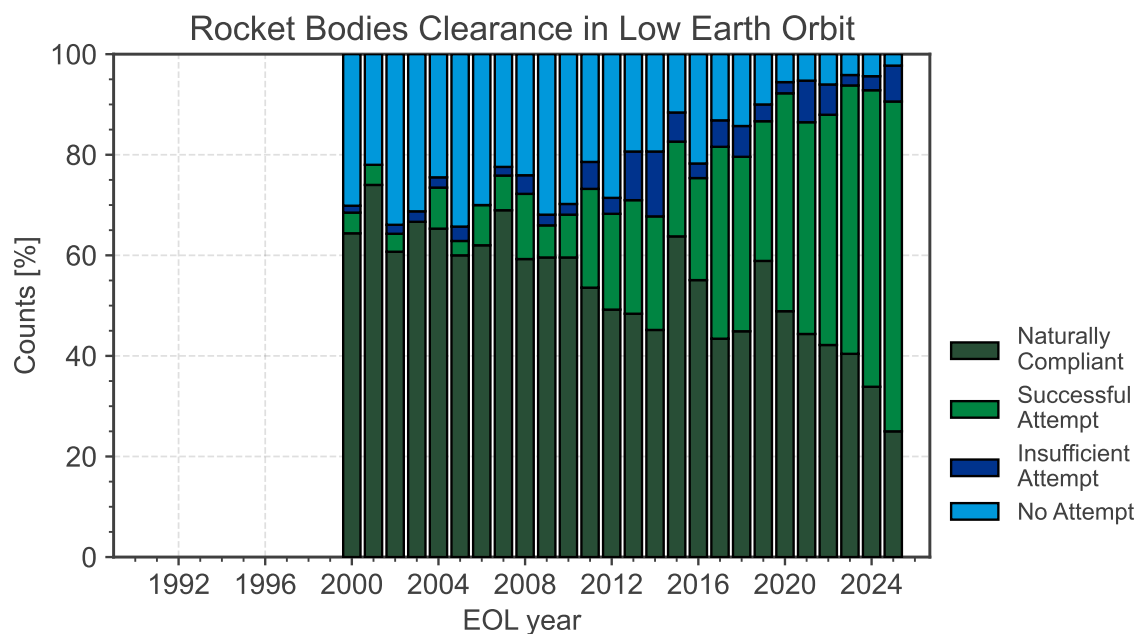
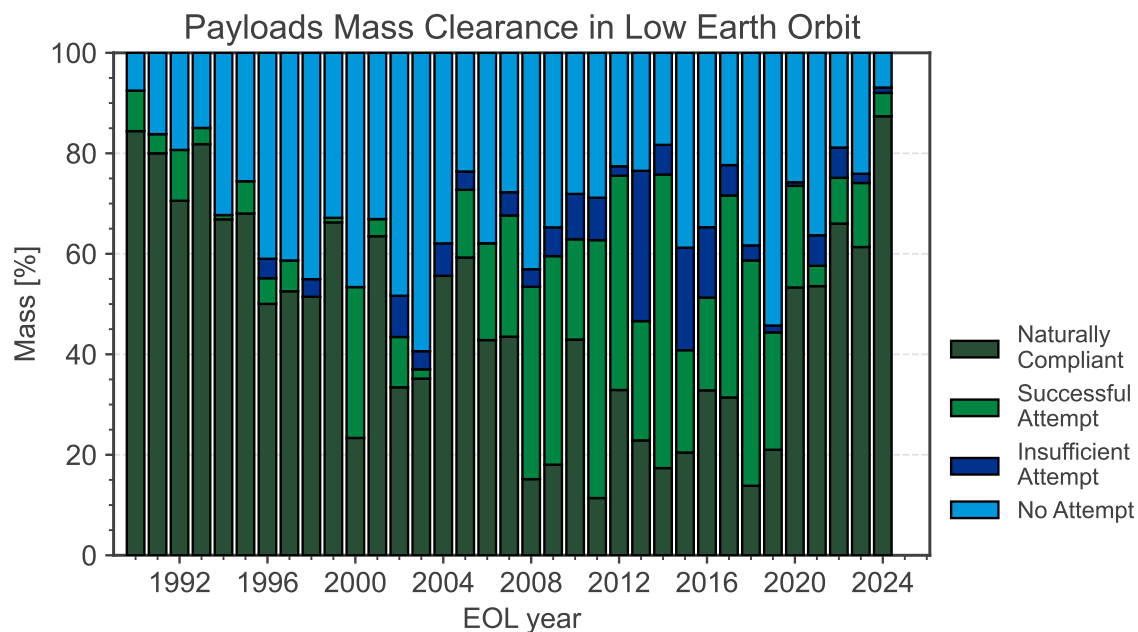
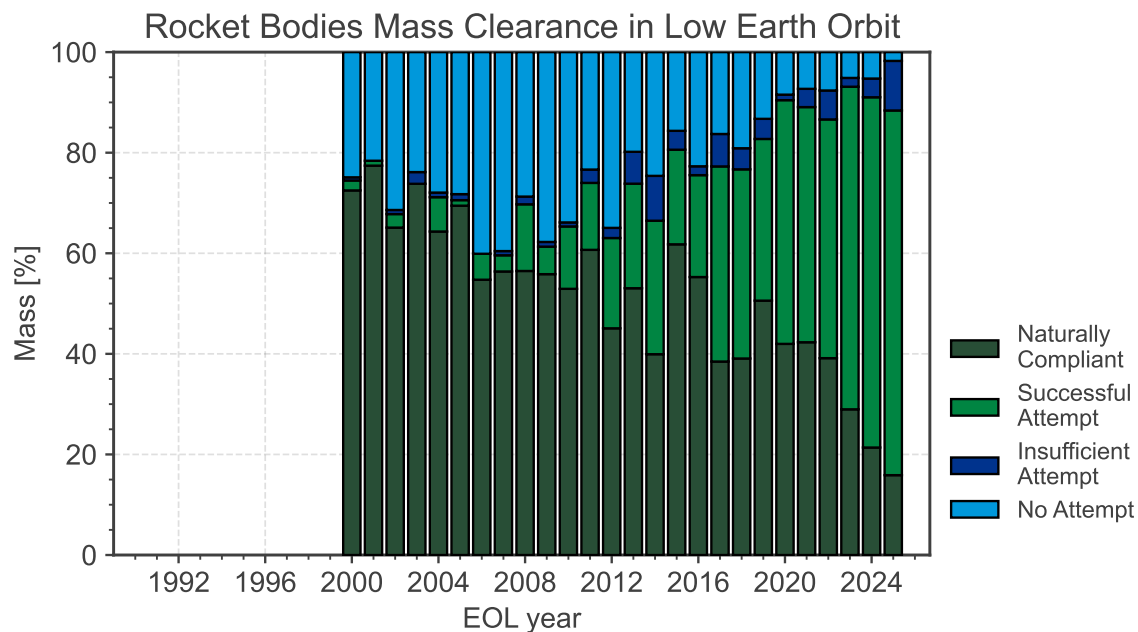
(a) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by payloads.(b) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by rocket bodies.

Figure 6.11: Trend of adherence to clearance of LEO_{IADC} over time in terms of numbers, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

(a) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by payloads.(b) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by rocket bodies.Figure 6.12: Trend of adherence to clearance of LEO_{IADC} over time in terms of mass, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

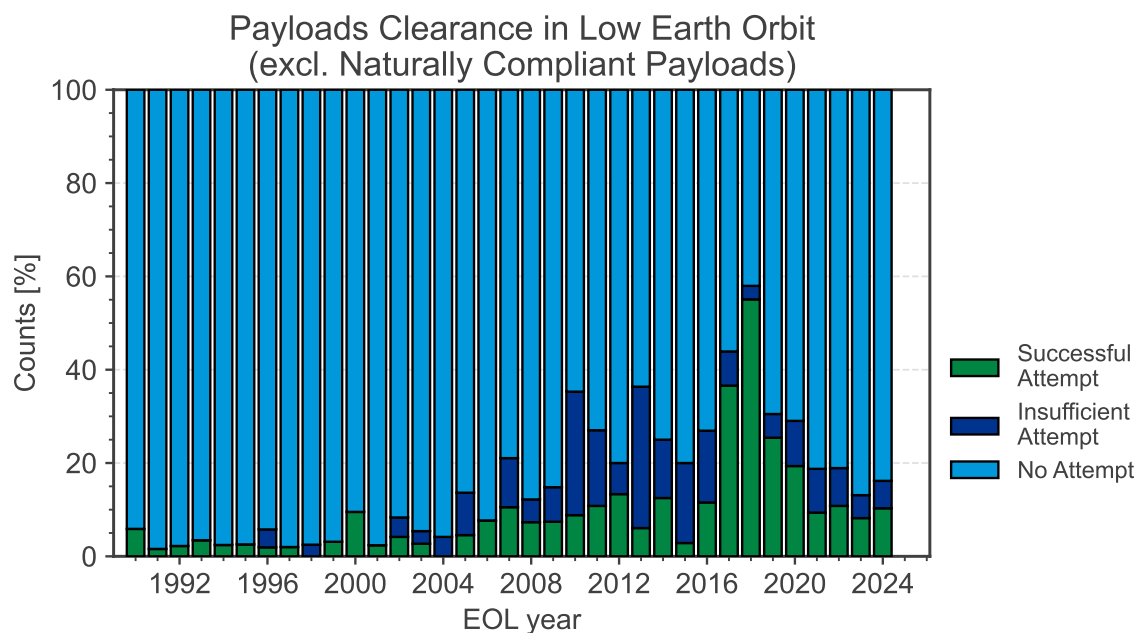
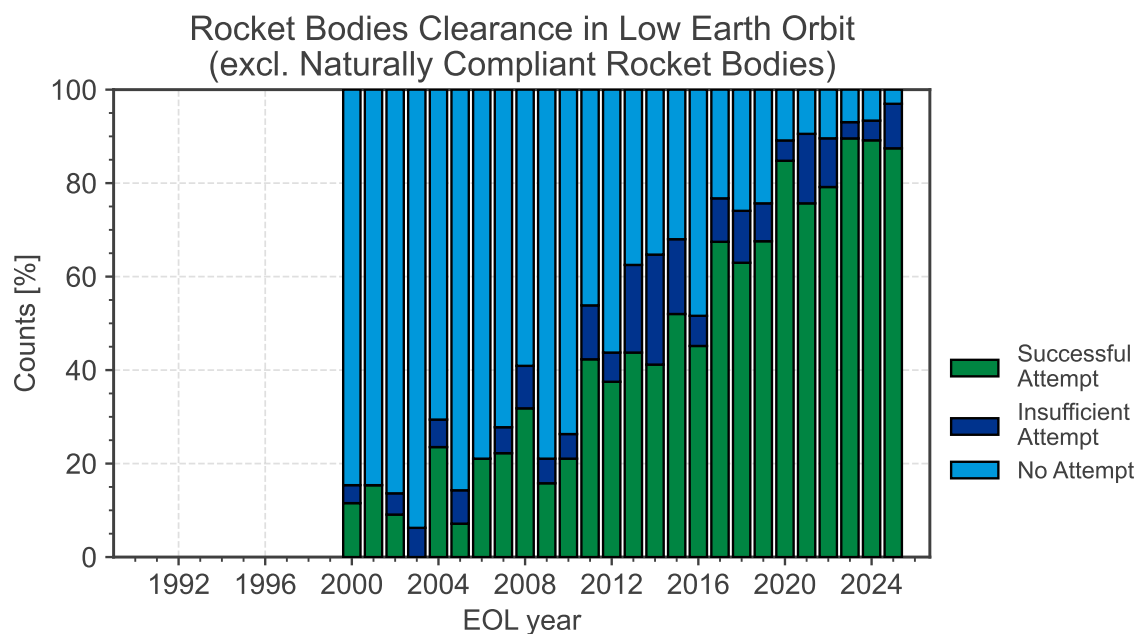
(a) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by payloads.(b) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by rocket bodies.

Figure 6.13: Trend of adherence to clearance of LEO_{IADC} over time in terms of numbers, excluding naturally compliant objects, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

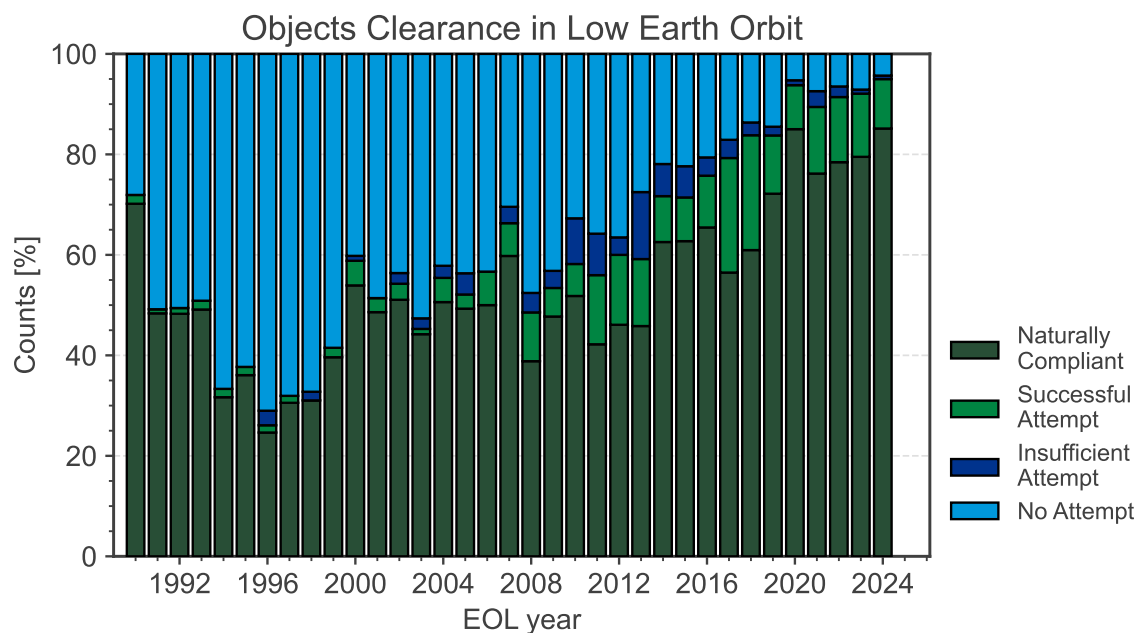
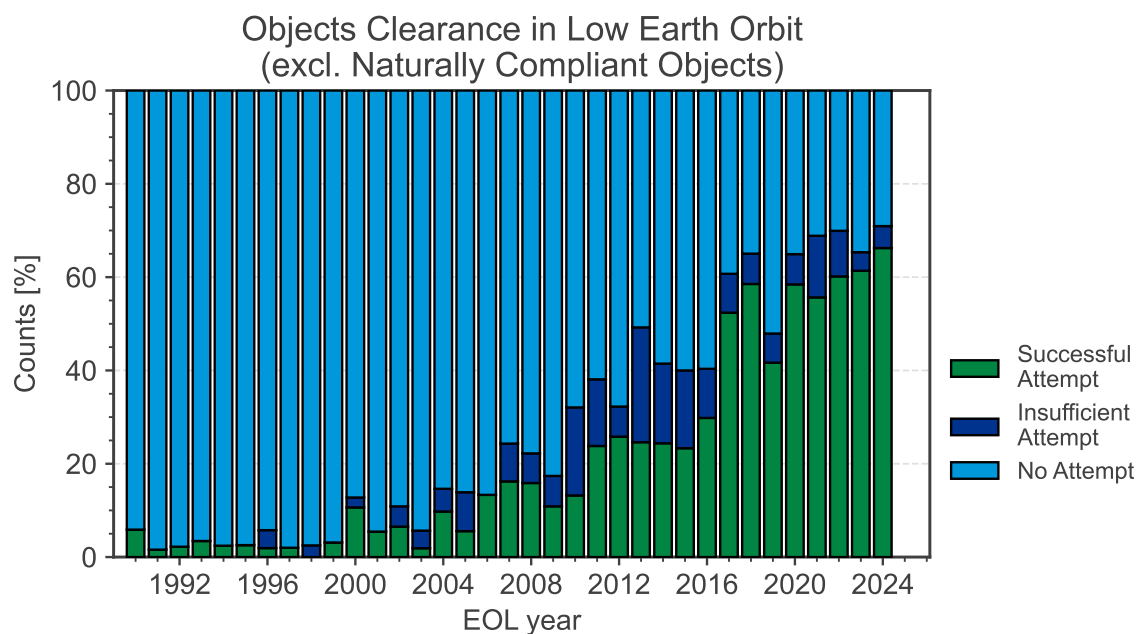
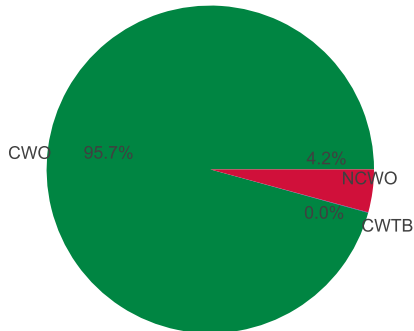
(a) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} .(b) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} excluding naturally compliant objects.

