



POLICY FOCUS

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Autonomous Vehicles

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HIGHLIGHT

Autonomous vehicles (AVs) have the potential to improve road safety, accessibility, and productivity. Several cities already have AVs on their roads, and many more are considering legislation that would allow testing or deployment. This policy focus highlights the benefits and risks of AVs, as well as the questions—including labor force displacement—that will need to be answered as the technology becomes more integrated into society.

INTRODUCTION

For most Americans, driving is their primary mode of transportation. Driving is how they get to work and school; it gives them the independence to choose where to live without foregoing the opportunities and communities that exist in other areas. Yet, roadway accidents are the leading **cause** of death for children and young adults worldwide. Approximately **1.19 million** people each year globally are fatally injured in traffic crashes. In 2025, there were nearly **37,000** traffic fatalities in the United States.

Human error figures prominently in these crashes. Over the past few decades, legislators have sought to reduce fatalities through legislation and regulations, such as seat belt and airbag mandates. States have also instituted alcohol limitations based on blood alcohol concentration to stop impaired driving. These interventions have helped, but they cannot eliminate human error.

Autonomous vehicles have fundamentally changed the discourse around road safety. AVs can significantly reduce traffic fatalities by delegating driving to a system powered by artificial intelligence (AI). Cameras with 360-degree views of streets and sidewalks can give the AI system a broader perspective than a human driver, and have the potential to dramatically **reduce** fatalities associated with driving.

While AVs are promising, there are also serious risks that require regulatory oversight and create new issues surrounding liability.

While AVs are promising, there are also serious risks that require regulatory oversight and create new issues surrounding liability. States have taken different approaches to AV testing and deployment, with some better able to calibrate regulation with innovation than others. For example, California previously **banned** autonomous trucking operations, though the state's Department of Motor Vehicles relaxed these regulations in April.

Moreover, as AVs become more ubiquitous, there are critical questions about who bears the burden of accidents.

Although safer than human drivers, AVs will inevitably be involved in crashes. Civil liability for traffic accidents is structured around the premise of a human driver, and many scholars have argued that a new standard may be necessary to address these situations.

AVs also have the potential to eliminate the human workforce of full-time drivers and independent contractors who primarily drive for extra income. This could have broad implications for the U.S. workforce, with **an estimated five million jobs** lost with a rapid transition to AVs.

WOMEN ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTED BY THE TRAFFIC FATALITY PROBLEM AND OTHER SAFETY ISSUES

While men are statistically more likely to be involved in fatal crashes as drivers, women face distinct and well-documented **risks** as passengers and victims of impaired or aggressive drivers. According to federal traffic data, a significant share of women killed or seriously injured in vehicle crashes are passengers—not drivers—meaning their safety is entirely dependent on the behavior and sobriety of drivers behind the wheel. **Research** also indicates that a belt-restrained female driver is more likely to sustain severe injuries than a belt-restrained male driver in a similar crash.

For women who rely on rideshare services, taxis, or rides from acquaintances, the risks extend well beyond the road itself. Sexual harassment and assault by rideshare and taxi drivers have been widely documented, with thousands of incidents reported annually. From 2017 to 2022, over 400,000 U.S. Uber trips resulted

in **reports** of sexual assault or misconduct. This is a small number compared to a **reported 6.3 billion total trips from 2017 to 2022**; however, it is still 183 reports per day, or roughly one every eight minutes.

These sobering statistics reveal the reality for many women, who must consequently make calculated decisions about their personal safety when choosing transportation: avoiding late-night rides, selecting specific routes, sharing their location with friends, or simply declining to travel at all to minimize risk. These are not abstract concerns—they are experienced by millions of American women navigating daily life. Fully autonomous vehicles eliminate the human driver entirely, and with it, the risk of assault or coercion by a person in a position of control over the passenger.

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Beyond personal safety from driver misconduct, AV technology offers protection from the most pervasive cause of traffic fatalities: human error. The U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has long recognized that driver error—including distracted driving, impaired driving, speeding, and fatigue—is a factor in the overwhelming majority of serious crashes. Drunk and drugged driving alone claims thousands of lives each year.

