

The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. Order a reprint of this article now.



March 12, 2011

Carnage on I-95 After Crash Rips Bus Apart

By ROBERT D. McFADDEN

A tour bus barreling south for Manhattan overturned at high speed on a highway in the Bronx early Saturday and was sliced open by a sign stanchion in a shriek of rending metal that hurled riders about like rag dolls. Fourteen people were killed and 19 were injured, 5 of them critically, the authorities said.

Victims of the accident, which happened about 5:30 a.m. on Interstate 95 just across the Bronx line from Westchester County, were returning to Chinatown on a chartered bus from the Mohegan Sun casino in Uncasville, Conn. Some described grisly scenes of mayhem: at least one person decapitated, others maimed, people hanging upside down, victims gashed by flying glass, screaming in the darkness and struggling to get out. Some were thrown out on the ground, others were trapped in a maze of metal.

The crash cast a grim light on a nocturnal New York City subculture of overnight gamblers, many of them older Asian and Hispanic people, who take cheap buses from Chinatown to casinos in Connecticut and New Jersey, play the slots and tables for a few hours and catch an after-midnight bus home, usually sleeping on the trip back and often arriving just in time to get to return to work.

The driver, Ophadell Williams, 40, survived. He told the authorities that his bus was clipped by a passing tractor-trailer, which sped away, an assertion that the police later said was under investigation.

Out of control, the bus began swerving, toppled on its right side and skidded for 100 yards along a guardrail in showers of sparks, then rammed into the support pole of a large green sign pointing to the Hutchinson River Parkway exit.

The pole burst through the front window and sheared the bus in half laterally, from front to back, along the passenger window line, the police said. Firefighters found a section of guardrail inside the shattered bus amid unspeakable carnage.

"It was a pile of humans, either still in their seats or on the floor, wrapped in the metal, wrapped in the wreckage," said Capt. James Ellson, 42, a 20-year veteran of rescues and fires who was among the first on the scene. "They were in the full length of the bus, from the front to the rear there were bodies. It was just a pile."

Captain Ellson said body parts were strewn about, and he described the rescue of a man trapped between the pole and the roofline with a two-inch-square chunk of roof metal impaled in his back. The man was alive, his eyes open, but trapped under three bodies — "two of them were obviously dead, and one of them was alive," the captain said.

One passenger, Jose Hernandez, said people were "screaming for help." He saw a woman whose arm was missing. "We tried to help people, but there was twisted metal in the way," he said.

One city official, who asked not to be identified, said that the sign post "had come through at midchest, on the seat-high level, and had killed people."

The dead were taken to morgues and the injured were taken to Jacobi Medical Center and St. Barnabas Hospital, both in the Bronx. The identities of the victims were not released. Thirty-two people were on board, in addition to Mr. Williams. They ranged in age from their 20s to their 50s, officials said. Nine of those who were taken to hospitals had been released by Saturday night.

Dennis Yeh, 62, of Queens, said that his brother, Michael Yeh, 66, a retired supermarket worker who lived in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, was among those killed in the crash. Mr. Yeh, who was at Bellevue Hospital Center on Saturday night, said that the authorities had shown him a photograph of his brother that had been taken after the crash. "The impact was so bad" that it was difficult to identify him, Mr. Yeh said.

Investigators said the bus was apparently in the right-hand lane and the tractor-trailer was in the center lane, passing the bus. At the rear of the tractor-trailer was a step, on the right-hand side, and the driver said he believed the step clipped his front bumper.

The police said that it had not yet been determined whether the bus was actually hit by the tractor-trailer, or whether the bus driver, upon seeing it, himself began to swerve.

Later, at an evening news conference, Major Michael Kopy of the State Police said that the authorities had seized a trailer on Long Island and a tractor in Westchester County, and taken them to a police compound in Farmingdale to determine if they may have clipped the bus.

Major Kopy also said that the police had received several reports that the bus driver had been speeding on the Interstate, where the limit is 55 miles per hour. The bus driver's blood was tested for alcohol and drugs, and the results are pending.

The police have obtained a video taken from inside the bus but have not yet reviewed it, Major Kopy said.

For hours after the crash, investigators examined the wreckage of the black bus, which lay on its side on a highway strewn with shattered glass, passenger bags, shreds of clothing and other debris.

The stretch of highway near the crash is dotted with surveillance cameras, but most are traffic cameras with no recording capability. Those with recording devices will be examined by investigators.

Officials of the National Transportation Safety Board were en route to New York. Initial interviews with passengers were difficult, in part because survivors who had been seated in the front, and were thus more likely to have seen what happened, were the most traumatized and severely injured, while those at the back were less seriously hurt but had no clear view of the crash.

Language difficulties also hampered the early police interviews. However, two Chinese-speaking state troopers and some Asian auxiliary police officers from the Fifth Precinct in Chinatown were sent to the hospitals to talk to survivors.

At St. Barnabas Hospital, Dr. Ernest F. Patti, the senior attending physician of emergency medicine, said five trauma patients, including the bus driver, had been admitted with injuries that included skull and rib fractures and lung and internal injuries.

Two of them, a man described as very critically injured, and a woman, were being sustained by life-support mechanisms, he said.

Dr. Patti said the bus driver was in stable condition with non-life-threatening injuries and was being interviewed by the authorities. "He's obviously very much in distress," the doctor said. He noted that an accident like Saturday's "will put anybody into shock," and that post-traumatic stress disorder might be common in the survivors.

The wife of a Jacobi Medical Center surgeon said her husband called her from work and described a passenger with a crushed skull and others with hand and arm amputations. She showed an iPhone photo, texted from Jacobi, of a hand and forearm, severed just below the elbow, lying on an operating table.

At Jacobi, Kevin Ng, who said his grandmother had been on the bus, said after a brief visit with her: "She's O.K. for now. She's about to go into surgery." He said she had suffered a broken ankle and a minor concussion. "She was just in pain," he added.

Gang Luo, who identified himself as the Chinese consul in New York, visited Jacobi and spoke to hospital officials. He quoted them as saying at least three people were in critical condition at the hospital. Fifteen people were taken to Jacobi after the accident, said a spokeswoman, Barbara Delorio.

Investigators said the bus, operated by World Wide Tours, a company based in Brooklyn, had picked up passengers at the Mohegan Sun casino for the three-hour trip to Manhattan. The charter was to make its first stop at Allen Street on the Lower East Side, and then was to end its run at the Bowery, in Chinatown.

The owners of World Side Tours issued a statement saying that the company was cooperating with investigators and expressing sympathy for the victims and their families.

World Wide Tours was recently flagged by federal regulators for troubles with fatigued drivers, although its overall safety record was satisfactory, according to the federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration. The company's buses were involved in two crashes in the past two years that resulted in passenger injuries.

A city official said the accident on Saturday began in Westchester County but ended in the Bronx. Specialized rescue units from the New York Police and Fire Departments helped extricate victims and survivors, but the State Police were serving as the lead investigators of the accident.

The city's Office of Emergency Management said it was opening a family assistance center to aid the victims' families. The mayor said other city agencies would also offer assistance.

Reporting was contributed by Al Baker, Michael M. Grynbaum, Colin Moynihan, Nate Schweber, Tim Stelloh and Karen Zraick.