Figure 6.14: Trend of adherence to clearance of LEO_{IADC} over time in terms of numbers, considering payloads and rocket bodies together, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

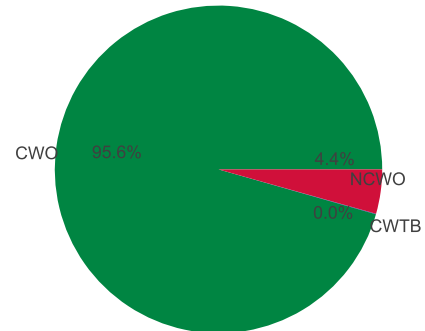
6.1.2.2. Evolution of behavioural classes per mass breakdown

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 1990, $m \leq 10$ kg)



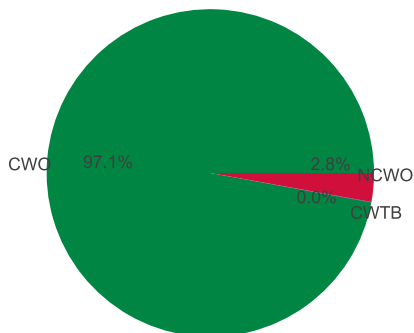
(a) 1990

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2000, $m \leq 10$ kg)



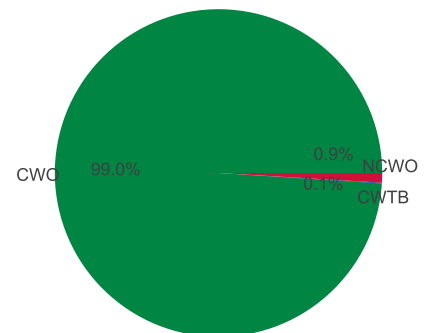
(b) 2000

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2010, $m \leq 10$ kg)



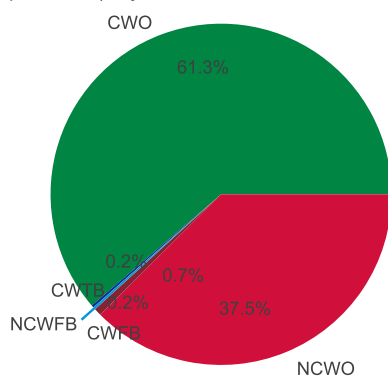
(c) 2010

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2020, $m \leq 10$ kg)

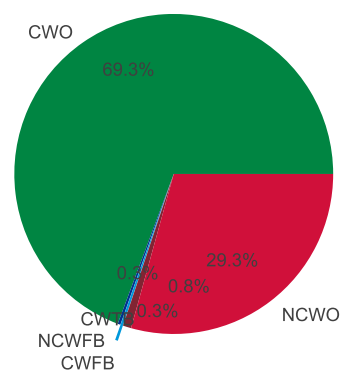


(d) 2020

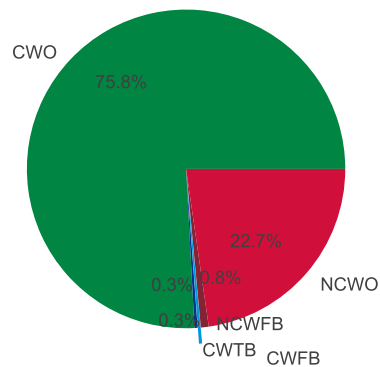
Figure 6.15: Breakdown per decade of observed behavioural classes for payloads with a mass below 10.0 kg, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 1990, $10 < m \leq 100$ kg)

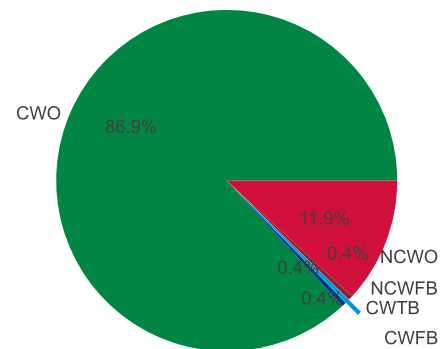
(a) 1990

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2000, $10 < m \leq 100$ kg)

(b) 2000

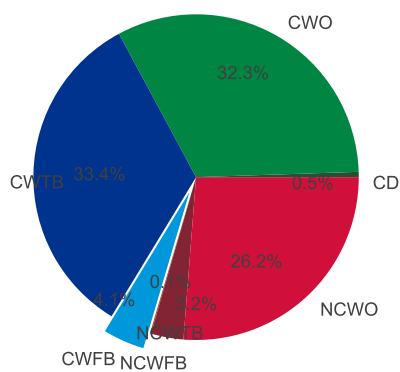
LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2010, $10 < m \leq 100$ kg)

(c) 2010

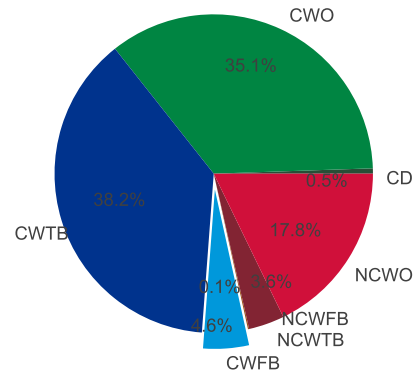
LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2020, $10 < m \leq 100$ kg)

(d) 2020

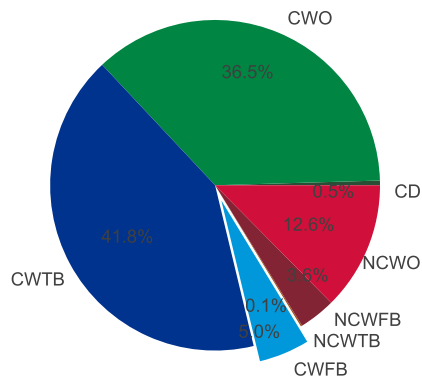
Figure 6.16: Breakdown per decade of observed behavioural classes for payloads with a mass between 10.0 and 100.0 kg, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 1990, $100 < m \leq 1000$ kg)

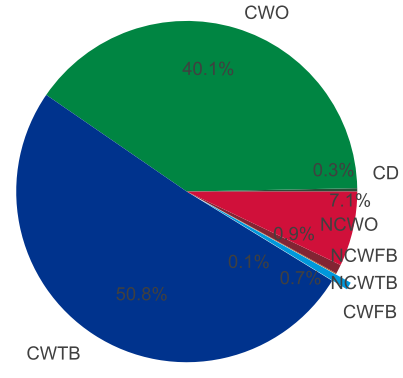
(a) 1990

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2000, $100 < m \leq 1000$ kg)

(b) 2000

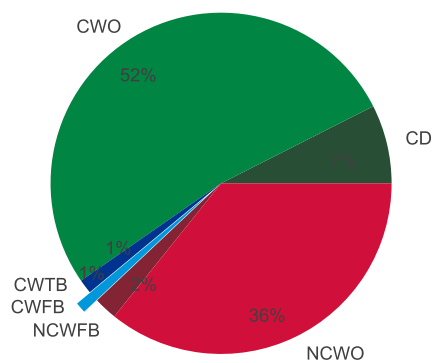
LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2010, $100 < m \leq 1000$ kg)

(c) 2010

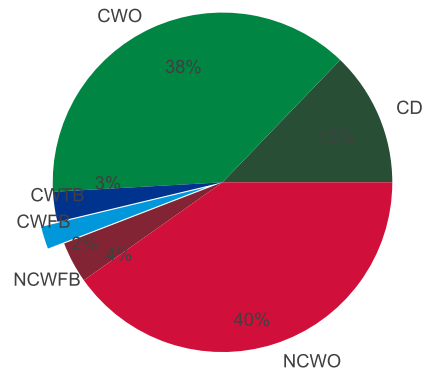
LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2020, $100 < m \leq 1000$ kg)

(d) 2020

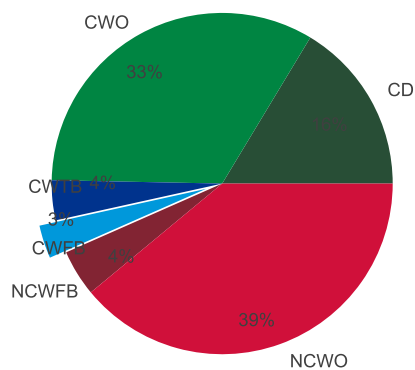
Figure 6.17: Breakdown per decade of observed behavioural classes for payloads with a mass between 100.0 and 1000.0 kg, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 1990, $m > 1000$ kg)

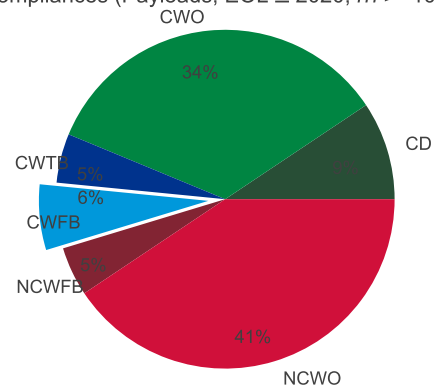
(a) 1990

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2000, $m > 1000$ kg)

(b) 2000

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2010, $m > 1000$ kg)

(c) 2010

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2020, $m > 1000$ kg)

(d) 2020

Figure 6.18: Breakdown per decade of observed behavioural classes for payloads with a mass above 1000.0 kg, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

6.1.3. Compliance to a 5-year lifetime limit

6.1.3.1. Evolution of compliance shares

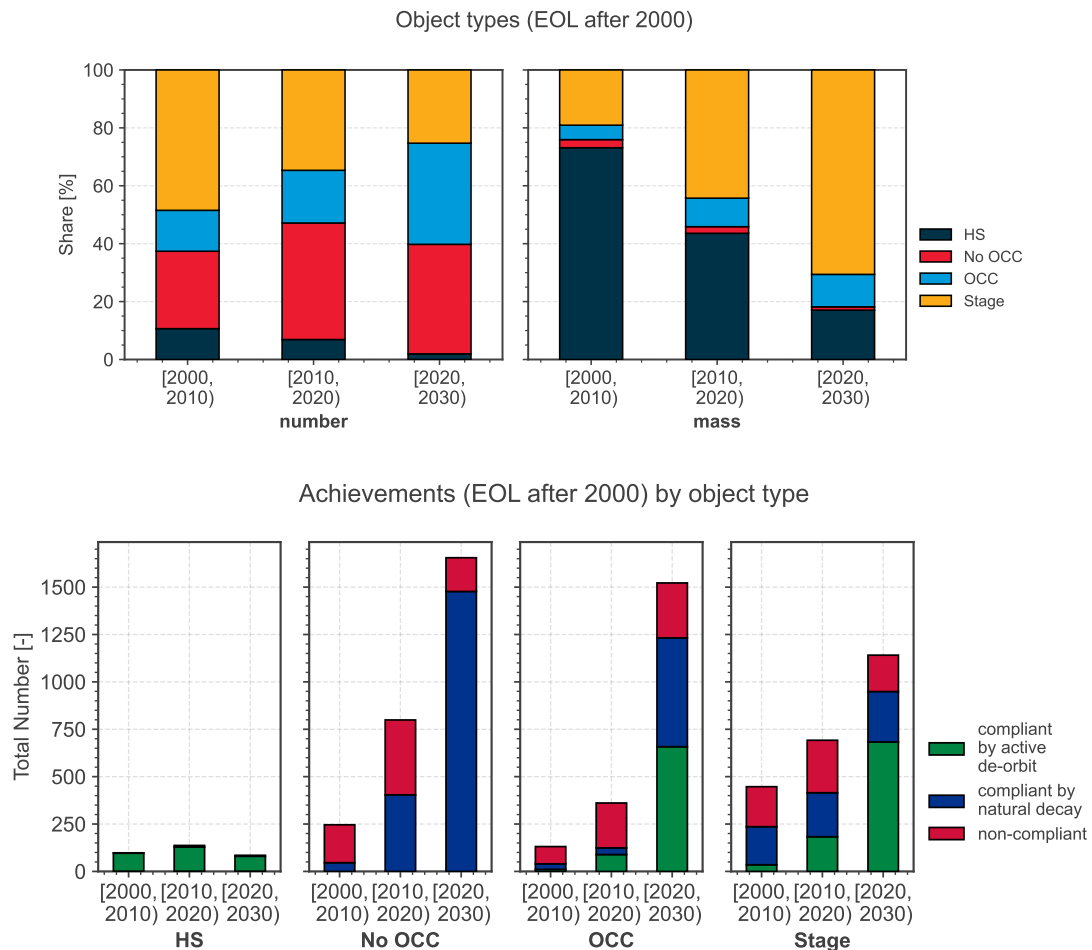


Figure 6.19: Share of payloads and rocket bodies in terms of mass and number (top) and compliance in terms of clearing the LEO protected region (bottom). The reported years for payload clearance of LEO_{IADC} goes up to 2024, for rocket body clearance of LEO_{IADC} goes up to 2025, for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

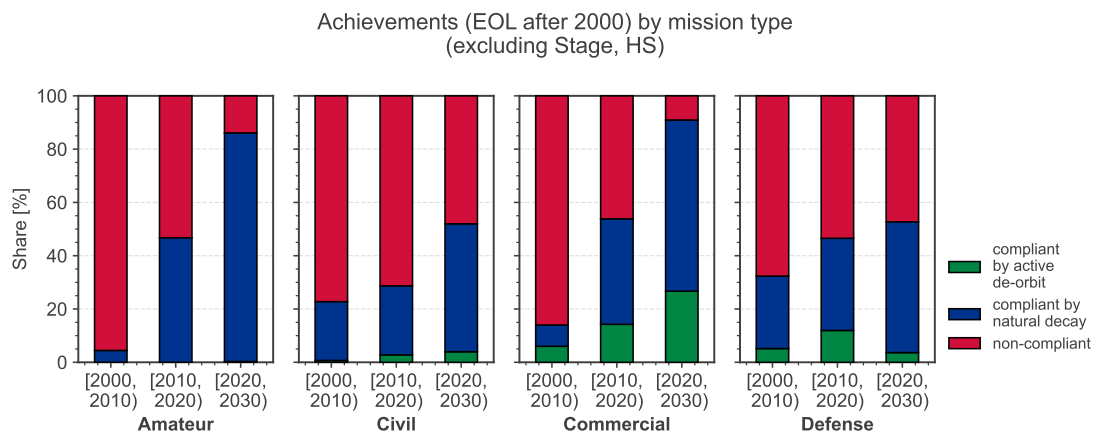


Figure 6.20: Share of compliance in terms of clearing the LEO protected region by mission type, for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

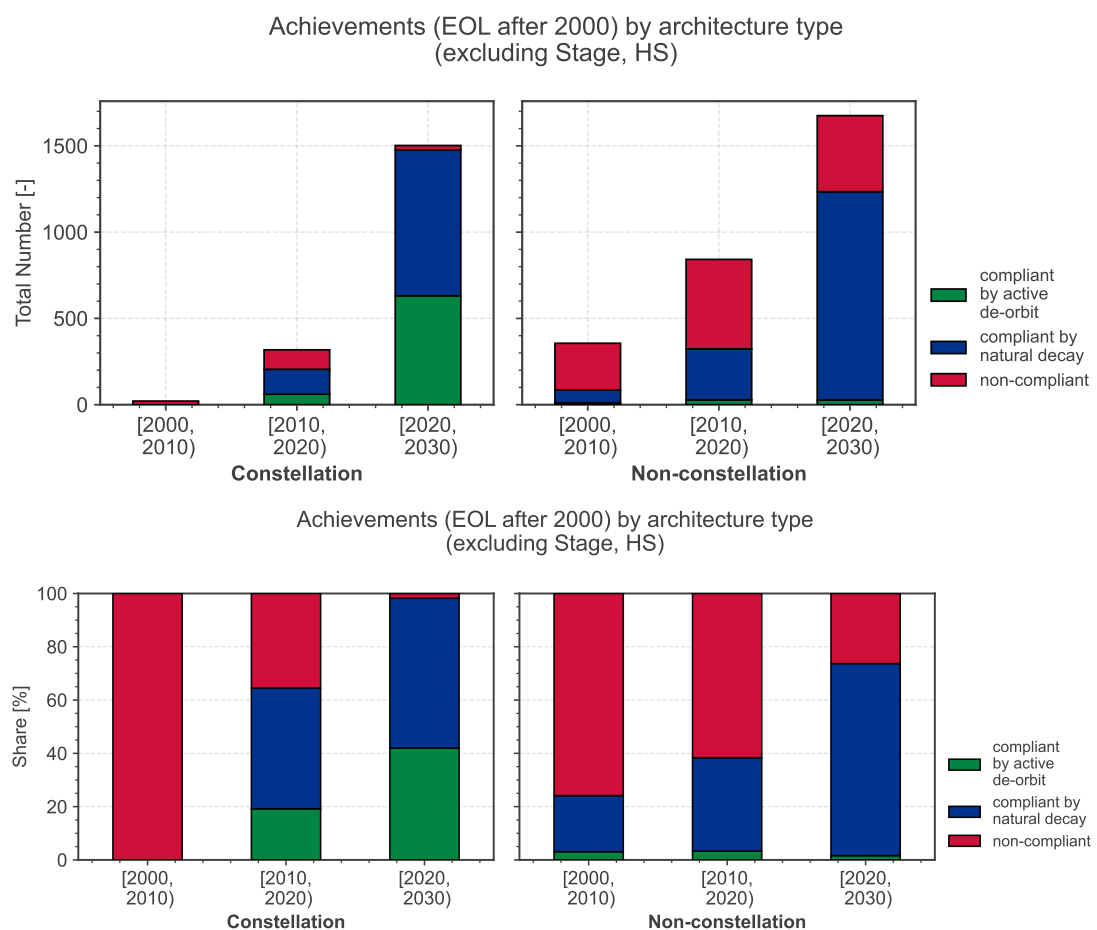


Figure 6.21: Compliance in terms of clearing the LEO protected region for constellation and non-constellation objects, in absolute numbers and in relative share, for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

