A new report says over time, AVs will eliminate some jobs. But they could also prevent enough car crashes to save $385 billion a year.  

**THE SELF-DRIVING ROBOTS** are coming to transform your job. Kind of. Also, very slowly.

That’s the not-quite-exclamatory upshot of a new report from the Washington, DC-based Securing America’s Future Energy. The group advocates for a countrywide pivot away from oil dependency, one it hopes will be aided by the speedy adoption of electric, self-driving vehicles. So it commissioned a wide-ranging study by a phalanx of labor economists to discover how that could happen, and whether America might transform into a *Mad Max*-like desert hell along the way.

The news, mostly, is good. For one, self-driving vehicles probably won’t wreck the labor market to the point where gig economy workers are hired out as mobile blood bags. In fact, they’ll eventually feed the economy, accruing an estimated $800 billion in annual benefits by 2050, a number mostly in line with previous researchers’ projections.
Two, robo-cars won’t disappear the jobs all at once. “We have a labor market characterized by churning—continual job creation and destruction,” says Erica Groshen, a visiting labor economist at Cornell University and former Commissioner of Labor Statistics, who worked on the report. “The challenge is to make the transition as smooth as possible.”

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The economists predict the most disruptive technologies, like trucks that can drive themselves in most (but not all!) road situations, won’t arrive until the mid-2030s at the earliest. So go ahead and breathe that sigh of relief. But only one. It’s time to prep for fewer truckers and cab drivers, right now.
According to the report, most of autonomous vehicles’ benefits come from saving lives that would be lost to crashes. The 40,000 or so deaths on US roads every year are terrible, and terribly expensive. There’s the medical care, plus the emergency services, plus the legal costs, the workplace costs, the property damage, and the traffic costs. (That includes the costs of the fuel to sit in traffic.) Crashes cost the US economy about $840 billion per year.

Autonomous vehicles won’t delete crashes from American life, but they should reduce them. Robots don’t get drunk, or high, or sleepy, or look at cell phones when they should be staring the road. They won’t even have phones. Thus, the economists estimate driving might reduce crash costs by $118 billion annually by 2050. Factor in quality of life improvements, and you get closer to $385 billion in yearly savings.

The SAFE report also suggests some jobs will be easier to reach via self-driving car. You’d probably be more into a longer commute if you could just twiddle your thumbs (or send even more emails) the whole time. That just might open up a whole new population of workers to different sorts of businesses, assuming traffic isn’t so terrible that it scares everyone off the roads. (The economists chose not to factor in induced demand, or the idea that making travel easier will bring a ton more cars to the road.) OK!

The less great news is that, yes, some categories of jobs will probably disappear forever. Truckers, in particular, will eventually face some displacement. But the timing here is crucial. The first wave of automation to hit American roads won’t be too advanced. People trained as truckers will have to guide vehicles between distribution centers and the long, open highway, where the autonomous tech can do its thing. Meaning: There will still be jobs for people used to sitting behind the wheel.

The big changes won’t kick in for at least a few decades, the economists figure. Their report examines a range of autonomous vehicle deployment scenarios, but even the “fast” version doesn’t see slight unemployment increases—between 0.06 to 0.13 percent, with two or three years of $18 billion in annual wage losses—until the mid-2040s. Or even mid-2050s, when even better automation makes it to the streets. By then, most of today’s truck drivers will be out the biz. The average age of a driver is now 55.
That should leave politicians, CEOs, and lawmakers plenty of time to prep. Perhaps: Ask private companies to help pay for the labor fallout from their tech. Or: Be transparent with workers, and responsive to their concerns. Also: Boost government programs that might redirect and retrain professional drivers. And: Collect more data, and better data, on how market forces are affecting displaced workers.

“We should not panic, but we should not be complacent,” says Amitai Bin-Nun, who oversees SAFE’s autonomous vehicle and mobility work. Remember: To get to Thunderdome, a lot of negligent tech companies, policymakers, and government drones had to pass the buck.

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