Women, who are statistically **less likely** to drive impaired themselves, are nonetheless

killed and injured by impaired drivers at alarming rates. Autonomous vehicle systems do not drink. They do not text. They do not speed or experience road rage out of frustration or fatigue. The promise of dramatically reducing human error on our roads is a promise of saving women's lives.

LEVELS OF AUTOMATION

Autonomous vehicles can significantly improve road safety by aiding or replacing human drivers. The NHTSA has adopted a classification **system** from the Society of Automotive Engineers:

- **Level 0:** Momentary Driver Assistance
- **Level 1:** Driver Assistance
- **Level 2:** Additional Driver Assistance
- **Level 3:** Conditional Automation
- **Level 4:** High Automation
- **Level 5:** Full Automation

Most cars are at Level 0 or 1, with basic systems such as emergency braking and cruise control. Tesla's popular Autopilot feature is a Level 2 system because it requires the human driver to be fully engaged and attentive. There is a significant gap between cars currently on the road—even the most advanced ones—and the autonomous vehicles that hold the most potential.

In 2018, Waymo **launched** in Phoenix, Arizona, offering its self-driving, ride-hailing service to the public. Waymo cars **operate** at Level 4 automation, meaning that the system is fully responsible for driving tasks within limited service areas. The human occupants are passengers and do not need to be engaged on the road.

Today, millions of Americans **ride** in these autonomous vehicles, which operate in 11

U.S. cities and are expanding to 20 more. Companies such as **General Motors** and **Mercedes-Benz** are also investing in AV research and development. **A 2025 peer-reviewed study**, examining data from Waymo on more than 50 million fully driverless miles on public roads, found 80% reductions in crashes compared with human drivers on the same streets.

THE PROMISE OF AUTONOMOUS VEHICLES

The benefits of autonomous vehicle technology extend beyond physical safety. For many American women, access to reliable, safe transportation is directly tied to economic participation, caregiving responsibilities, and quality of life. Women make up the majority of caregivers for children and elderly family members, and they are more likely than men to make multiple “trip-chaining” stops throughout their day—combining work commutes with school pickups, medical appointments, grocery runs, and other essential errands. Safe, on-demand autonomous transportation could dramatically expand mobility options for women in underserved communities, women without access to personal vehicles, older women who can no longer safely drive, and women with disabilities for whom traditional transportation options remain inadequate.

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Women with greater access to safe and reliable transportation have greater access to opportunity. The freedom to move safely, affordably, and on one’s own terms is foundational to the independence and self-determination that Independent Women champions. AV technology, if permitted to develop and deploy responsibly, represents a significant expansion of that freedom.

Additionally, AVs can improve the freedom of senior citizens, helping them to maintain independence and travel safely as they age. For this population, health issues such as vision and hearing loss make driving increasingly difficult. These issues inevitably take senior citizens off the road and, as a result, **increase** geographical isolation and lower the quality of life. Studies **show** that older adults trust this technology and would be willing to use AV transportation if given the opportunity.

LABOR FORCE DISRUPTION

AVs have the potential to heavily disrupt the U.S. (and global) labor force. Tech **policy experts at Rethink X estimate** that “up to 5 million jobs nationwide could be lost due to self-driving vehicles (including 3.5 million truck drivers and, of course, almost all taxi drivers), equating to 3% of the U.S. workforce.” They also predict that these job losses from driving “will reduce income by \$200 billion, but new jobs will emerge.” These emerging jobs include AV fleet management, along with AV hub procurement and planning.

Danial Salman at the University of Washington’s Michael G. Foster School of Business **reported** that commercial driver licensing and truck-driving employment

fell disproportionately in more AV-exposed areas. And as a result, “drivers extend their work hours and reduce mortgage market participation relative to less-exposed, neighboring drivers.” Salman wrote that “Changes in household spending on alcohol and tobacco products are consistent with heightened automation-induced anxiety. The results indicate that perceived displacement risk affects households’ labor supply, credit behavior, and health, informing welfare assessments and policy responses to automation.”

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However, transportation is far from the only industry that will be affected by AI technologies that make human labor obsolete or less efficient. Local, state, and federal policymakers will need to analyze comprehensively how to support labor force adaptation and transitions in the age of AI.