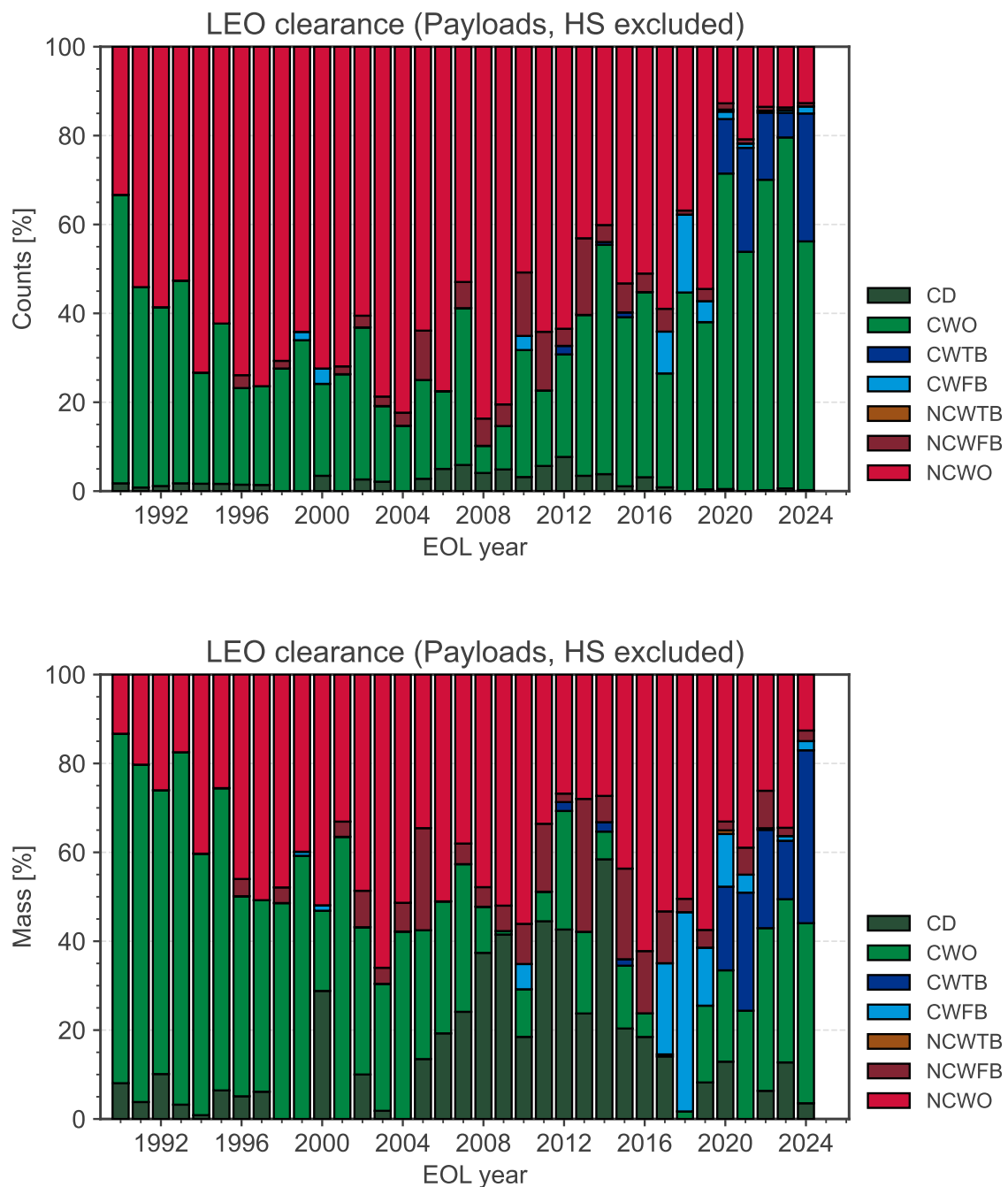


Figure 6.22: Relative share of disposal behaviour classes over time in terms of number (top) and mass (bottom) for payloads in LEO, excluding objects associated with human spaceflight by end-of-life year, for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

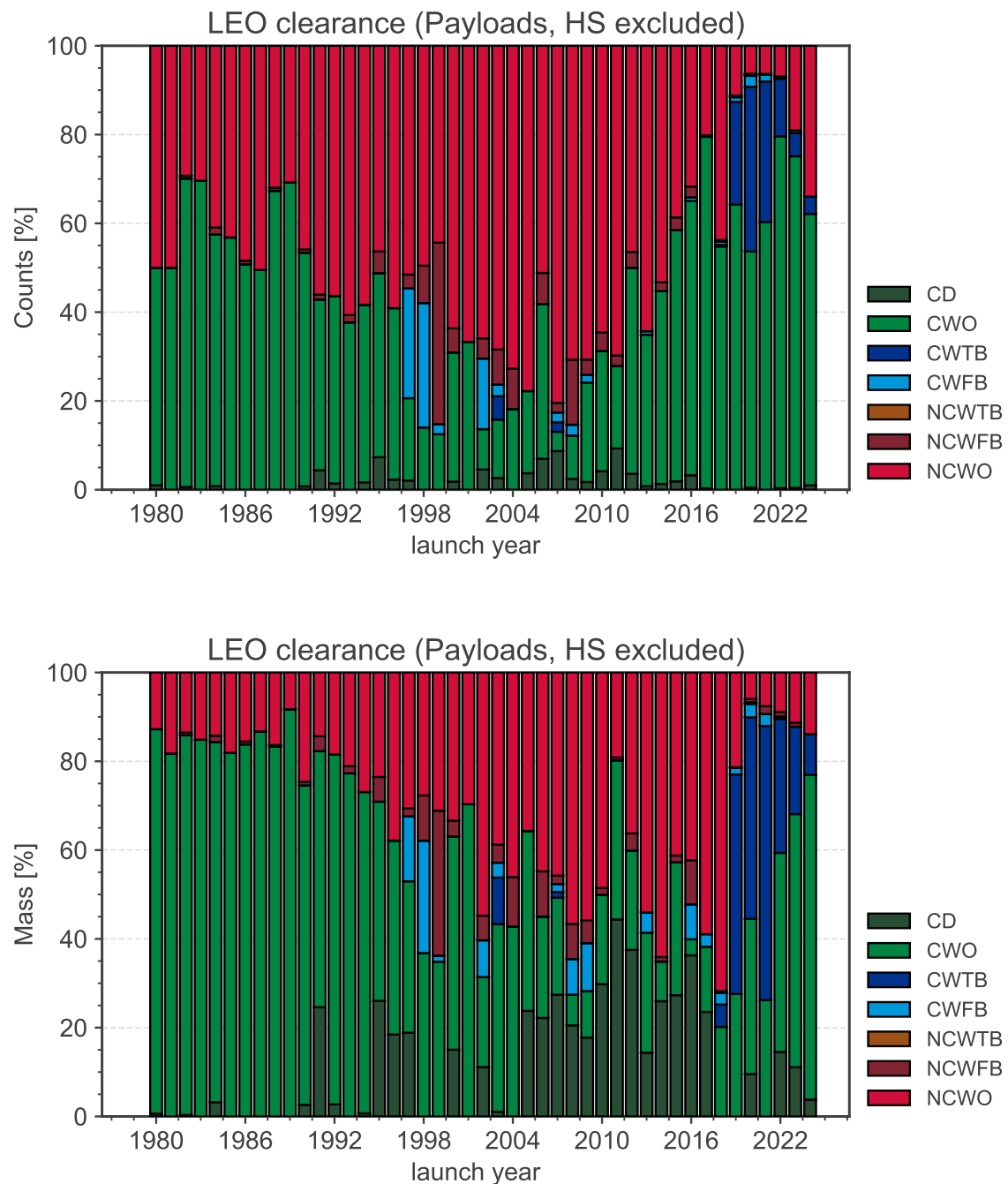


Figure 6.23: Relative share of disposal behaviour classes over time in terms of number (top) and mass (bottom) for payloads in LEO, excluding objects associated with human spaceflight by launch year, for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

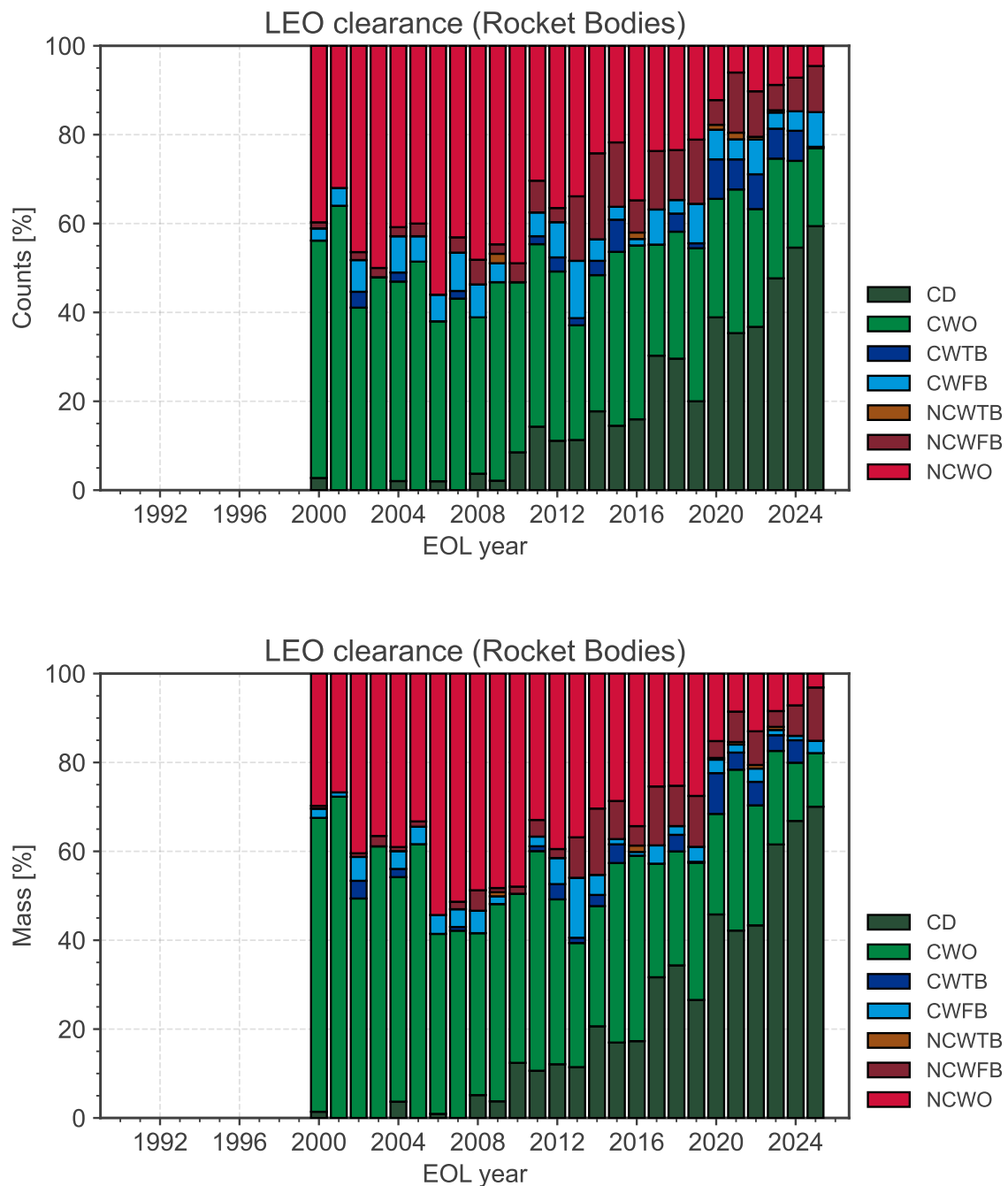


Figure 6.24: Relative share of disposal behaviour classes over time in terms of number (top) and mass (bottom) for Rocket Bodies in LEO by end-of-life, i.e. launch year, for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

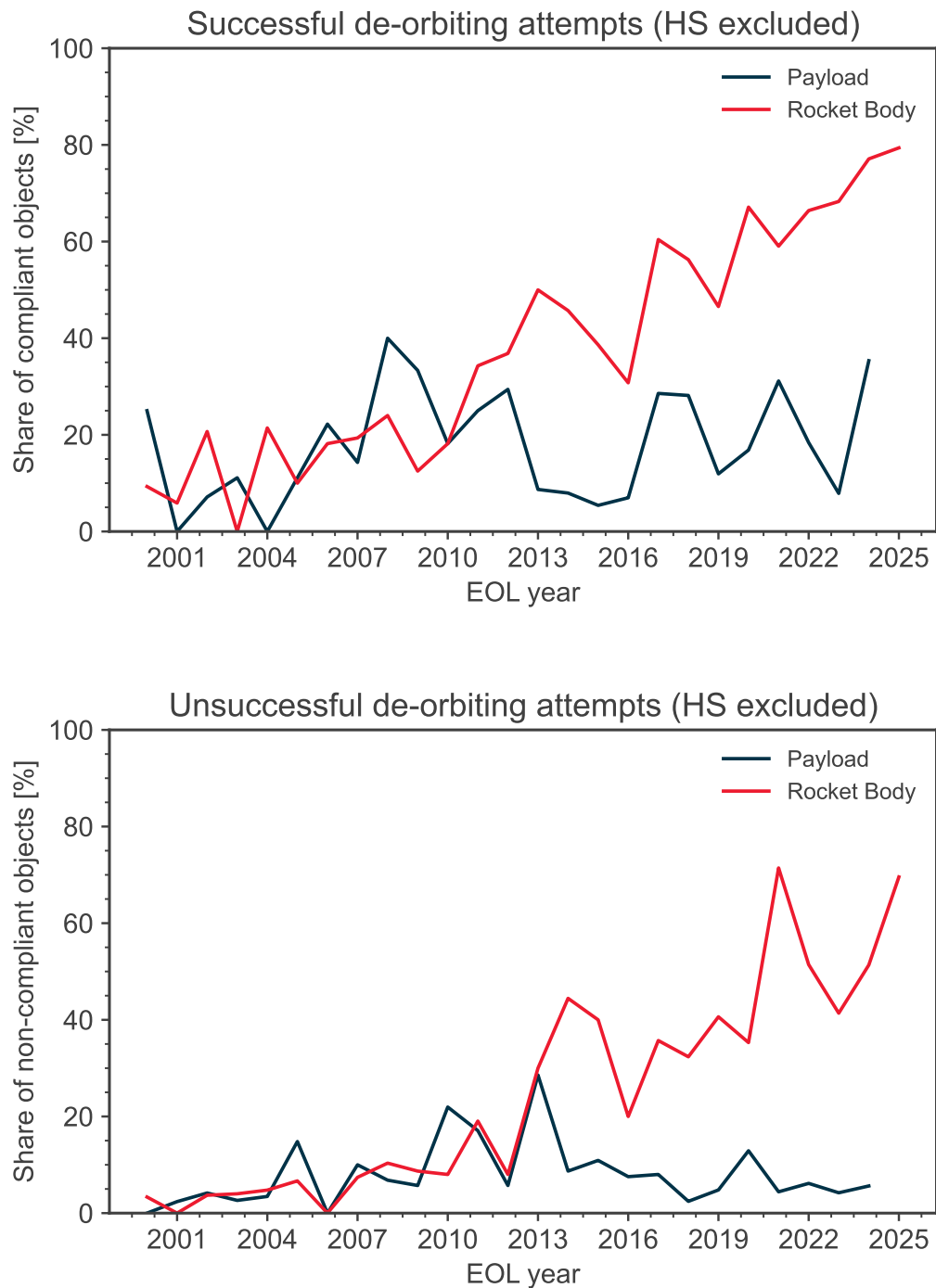


Figure 6.25: Relative shares of success w.r.t. compliance (top) and non-compliance (bottom) over time, excluding objects associated with human spaceflight, for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

