

Rage against the machine: self-driving cars attacked by angry Californians

Local residents are hitting back at their new robot neighbors – literally – as reports detail assaults on driverless cars



One incident involved a pedestrian crossing the street and striking the autonomous vehicle 'with his entire body'. Photograph: Bloomberg via Getty Images

The great promise of self-driving cars is that they will save innumerable lives by removing the most fallible and unpredictable element from vehicle traffic: the human.

But in San Francisco at least, fickle human behavior is taking a stand.

Two of the six collisions involving autonomous vehicles in California so far this year involved humans colliding with self-driving cars, apparently on purpose, according to incident reports collected by the California department of motor vehicles.

On 10 January, a pedestrian in San Francisco's Mission District ran across the street to confront a GM Cruise autonomous vehicle that was waiting for people to cross the road, according to an incident report filed by the car company. The pedestrian was "shouting", the report states, and "struck the left side of the Cruise AV's rear bumper and hatch with his entire body".

No injuries occurred, but the car's left tail light was damaged.

In a separate incident just a few blocks away on 28 January, a taxi driver in San Francisco got out of his car, approached a GM Cruise autonomous vehicle and "slapped the front passenger window, causing a scratch".

The police were not called in either case.

The two human-on-robot assaults are not the first time San Franciscans have fought back – physically – against robots.

In December, the local SPCA animal shelter removed its 400lb Knightscope security robot from the streets around its building amid backlash from residents and the homeless population who complained the robot was harassing them. While most residents simply complained about the robot's presence, one person reportedly "put a tarp over it, knocked it over and put barbecue sauce on all the sensors".

And in April, a drunk man was arrested after he allegedly attacked and knocked over another Knightscope security robot in Mountain View, the Silicon Valley town that is home to Google.

Other efforts to rein in robots have been more genteel.

Last year, the San Francisco supervisor Jane Kim launched a thus far unsuccessful effort to tax robots that take human jobs. And in December, San Francisco passed a bill strictly limiting the number of autonomous delivery robots that are allowed to roam the city's sidewalks.



Gary Turner

(@garyturner)

Not shitting you, but I actually just rescued a robot in distress on the street after someone had tipped it over. This is one of those weird dreams, right. pic.twitter.com/Jh57DNqw1M

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"Not every innovation is all that great for society," the San Francisco supervisor Norman Yee, who authored the legislation, said at the time. "If we don't value our society, if we don't value getting the chance to go to the store without being run over by a robot ... what is happening?"

☐ Have you ever attacked a robot? Or wanted to? We want to hear from you! Contact julia.wong@theguardian.com