AV SAFETY RISKS

Although there is high potential for autonomous vehicles, there are also risks. As the past few years have shown, AVs are less error-prone than humans, but they are not flawless. In December 2025, 130,000 homes and businesses lost power during a **widespread power outage** in San Francisco, and traffic lights were no longer operational. The Waymo cars stalled at intersections, leading to dozens of viral videos of the AVs impeding

traffic. After the incident, the company’s data **revealed** that the cars stopped 1,593 times for two minutes or more during the outage. Waymo sent staff and tow trucks to remove 64 of its cars, and, in two incidents, city first responders had to assume control of the stalled vehicles.

Public officials should take this potential power issue seriously: When AVs stall on roads in times of emergency, they impede other drivers and emergency vehicles from reaching their destinations.

AVs have also **stalled** because of protestors and vandals, who use misplaced traffic cones to render the car immobile.

Currently, a ride-hailing AV is more **expensive** than the same ride with a human driver. Although Waymo expanded its fleet beyond Jaguar cars, the pricing model and car composition suggest this is currently a premium service. If AVs are going to unlock the promise of safety, accessibility, and affordability, they must move past their current luxury iteration. To be sure, research, development, and extensive regulation factor into the costs, but the benefits of AVs cannot be realized in their current form.

WHO IS LIABLE?

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traffic accidents, tort law is the main tool for drivers to sue other drivers for monetary damages. The question of who is at fault is difficult to answer when there is no human driver. Several scholars have posited a way forward.

Currently, driver negligence figures prominently in auto liability cases. According to Stanford Law School professor Robert L. Rabin, the focus will now shift to product defect claims. Rabin believes that the product defect model will be difficult to use for the highly complex technology, and has **proposed** a new liability framework that is federally managed.

Proposals like this, however, can spur too much litigation and deter innovation. Brookings Institution scholar Mark MacCarthy has **advocated** for a moderate solution: maintaining the traditional negligence product liability standard, supplemented with a negligent driving regime based on what a reasonable human driver would do. Law professor Bryant Walker Smith at the University of South Carolina **proposed** a similar model, arguing that car manufacturers should be held liable when their cars perform unreasonably. A self-driving car performs unreasonably when a human driver or comparable automated driving system could have done better if presented with the same circumstances.

Liability will be a more prominent topic as AVs scale up and expand to different states. Because tort cases are largely

governed by state statutes and common law, different standards for AV accidents are likely to emerge. While the precise answer is unclear, states should be cautious of standards that push too far on either side. In particular, they should be careful of two outcomes: too little liability resulting in victims having no recourse, and too much liability that companies are deterred from operating or pass excessive costs on to consumers.

CONCLUSION

Autonomous vehicle technology has the potential to make roads safer and more accessible, especially for women and their families. Data on AVs currently operating on the roads in select cities provide encouraging signs for significant improvements in saving lives by reducing human operator error.

Labor markets for human drivers are projected to be heavily disrupted, with estimates of around five million drivers displaced, both full-time and independently contracted labor. This will require careful consideration by policymakers on how to support labor force adaptation and transitions.

For policymakers considering whether to allow AV operation within their borders, the greatest challenge will be balancing risk prevention and innovation. Resolving these challenges will enable society to realize the full benefits of AVs and transform driving for the better.

WHAT YOU CAN DO!

Get Informed

Learn more about autonomous vehicles, visit:

- [Paving the Way for Autonomous Vehicles—the Future of Mobility Is Here](#)
- [Letter of Support for Zoox’s Petition for Exemption](#)
- [IWV Applauds Introduction of CRA to Undo Electric Vehicle Mandates](#)

Talk to Your Friends:

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what’s going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

Become a Leader in the Community

Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

Remain Engaged Politically

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

Connect with Independent Women! Follow us on:

WE RELY ON THE SUPPORT OF PEOPLE LIKE YOU!

Please visit us on our website iwf.org to get more information and consider making a donation to Independent Women.

ABOUT INDEPENDENT WOMEN

Independent Women is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility. Independent Women, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.