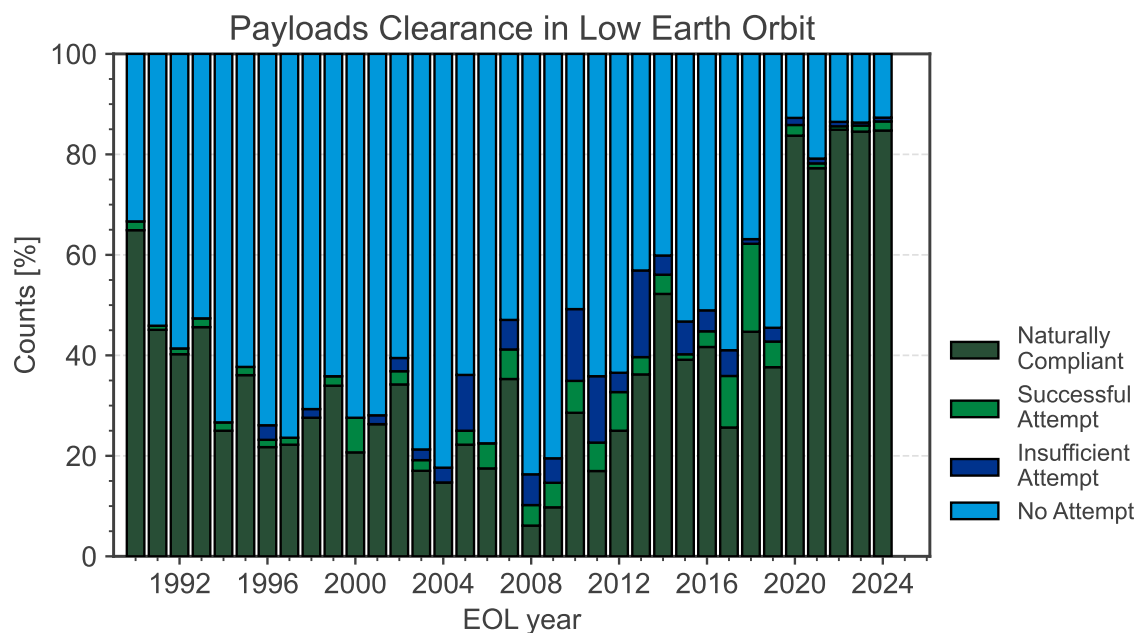
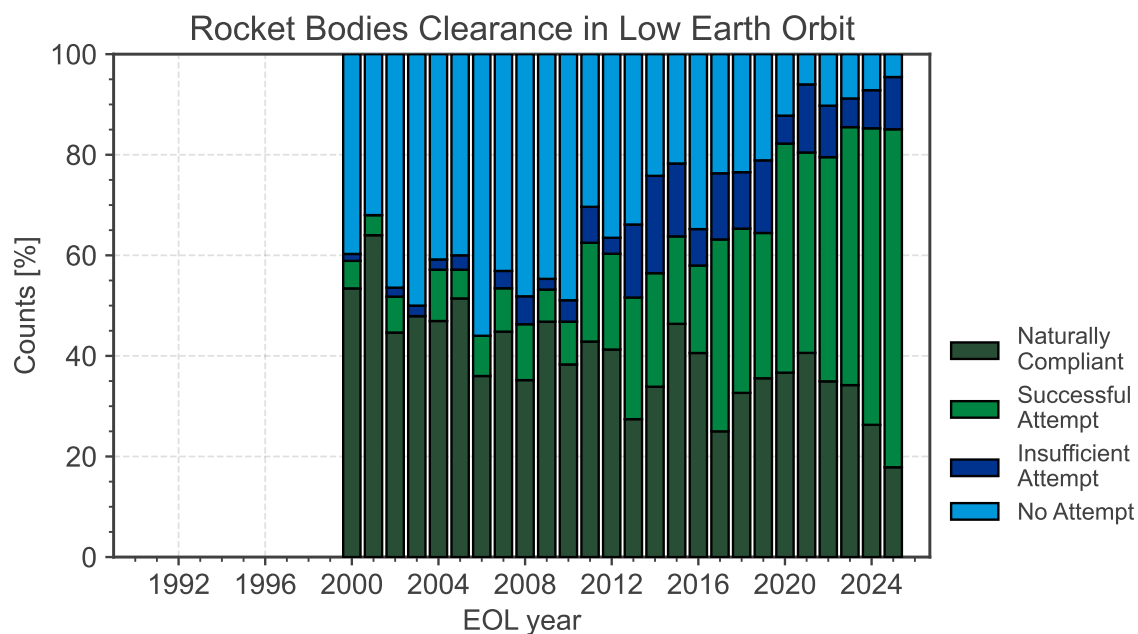
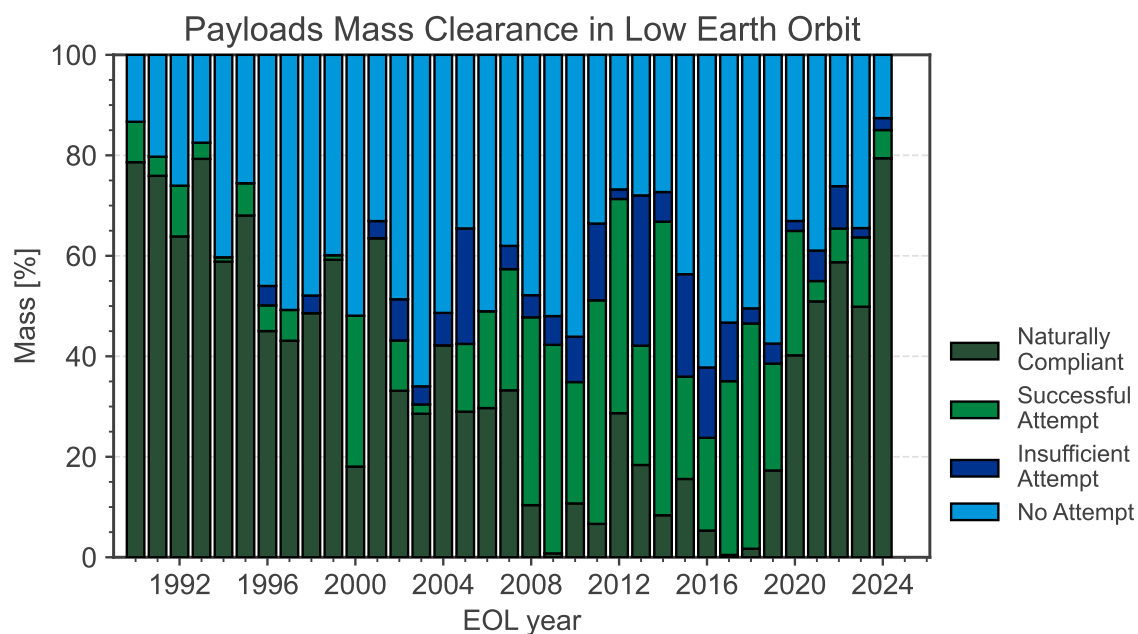
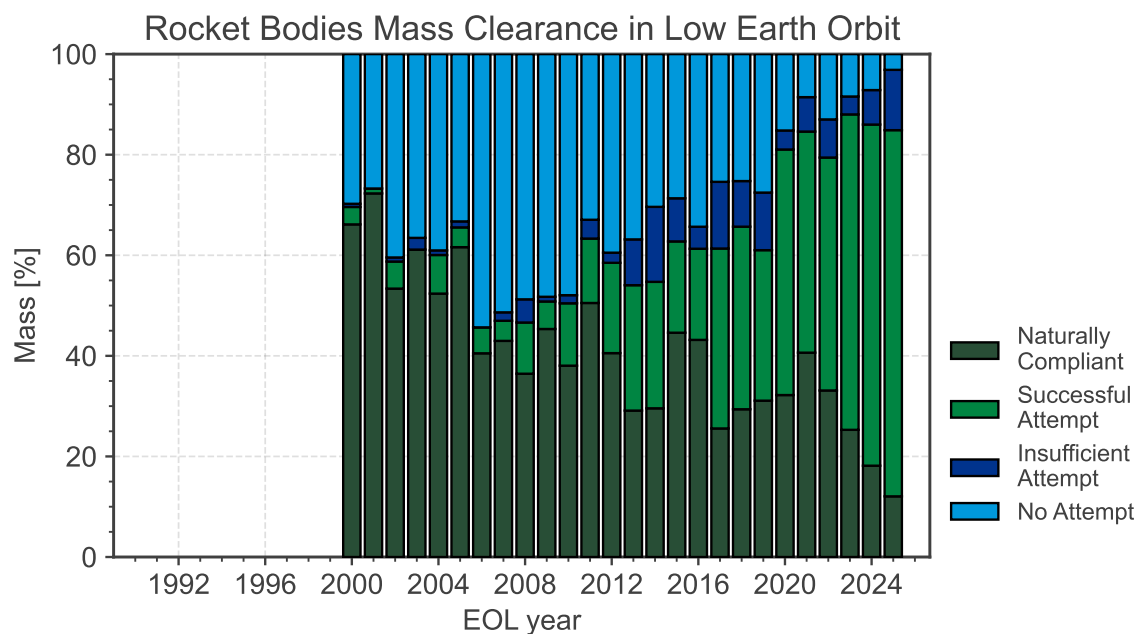
(a) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by payloads.(b) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by rocket bodies.

Figure 6.26: Trend of adherence to clearance of LEO_{IADC} over time in terms of numbers, for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

(a) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by payloads.(b) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by rocket bodies.Figure 6.27: Trend of adherence to clearance of LEO_{IADC} over time in terms of mass, for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

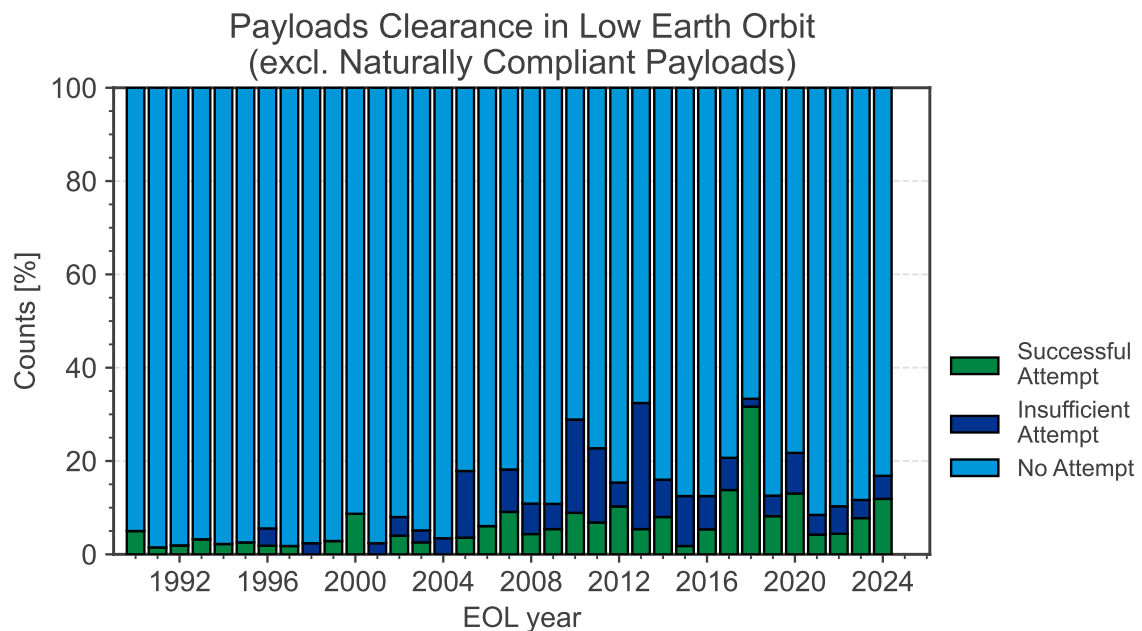
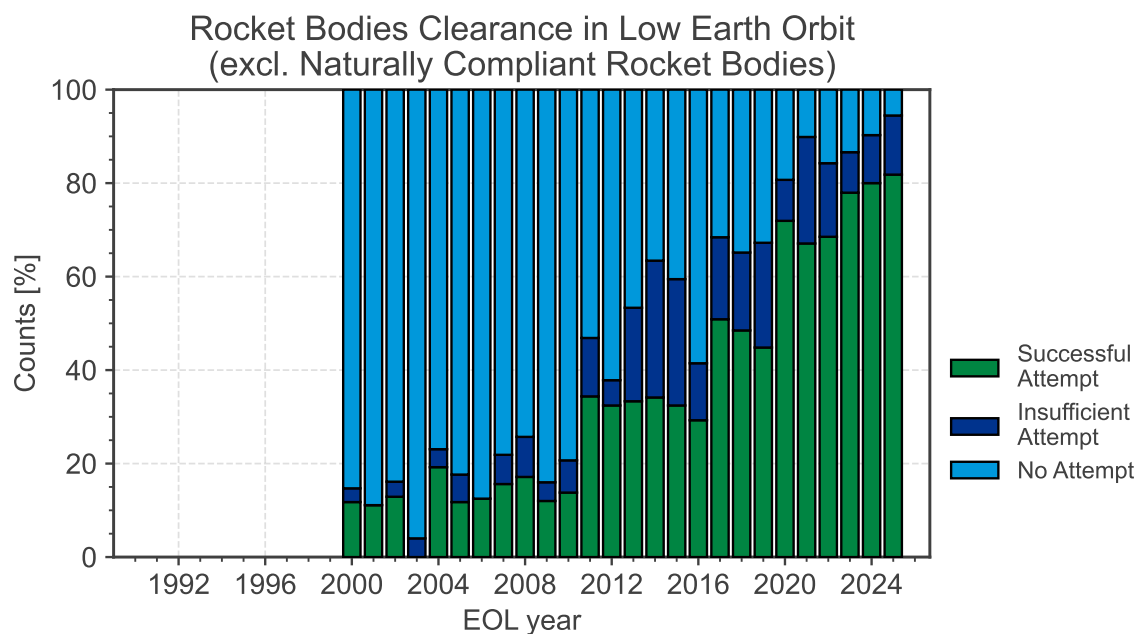
(a) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by payloads.(b) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} by rocket bodies.

Figure 6.28: Trend of adherence to clearance of LEO_{IADC} over time in terms of numbers, excluding naturally compliant objects, for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

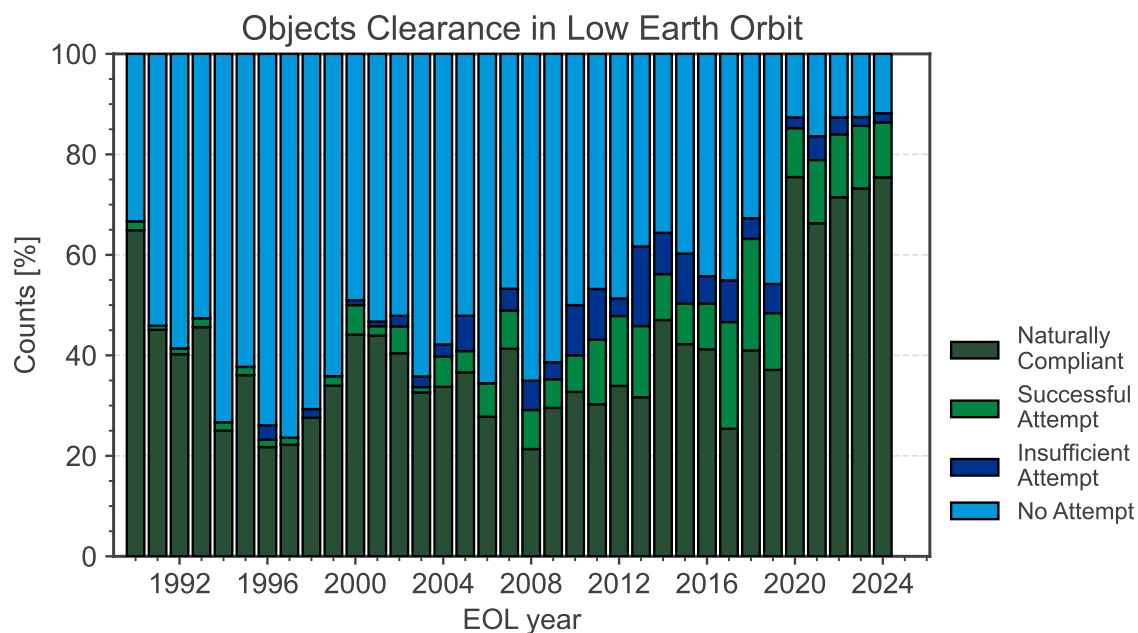
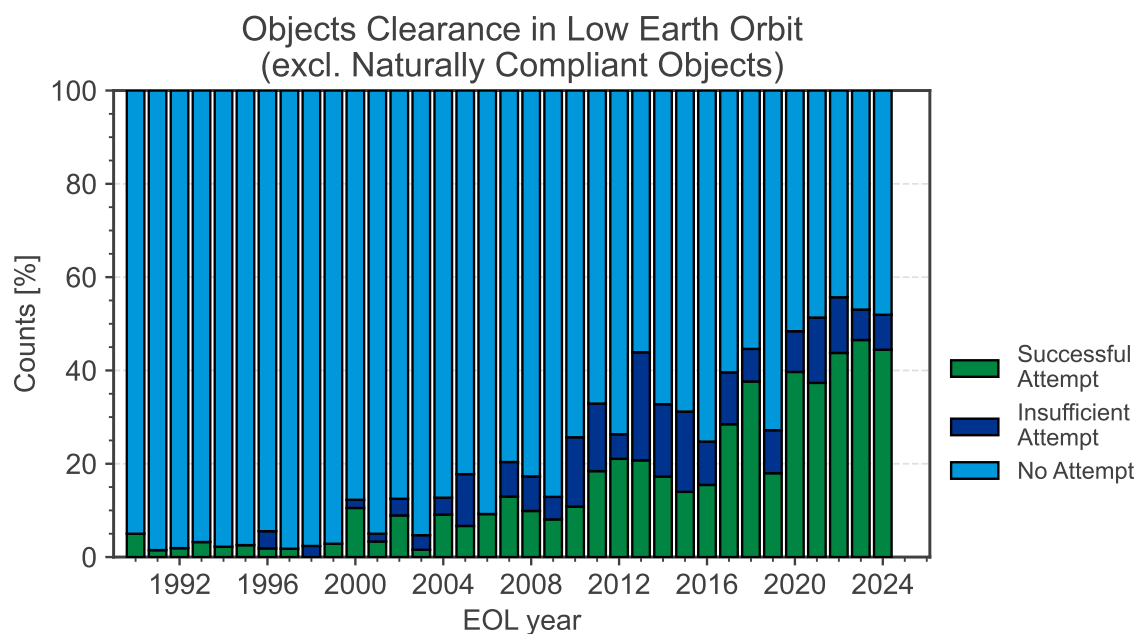
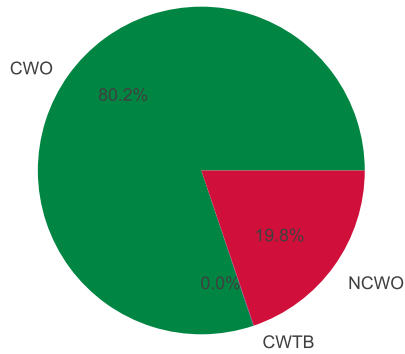
(a) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC}.(b) Relative clearance of LEO_{IADC} excluding naturally compliant objects.

