

‘Please Pray for Everybody’: Wisconsin Parade Tragedy Investigation Heightens

A joyous scene of marching bands and children dancing in Santa hats and waving pompoms turned deadly in an instant, as an SUV sped through barricades and into a Christmas parade in suburban Milwaukee, killing at least five people and injuring more than 40 others.

Investigators are examining whether the SUV’s driver may have been fleeing from a crime when he crashed into the parade-goers, a law enforcement official briefed on the matter told The Associated Press. The investigators were questioning the person in custody about that incident, which the official described as an altercation involving a knife.

The official, who cautioned the investigation was still in the early stages and was continuing to develop, could not discuss the investigation publicly and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

One video showed a woman screaming, “Oh my God!” repeatedly as a group of young dancers was struck Sunday. A father talked of going “from one crumpled body to the other” in search of his daughter. Members of a “Dancing Grannies” club were among those killed.

The city of Waukesha posted on its social media accounts late Sunday that it could confirm at least five died and more than 40 were injured, while noting that it was still collecting information. The city’s statement also noted that many people took themselves to hospitals. The city did not release any additional information about those who died.

A “person of interest” was in custody, Waukesha Police Chief

Dan Thompson said, but he gave no details about the person or any possible motive. The investigation was ongoing, with assistance from the Wisconsin Department of Justice.

The horror was recorded by the city's livestream and onlookers' cellphones. One video shows the moment the SUV broke through the barricades and the sound of what appears to be several gunshots. Thompson said a Waukesha police officer fired his gun to try to stop the vehicle. No bystanders were injured by the gunfire, and Thompson said he did not know if the driver was struck by the officer's bullets.

Another video shows a young child dancing in the street as the SUV speeds by, just a few feet from her, before it hurtles into parade participants a few hundred feet ahead. One video, of dancers with pompoms, ends with a group of people tending to a girl on the ground.

"There were pompoms and shoes and spilled hot chocolate everywhere. I had to go from one crumpled body to the other to find my daughter," Corey Montiho, a Waukesha school district board member, told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. "My wife and two daughters were almost hit. Please pray for everybody. Please pray."

The Milwaukee Dancing Grannies posted on its Facebook page early Monday that some of its members were among the dead. The group's profile describes them as a "group of grannies that meet once a week to practice routines for summer and winter parades."

"Our group was doing what they loved, performing in front of crowds in a parade putting smiles on faces of all ages, filling them with joy and happiness," the post said.

"Those who died were extremely passionate Grannies. Their eyes gleamed ... joy of being a Grannie. They were the glue ... held us together."

A Catholic priest, multiple parishioners and Waukesha Catholic schoolchildren were among those injured, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee spokeswoman Sandra Peterson said.

Chris Germain, co-owner of the Aspire Dance Center studio, had about 70 people in the parade ranging from as young as 2 being pulled in wagons to age 18. Germain, whose 3-year-old daughter was in the parade, said he was driving at the head of their entry when he saw a maroon SUV that “just blazed right past us.” A police officer ran past in chase. Germain said he jumped out of his own SUV and gathered the girls who were with him to safety.

Then he walked forward to see the damage.

“There were small children laying all over the road, there were police officers and EMTs doing CPR on multiple members of the parade,” he said.

Angelito Tenorio, a West Allis alderman who is running for Wisconsin state treasurer, said he was watching the parade with his family when they saw the SUV come speeding into the area.

“Then we heard a loud bang,” Tenorio said. “And after that, we just heard deafening cries and screams from the crowd, from the people at the parade. And people started rushing, running away with tears in their eyes, crying.”

The Waukesha school district canceled classes Monday and said in a notice on its website that extra counselors would be on hand for students and staff. The parade’s list of entries included cheer, dance and band entries associated with district schools.

Gov. Tony Evers said he and his wife, Kathy, were “praying for Waukesha tonight and all the kids, families, and community members affected by this senseless act.”

President Joe Biden was briefed Sunday night, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said on Twitter. Assistance is being offered to local officials, she said, and “Our hearts are with the families and the entire community.”

The parade, held each year on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, is sponsored by the city’s Chamber of Commerce. This year’s, the 59th, had the theme of “comfort and joy.”

Waukesha is a western suburb of Milwaukee, and about 55 miles (90 kilometers) north of Kenosha, where Kyle Rittenhouse was acquitted Friday of charges stemming from the shooting of three men during unrest in that city in August 2020. {eo}

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