Figure 6.29: Trend of adherence to clearance of LEO_{IADC} over time in terms of numbers, considering payloads and rocket bodies together, for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

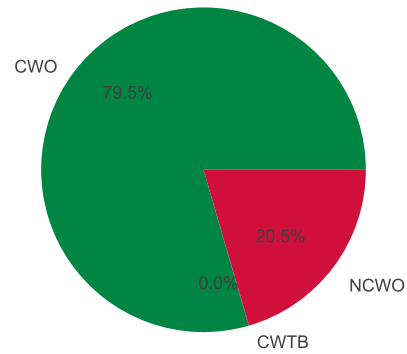
6.1.3.2. Evolution of behavioural classes per mass breakdown

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 1990, $m \leq 10$ kg)



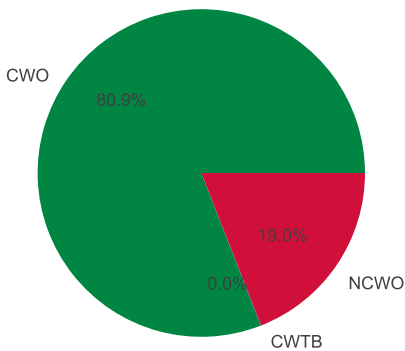
(a) 1990

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2000, $m \leq 10$ kg)



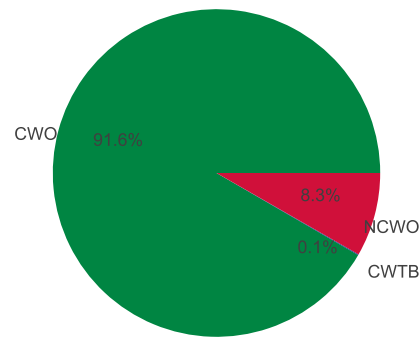
(b) 2000

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2010, $m \leq 10$ kg)



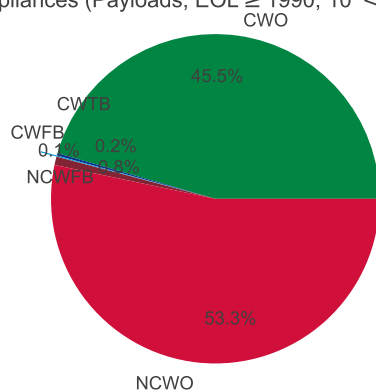
(c) 2010

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2020, $m \leq 10$ kg)

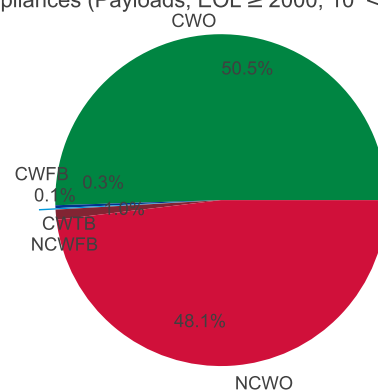


(d) 2020

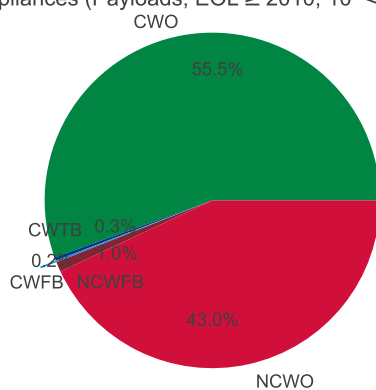
Figure 6.30: Breakdown per decade of observed behavioural classes for payloads with a mass below 10.0 kg for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

LEO compliances (Payloads, $EOL \geq 1990$, $10 < m \leq 100$ kg)

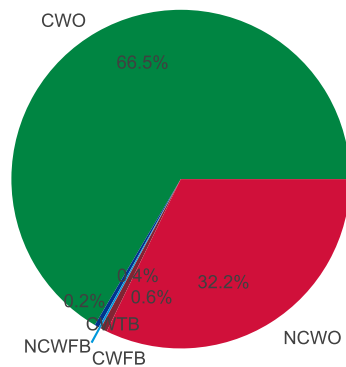
(a) 1990

LEO compliances (Payloads, $EOL \geq 2000$, $10 < m \leq 100$ kg)

(b) 2000

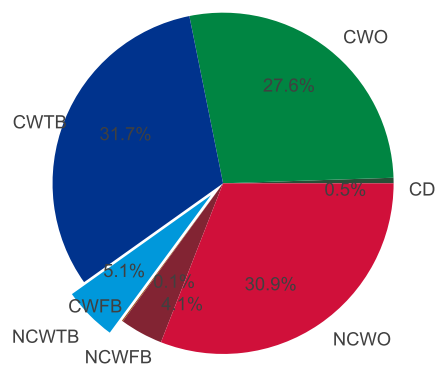
LEO compliances (Payloads, $EOL \geq 2010$, $10 < m \leq 100$ kg)

(c) 2010

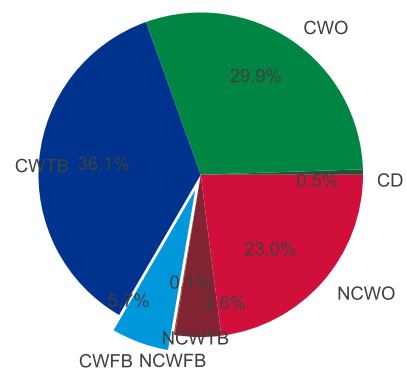
LEO compliances (Payloads, $EOL \geq 2020$, $10 < m \leq 100$ kg)

(d) 2020

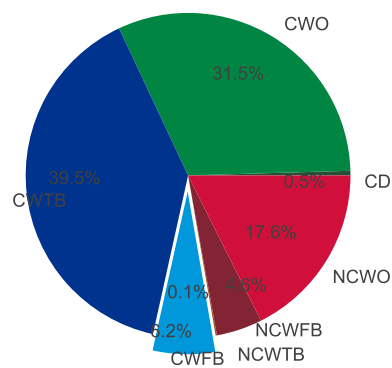
Figure 6.31: Breakdown per decade of observed behavioural classes for payloads with a mass between 10.0 and 100.0 kg for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 1990, $100 < m \leq 1000$ kg)

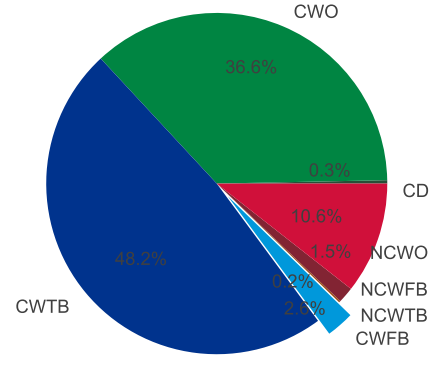
(a) 1990

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2000, $100 < m \leq 1000$ kg)

(b) 2000

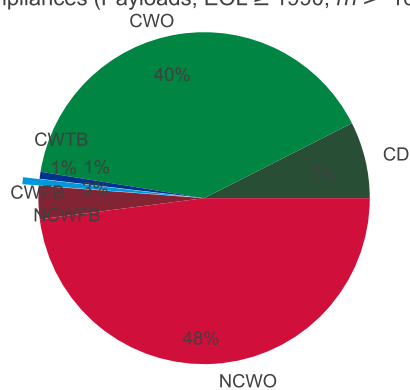
LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2010, $100 < m \leq 1000$ kg)

(c) 2010

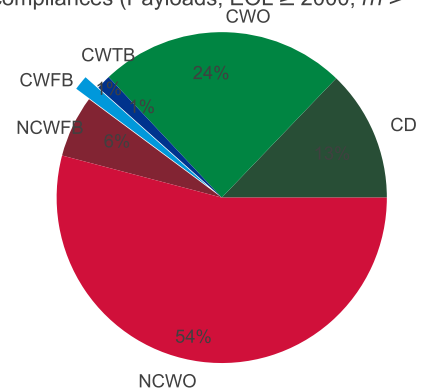
LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2020, $100 < m \leq 1000$ kg)

(d) 2020

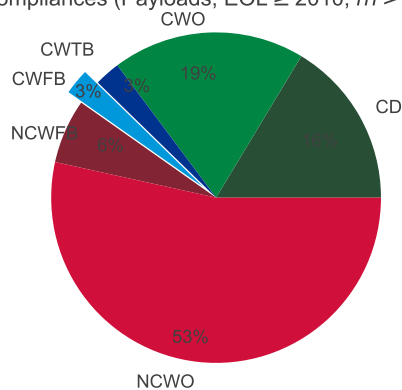
Figure 6.32: Breakdown per decade of observed behavioural classes for payloads with a mass between 100.0 and 1000.0 kg for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 1990, $m > 1000$ kg)

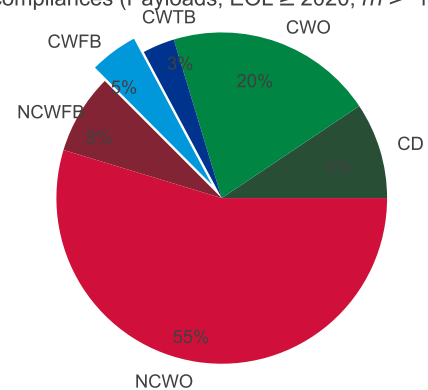
(a) 1990

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2000, $m > 1000$ kg)

(b) 2000

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2010, $m > 1000$ kg)

(c) 2010

LEO compliances (Payloads, EOL $\geq$ 2020, $m > 1000$ kg)

(d) 2020

Figure 6.33: Breakdown per decade of observed behavioural classes for payloads with a mass above 1000.0 kg for a lifetime limit of 5 years.

6.1.4. Robustness of the evaluation of compliance shares in LEO

The following analysis shows how the compliance classification has changed over the different editions of the report, considering that each edition is based on a *current* best-estimate of the residual orbital lifetime and reclassification can take place. Fig. 6.34 shows the share of successful re-/de-orbit attempts for payloads according to the different report editions. As mentioned in Section 6.1, in case of payload objects, as in the case in Fig. 6.34, at least one calendar year without orbit control actions needs to pass for an object to be classified as reaching end-of-life, so the report issued in a given year covers up to the end of two years before the release year (e.g. the report issued 2017 covers until the end of 2015). Note that for this visualisation (and for the purpose of the comparison), re-orbits are still considered as successful attempts.

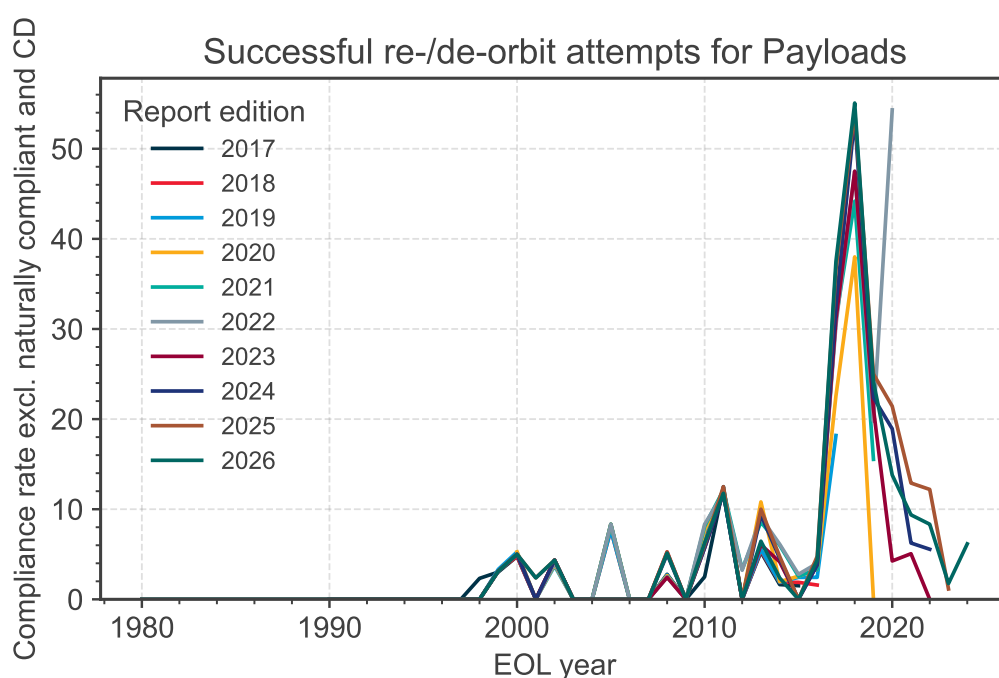


Figure 6.34: Successful re-/de-orbit attempts for payloads according to the different report editions, for a lifetime limit of 25 years.

6.2. End-Of-Life Operations in Geostationary Orbit

Unlike in LEO, no natural sink mechanism is available for the GEO protected region by which objects could leave. The solar radiation pressure on the objects will also make long term predictions subject to non-negligible uncertainties. A payload or rocket body operating in the GEO Protected Region, with either a permanent or periodic presence, shall be manoeuvred in a controlled manner during the disposal phase to an orbit that lies entirely outside the GEO Protected Region. There are different ways of ensuring that this condition is met. For example, the launch procedure for Rocket Bodies can be adapted to ensure that the release of the payloads no longer takes place directly within the geostationary orbit but below. In this case, the payload has to climb the last part into GEO_{IADC} but the launcher remains on a GTO trajectory that does not intersect the GEO protected region. For payloads within the GEO protected region, the mitigation measure has been refined, i.e. the so called IADC formulation [9], to ensure that a disposal occurs in a graveyard orbit with minimal interference. At least one of the following two conditions should be met:

- The orbit has an initial eccentricity less than 0.003 and a minimum perigee altitude ΔH (in km) above the geostationary altitude, in accordance with equation:
 1. $\Delta H = 235 + (1000C_r A/m)$;
 2. where C_r is the solar radiation pressure coefficient (dimensionless);
 3. A/m is the ratio of the cross-section area (in m^2) to dry mass (in kg) of the payload.
- The orbit has a perigee altitude sufficiently above the geostationary altitude that long-term perturbation forces do not cause the payload to enter the GEO Protected Region within 100 years.

In summary, clearance of the GEO protected region by payloads will be presented as *Successful Attempt*, i.e. the payload clears GEO_{IADC} in-line with the formulation above, *Insufficient Attempt* when the payloads attempt to clear the GEO_{IADC} but does not reach the criteria in the IADC formulation, and *No Attempt* otherwise. An in-depth overview of the status of objects in GEO_{IADC} and description of the summarised results shown here is available via [31].

For the rocket bodies delivering payloads in or near the GEO protected region, the long-term disposal orbits are influenced by a variety of perturbations potentially including Luni-Solar, solar radiation pressure, gravitational resonances, and atmospheric drag. This implies that long-term, i.e. over 100 years [10], clearance of both protected regions by these rocket bodies is only predictable as a stochastic estimate. To assess the adherence by rocket bodies to the disposal guidelines in a first approximation, we list the amount of rocket bodies predicted to cross one or both of the protected regions within the next 100 years after launch, as a function of the total number of rocket bodies that launch payload objects with a destination orbit in GEO. In addition, for those objects crossing the LEO protected region, an object is marked as *LEO-crossing* if it crosses LEO and the permanence time in the LEO region is longer than 25 years. Objects for which no orbital data is available are marked as *Not classified*.

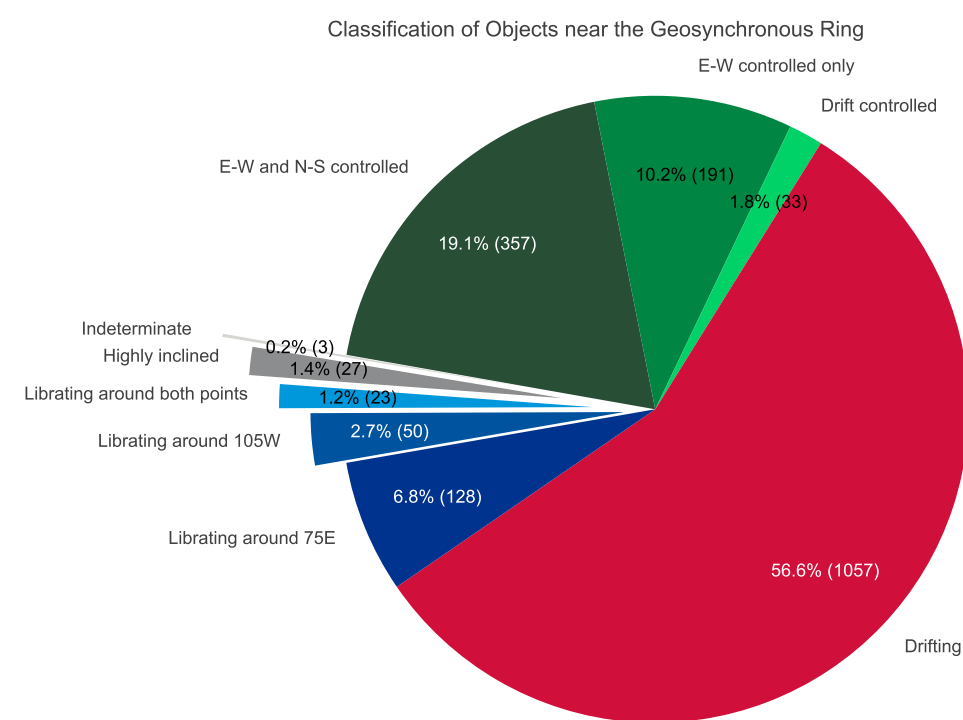
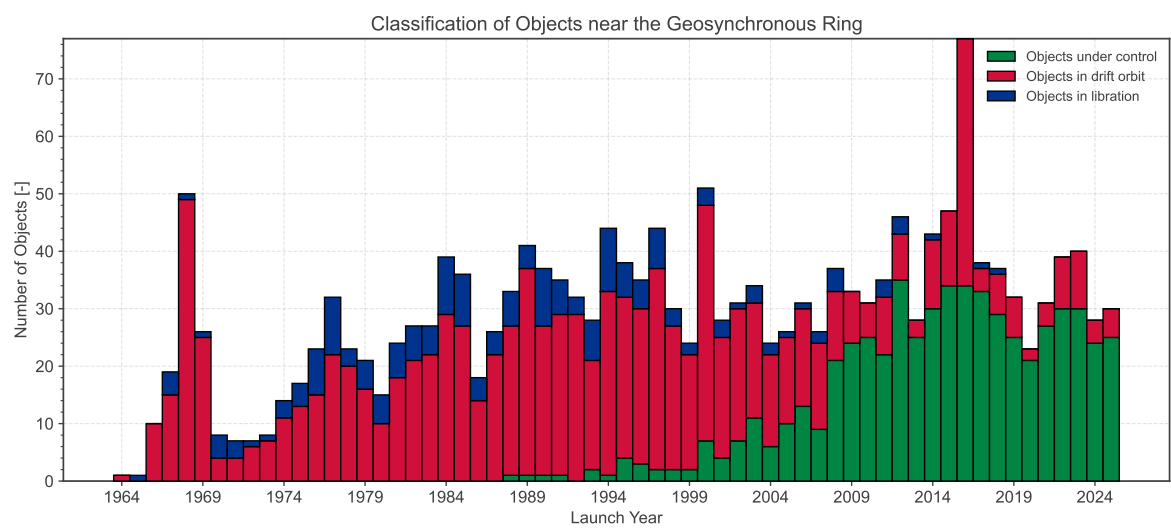
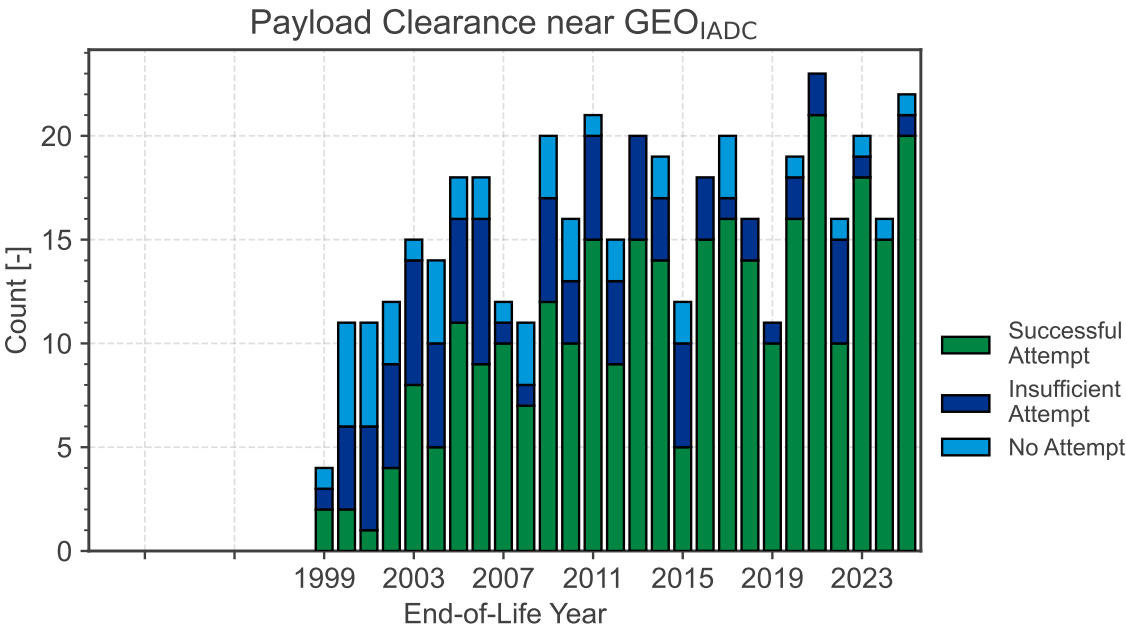
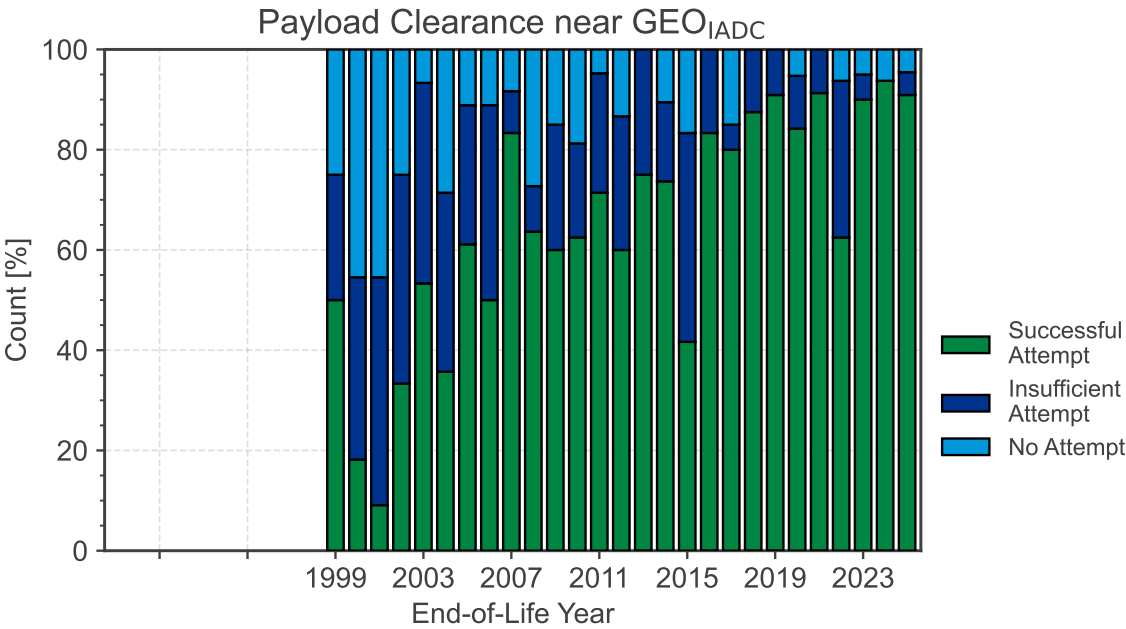


Figure 6.35: Orbital evolution status of payloads near the Geostationary orbit during 2025.

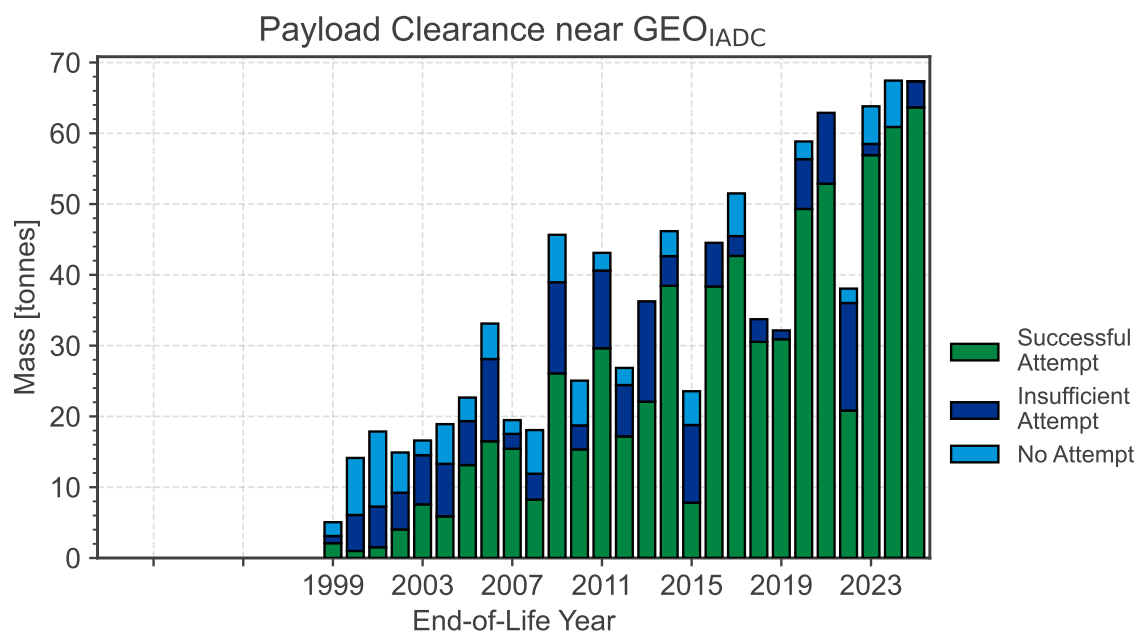
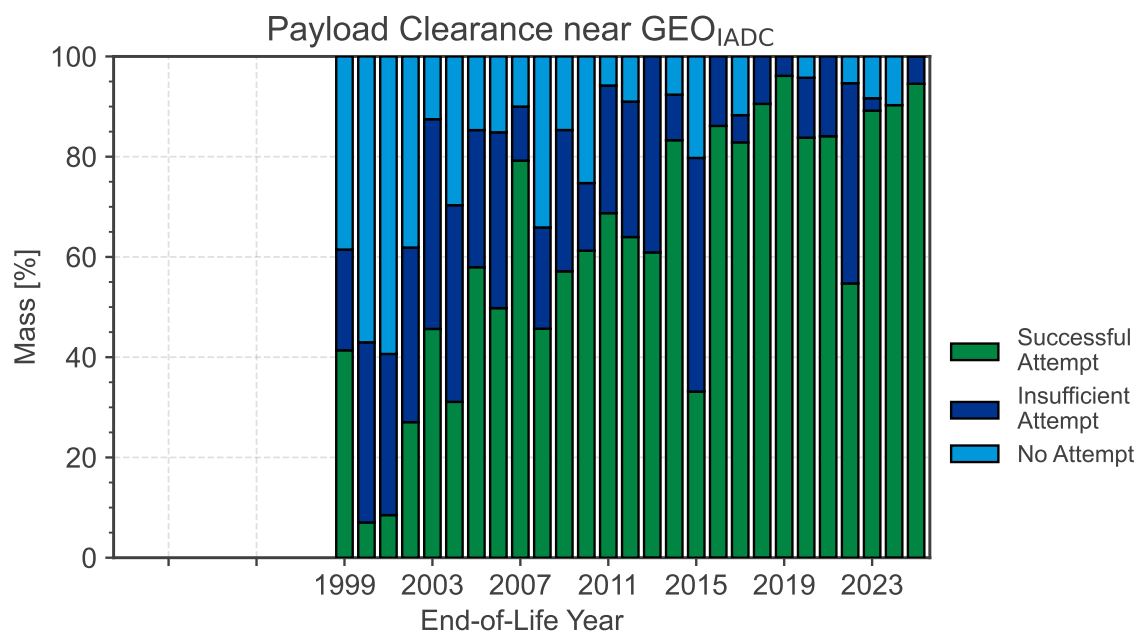


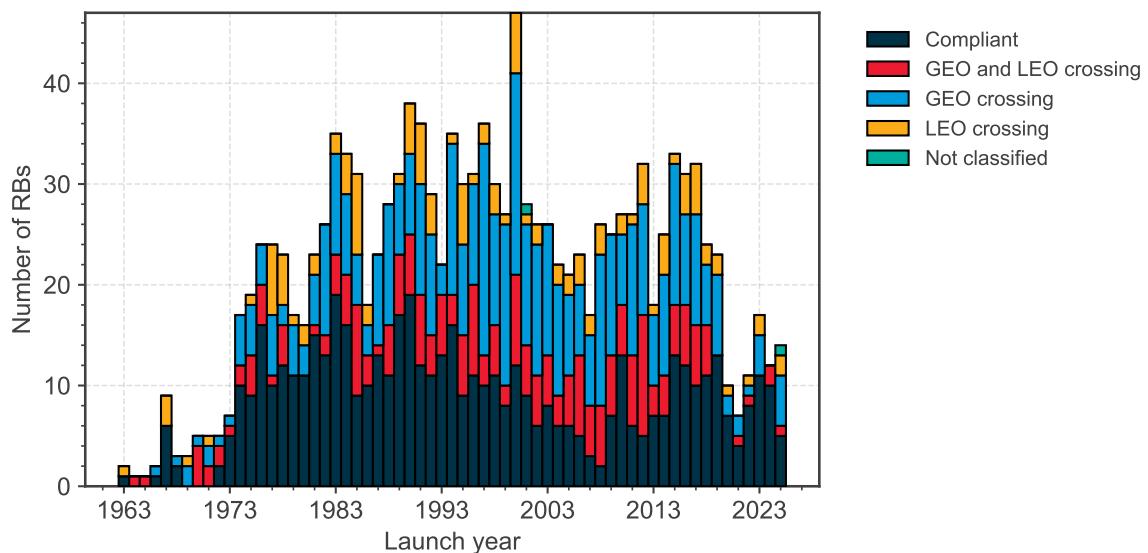
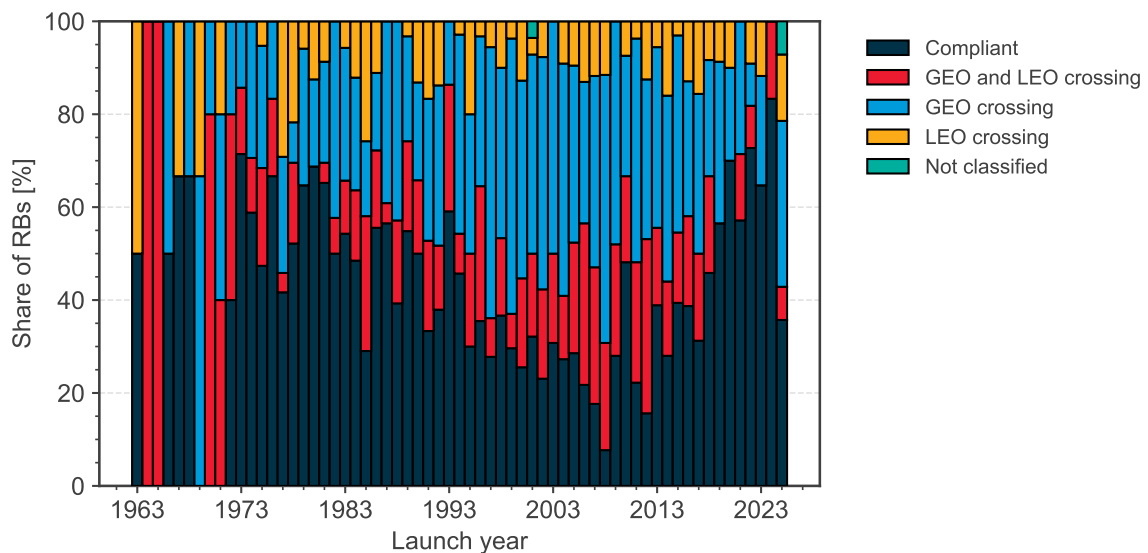
(a) Absolute clearance near GEO_{IADC}.



(b) Relative clearance near GEO_{IADC}.

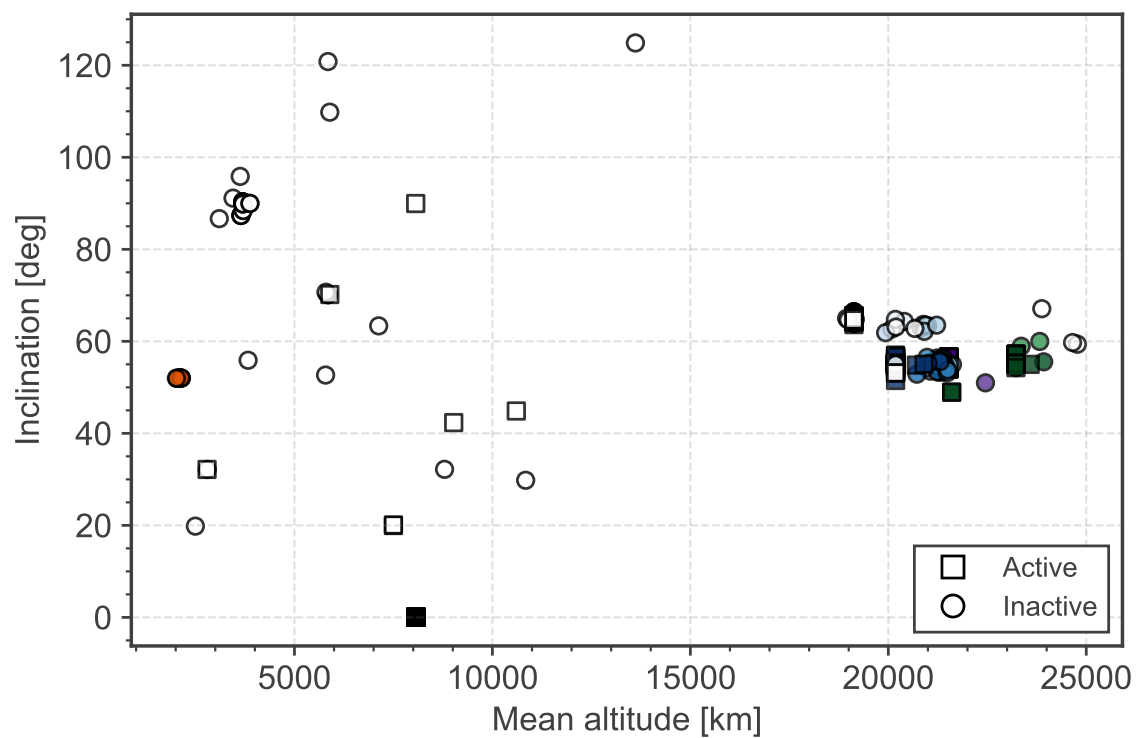
Figure 6.36: Trend of adherence to the disposal guideline in GEO_{IADC}.

(a) Absolute mass clearance near GEO_{IADC}.(b) Relative mass clearance near GEO_{IADC}.Figure 6.37: Mass trend of adherence to the disposal guideline in GEO_{IADC}.

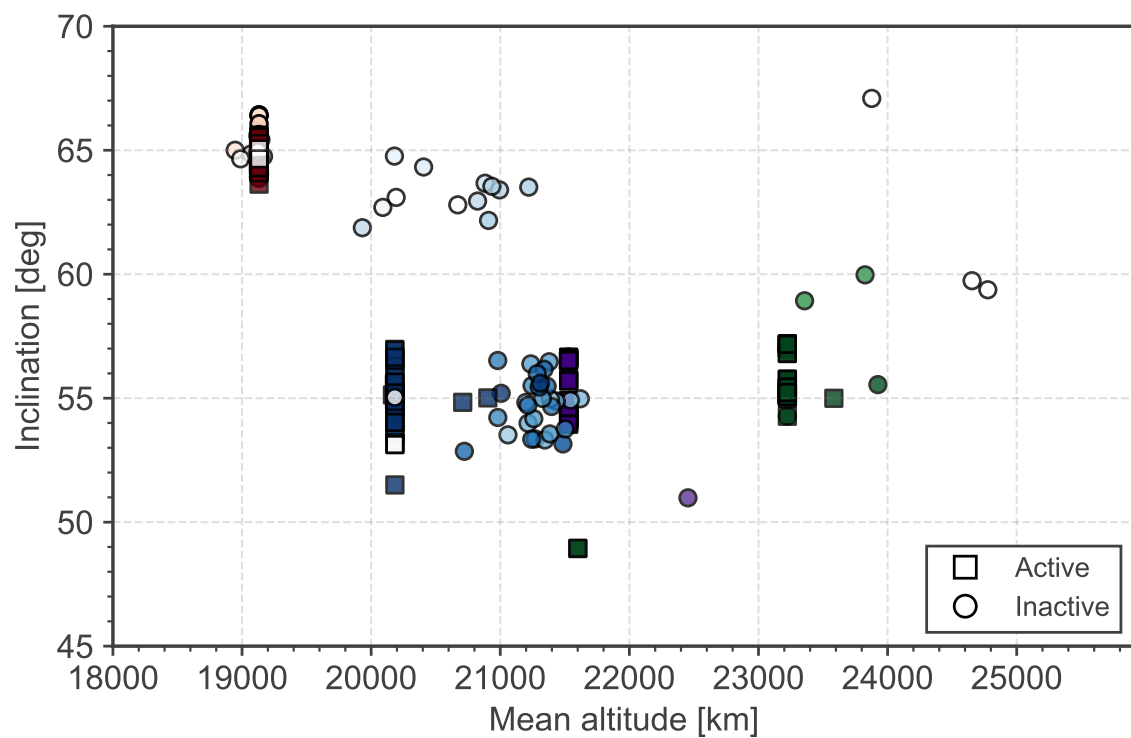
(a) Absolute clearance near GEO_{IADC}.(b) Relative clearance near GEO_{IADC}.Figure 6.38: Trend of adherence to the disposal guideline for rocket bodies used to insert satellites in GEO_{IADC}.

6.3. End-Of-Life Operations in MEO

Compared to the LEO_{IADC} and GEO_{IADC} regions, MEO contains relatively fewer objects in a larger volume of space. Notwithstanding the resulting lower space debris density, the region is of importance for global navigation and communication constellations, and crossed by space objects with large eccentricity and semi-major axis orbits. Space debris mitigation guidelines call for the avoidance of space debris dense regions by means of targeted disposals, even outside the protected regions [16]. With this perspective in mind, it is instructive to show the orbital disposal behaviour of Payload objects in this region.



(a) MEO region



(b) GNSS constellations

Figure 6.39: Distribution of payloads in MEO in mean altitude and inclination, distinguishing by activity status (symbols) and constellation (colour).

7. ENVIRONMENT METRICS

7.1. Environmental Index in 2025

The effect of adherence to space debris mitigation guidelines and regulations on a global level has a direct influence on the avoidance of the Kessler syndrome in Low Earth Orbit. In order to quantify the relation between them, the concept of an environment index is introduced via a general risk metric. The risk associated to an event is traditionally computed as $\text{Risk} = \text{Probability} \times \text{Severity}$.

This definition can be applied to space objects to measure the *fragmentation risk* associated to them and use this as a metric of their potential contribution to the space debris environment. The term *probability* represents the probability of a catastrophic collision, which is dependent on the flux of debris able to trigger a collision and the cross-sectional area of the object. The flux values are obtained from MASTER-8 [32] considering for each object the last available orbit in DISCOS. The physical properties and the activity status of the objects are also retrieved from DISCOS. The term *severity* measures the effect of such a fragmentation on operational spacecraft. This is done by simulating the generation of the cloud with the NASA breakup model [33] and modelling the evolution of its density over time under the effect of atmospheric drag. A representative set of target spacecraft is defined as proxy of the population of operational satellites. For each of these target spacecraft, the resulting cumulative collision probability over 25 years due to the fragment cloud is computed and their sum is used as a *severity* measure.

The risk is evaluated along the mission profile of an object, simulating its orbit evolution over 100 years. For active and manoeuvrable objects, the implementation of a Post-Mission Disposal (PMD) manoeuvre and its estimated success rate are considered when computing the trajectory evolution. More details on the approach can be found in [6]. The risk metric can be used to compare objects or missions against each other, and the cumulated risk taken by all objects in space at a given time, and their behaviour in the future, thus introduces the notion of capacity of the environment.

Fig. 7.1 shows the distribution, in mean altitude and inclination, of the analysed objects in LEO. The colour of the marker indicates the category of the objects, i.e. whether it is a rocket body, an inactive payload, an active one or a constellation. The size of the marker indicates the debris index value and an aggregated score is shown for constellations. The values are obtained assuming a 90% PMD success rate for active objects. Areas with high risk concentration can be observed around 850 km of mean altitude and 70-80 degrees in inclination. Fig. 7.2 shows the distribution of the total index among object categories: By far, most of the risk is associated to inactive objects (96%), with the largest contribution coming from spent rocket bodies.

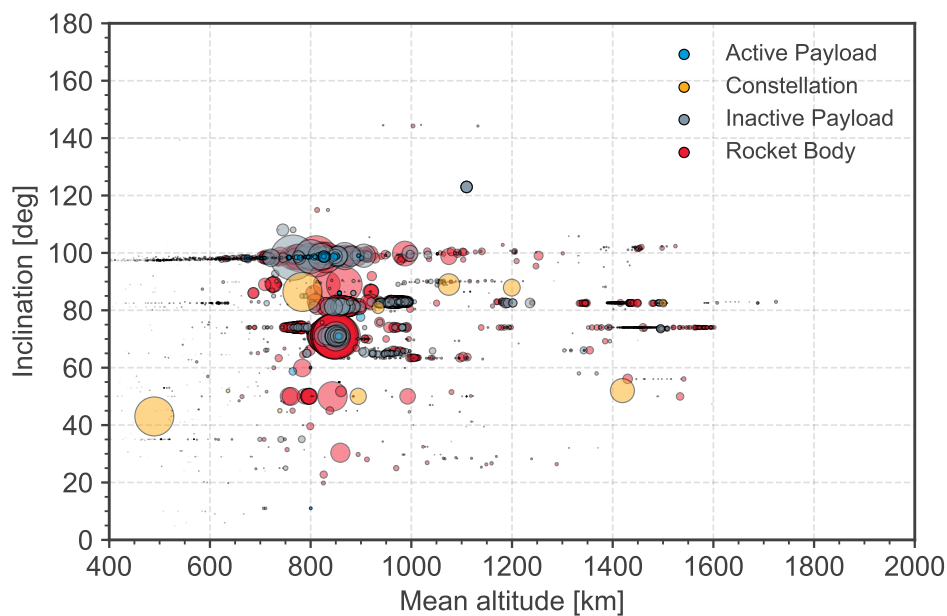


Figure 7.1: Index value for objects in LEO. The size of the marker is proportional to the debris index of the object or constellation.

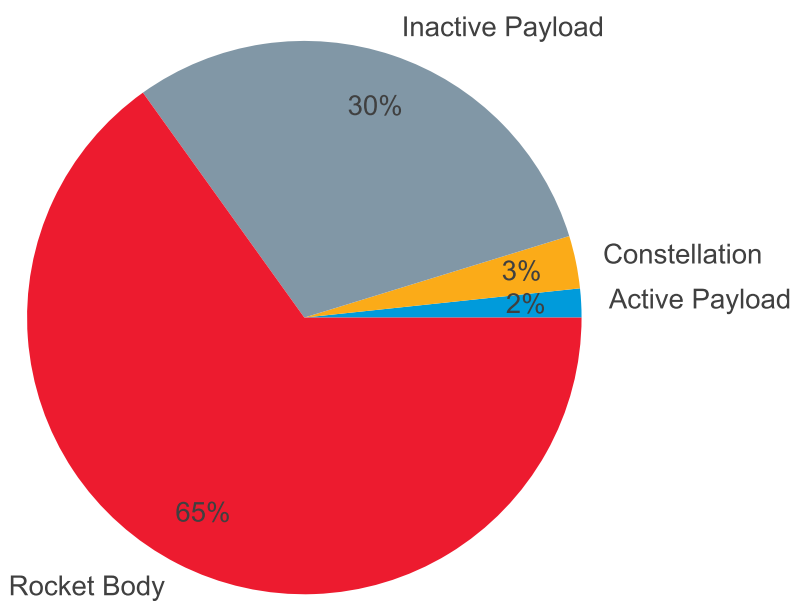


Figure 7.2: Distribution of the total index among object categories.

7.2. Environment evolution

The simulation of the future evolution of the debris population can be used to assess the efficacy of proposed mitigation actions and of current behaviours. In particular, two scenarios are presented in this section:

- A defined *extrapolation* (Extr) of the current behaviour in terms of launch traffic, explosion rates, and disposal success rates;
- *No future launches* (NFL), where it is assumed that no launch takes place after 2025.

The definition of trends in launch traffic, explosion rates, and disposal success rates is based on the data available in DISCOS and on the analysis contained in this report. DELTA-4 [34] was used to simulate the evolution of the environment over 100 years, performing 100 Monte Carlo runs per scenario. The parameters for the scenario definition are summarised hereafter.

For both scenarios, the reference population used for the analysis is an extraction of the DISCOS population at the reference epoch (1st January 2026). For each object, physical characteristics such as mass, cross-sectional area, and orbital parameters are retrieved, while for Rocket Bodies and Payloads, launch information is also stored. For payloads specifically, it is also stored in which orbital region they are active and whether they belong to a constellation, following the definitions in Section 1.1.

For the *extrapolation* scenario, a launch traffic model is needed as input for the simulations. This was obtained by repeating the launch traffic between 2017 and 2025, discounting the contribution from constellations. For each constellation, in-orbit or planned (according to the definition given in Section 1.1), a model of deployment and replenishment was defined using publicly available data¹. For these constellation payloads, a capability to successfully perform collision avoidance manoeuvres is assumed for objects with propulsion for as long as they are active in the simulation. For non-constellation payloads on the other hand, a collision avoidance success rate of 15% was assumed, corresponding to the fraction of payloads in DISCOS classified as manoeuvrable.

Explosion events in each scenario are modelled using the DELTA Explosion Event Module (EEM), a probabilistic framework based on survival analysis of historical DISCOS fragmentation data, that couples explosion occurrence to the simulated launch traffic, as described in [35].

A fixed operational lifetime of eight years is assumed for payloads not belonging to a constellation instead of the values derived in this report, in line with current long-term space debris environment modelling practices. Specific values are used for payloads belonging to constellations, based on the available information on the current constellation designs where possible. Post-mission disposal success rates are derived from the observed values reported in Section 6, considering the performance of objects with End-Of-Life equal or later than 2017. In particular, the post-mission disposal success rate is set to 70% for rocket bodies and 15% for payloads, to reflect the slow but upwards trend in compliance in combination with the shifting traffic towards destination orbits with lifetimes below 25 years. For constellation payloads, specific values for the post-mission disposal success rate and lifetime are again taken depending on currently available information, else are assumed to be 90% and 25 years respectively. These baseline values reflect the bare minimum identified in [16], whereas in practice, far higher rates of compliance would need to be observed over time to limit the long-term growth of the space debris population. It is assumed that the rocket bodies that are used to deploy constellation members perform direct re-entry, pending the availability of sufficient data to characterise disposal performance at constellation level.

The evolution of the number of objects larger than 10 cm and the cumulative number of *catastrophic collisions*, i.e.

¹<https://discosweb.esoc.esa.int/constellations>

collisions leading to the complete destruction of target and impactor, are shown in Fig. 7.4 and Fig. 7.3: the bold line for each scenario represents the mean value over all the Monte Carlo runs, while the lighter-coloured lines indicate the outcome of each individual run. This representation was selected to visualise the variability across the single runs without introducing standard deviation bands as they may be not representative of the result distribution [36].

The results from the evaluation of the scenario indicated that even when spaceflight is completely halted today, the amount of space debris objects in Low Earth Orbit is likely to increase. The extrapolation of our current behaviour, which assumes the continuation of explosion in orbits at current rates, adherence by constellations to at least the minimum desirable post-mission disposal success rates, and continuation of the currently estimated post-mission disposal success rates for all other objects, leads to an unstable environment with collision rates increasing exponentially. While a shift in launch traffic to orbits with low orbital decay as observed in Section 2.7 improves the situation [37], the implementation of all space debris mitigation strategies are necessary to avoid an adverse future.

It should be noted that the variability shown does not capture uncertainties in future launch traffic or constellation deployment plans, which have a significant influence on the long-term evolution of the environment. Within the launch traffic assumptions considered, the results highlight the importance of maintaining high mitigation and disposal compliance within large constellations, where even an individual constellation can substantially affect the long-term stability of the orbital environment as a whole [5].

Establishing the space debris growth rates based on the status of annual environment snapshots provides an estimate for the consequences of the current levels of global space debris mitigation. To analyse trends in the predicted environment evolution, additional scenarios can be simulated using different starting epochs, while adopting the logic laid out above for what concerns deriving space traffic settings for the model.

In particular, in addition to the starting points generated from past and current editions of the report, other two reference epochs (at 2014 and 2005) were defined, for which the corresponding launch traffic, explosion rate, and disposal rates were extracted from the data in DISCOS. The years 2014 and 2005 are not chosen arbitrarily, but respectively correspond to the last year before the fundamental change in launch traffic (due to the increase in usage of small satellites) and the adoption of the IADC mitigation guidelines in national practices [38].

The number of objects larger than 10 cm in the final population and the final cumulative number of catastrophic collisions at the end of the simulation are shown in Fig. 7.6 and Fig. 7.7, where red is used for the *extrapolation* scenarios and dark blue for *no further launches*. For each simulation, this end date is 100 years after the starting point. In Fig. 7.8, the same scenarios are evaluated by the risk index introduced in Section 7.1. Here, a further scenario is included, in green, representing the *target environment*. Any target environment is a subjective choice, but to facilitate a transparent evaluation of global steps towards space sustainability, a good candidate can be the scenario reflected largely in most space debris mitigation standards world-wide. This corresponds to a high-level implementation of the IADC guidelines [39] (in particular a 90% success rate of 25-year PMD) based on observed launch traffic at 2014, and can be considered a baseline, or *orbital sustainability threshold*, for measuring the long-term sustainability of the space environment as a whole. In this approach, a clear analogy can be drawn to climate science, where the Paris Agreement established the 1.5 °C global average temperature threshold with respect to pre-industrial levels as the acceptable limit on global warming.

Boxplots are used to visualise the spread of results over the runs: the box covers the range between the first and the third quartile, with the horizontal line within the box indicating the median; the whiskers indicate the distance of 1.5 the interquartile range in both directions and any datapoint outside this range is considered an outlier and indicated with a small dot. As noted above, this uncertainty represents variability arising from the stochastic modelling of collisions and explosions, rather than uncertainties in model inputs such as the assumed future launch traffic. For Fig. 7.6, the number of objects at each starting epoch is further denoted by a grey triangle.

It is important to note that in all extrapolation scenarios the simulated space debris environment continues to deteriorate. Under the current extrapolation conditions, the amount of catastrophic collision could rise quickly. Even under the no further launches scenarios, the amount of space debris objects is observed to increase in all cases. With respect to the target environment, the level of risk associated with the extrapolation scenario is predicted to be 50 times greater than this first threshold towards long-term sustainability.

The notable increase in the index this year is primarily driven by the substantially larger future population resulting from the current extrapolation scenario (Fig. 7.5). In particular, the growing influence of large constellations highlights the limitations of traditional mitigation approaches when applied to future traffic at unprecedented scales. At the same time, the results are affected by the limited availability of detailed and verifiable information on future deployment plans, operational practices, and end-of-life strategies of these systems. As a result, the modelling relies on the best information currently available and a number of necessary assumptions regarding future traffic evolution. It should therefore be noted that the current value should not be interpreted as a deterministic forecast, but rather as an indication of how the environment could evolve under current knowledge and assumptions. Importantly, the situation may improve substantially, or deteriorate further, as actual operational and disposal behaviours become observable over the coming years.

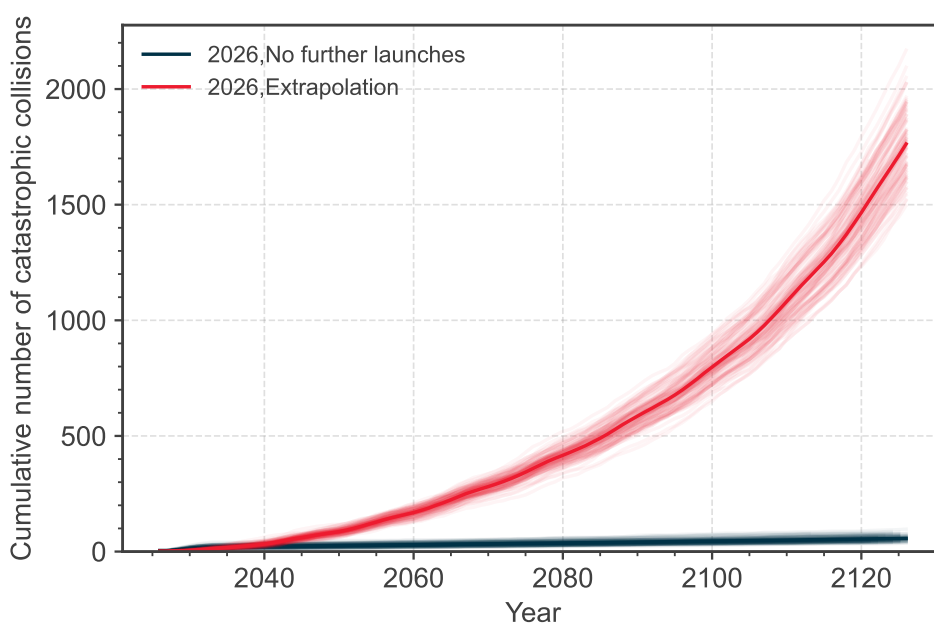


Figure 7.3: Number of cumulative collisions in LEO_{IADC} in the simulated scenarios of long-term evolution of the environment.

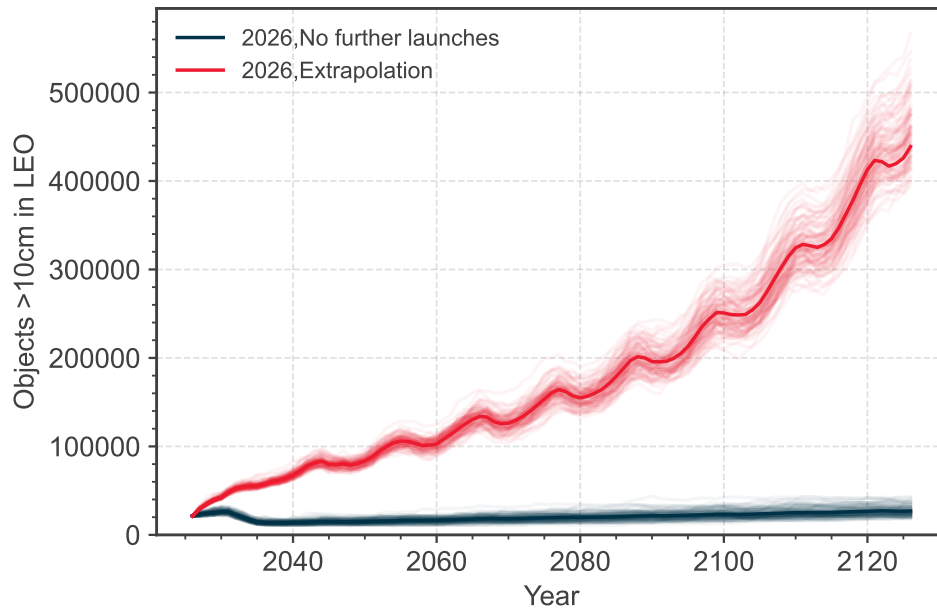


Figure 7.4: Number of objects in LEO_{IADC} in the simulated scenarios of long-term evolution of the environment.

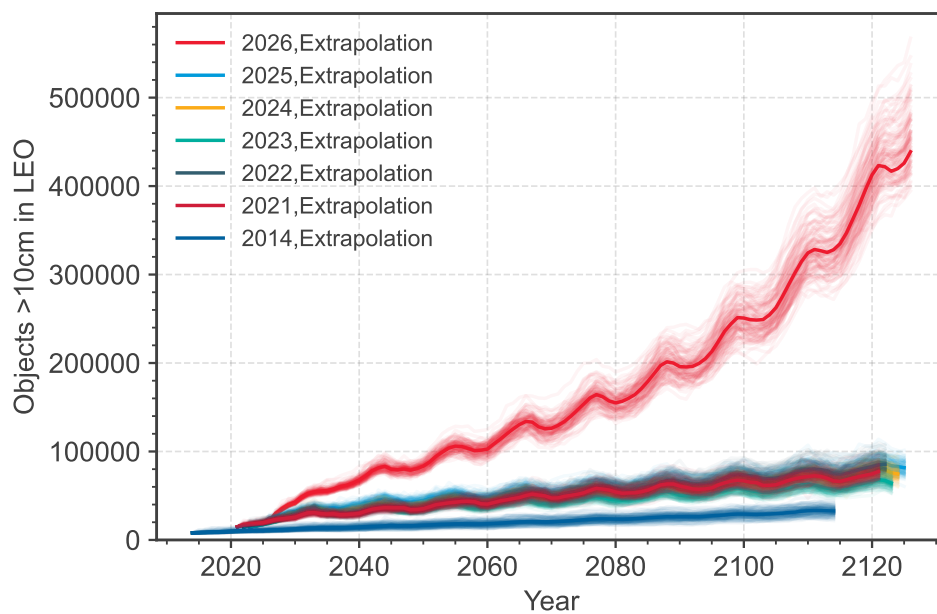


Figure 7.5: Number of objects in LEO_{IADC} in the simulated scenarios of long-term evolution of the environment, across extrapolation scenarios initiated at different start epochs.

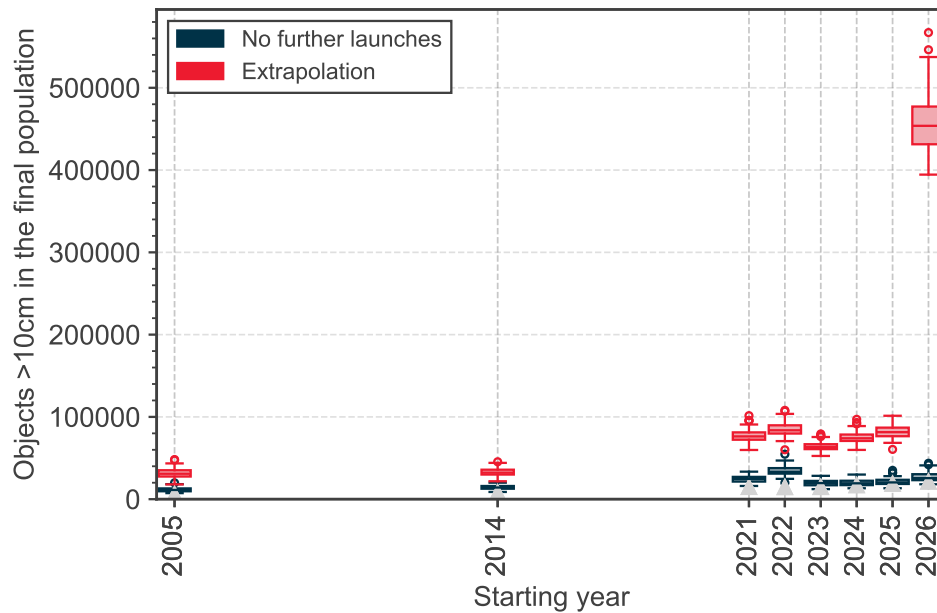


Figure 7.6: Number of objects in LEO_{IADC} in the simulated scenarios of long-term evolution of the environment. The number of objects at each starting epoch is denoted by a grey triangle.

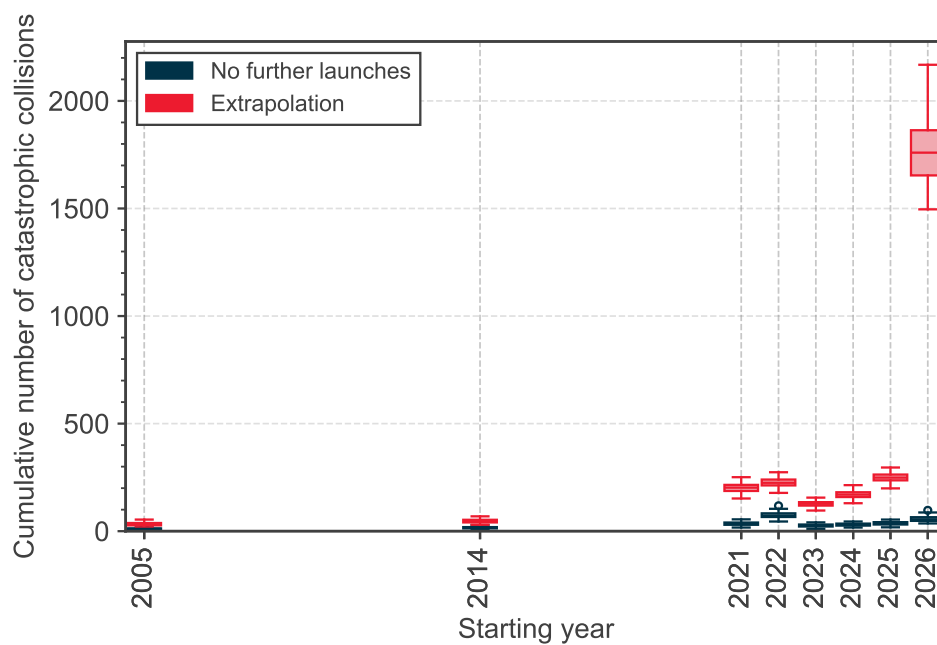


Figure 7.7: Number of cumulative collisions in LEO_{IADC} in the simulated scenarios of long-term evolution of the environment.

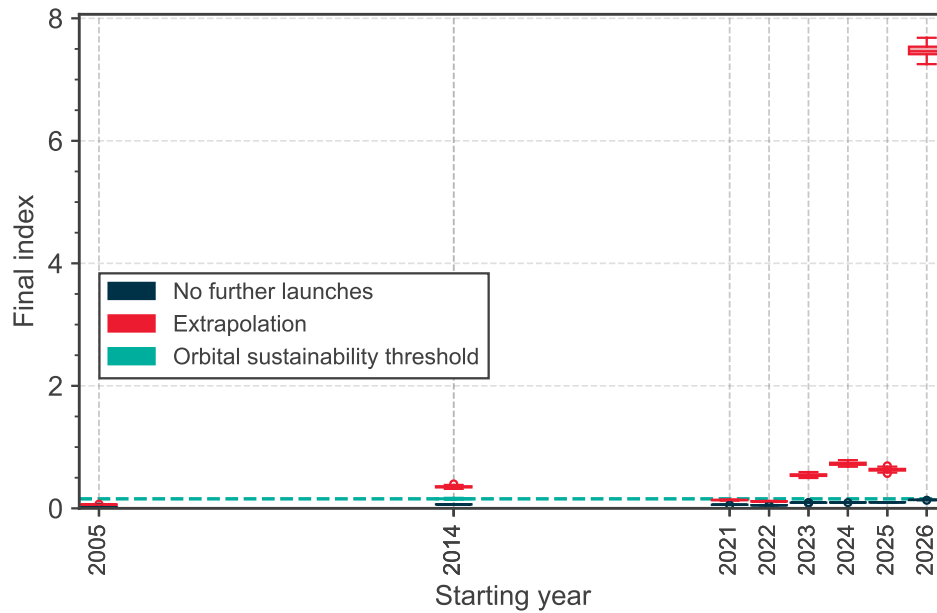


Figure 7.8: Index values in LEO_{IADC} in the simulated scenarios of long-term evolution of the environment.

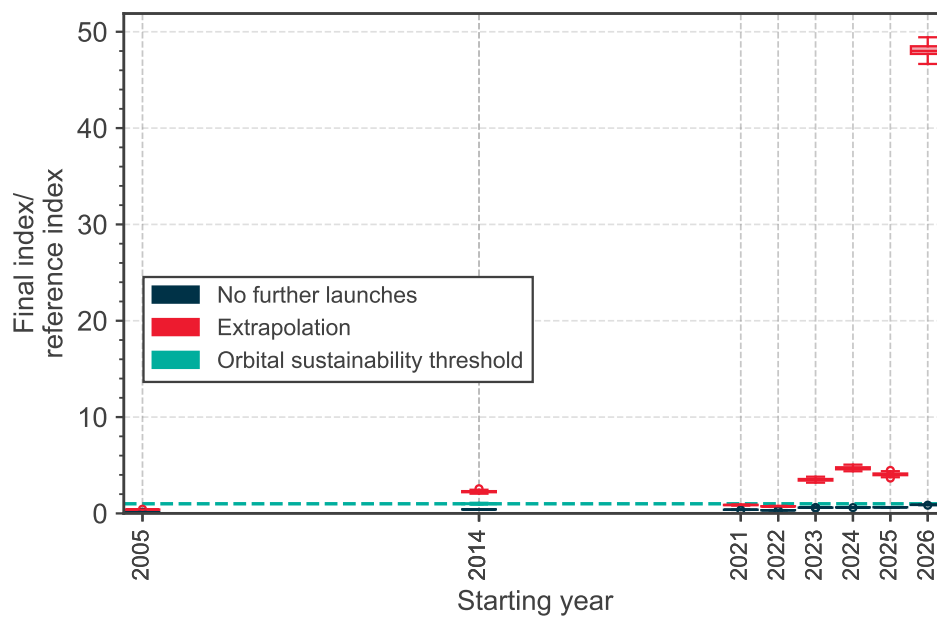


Figure 7.9: Index values in LEO_{IADC} in the simulated scenarios of long-term evolution of the environment, normalised against the first target towards a sustainable environment based on observed launch traffic at 2014.

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