

Gunman Storms N.Y.P.D. Precinct After Firing at Police Van, Wounding 2

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He first shot at two police officers in a van after having asked them for directions.

Then, less than 12 hours later, the police said, the man entered a precinct in the Bronx and began shooting, hitting one officer and injuring another, while sending others scrambling for cover.

By the end of the rampage on Sunday morning, two officers were wounded and a third was injured, and the department was shaken. For some, the shootings echoed previous deadly attacks on officers, including a 2014 assassination of two officers in Brooklyn who were killed as they sat in a patrol car.

“This is not a crime gone bad. This is not a liquor store robbery interrupted,” said Police Commissioner Dermot Shea on Sunday. “This is a premeditated assassination attempt.”

The shooting spree touched off a political firestorm about policing in New York, bringing into question the circumstances that allowed the man, whom two police officials identified as Robert Williams, to attack the officers. Mr. Williams, 45, has a lengthy criminal history and was out on parole after a conviction for attempted murder, stemming from a 2002 incident where he engaged in a gun battle with officers, the police said.

On Twitter, President Trump blamed the governor and the mayor — “weak leadership” — for being too soft on crime; the officers’ union blamed Democratic state legislators for enacting changes to several criminal justice laws; and Commissioner Shea and the mayor blamed activists who had recently protested increased police presence in the subway.

“Anyone who spews hatred at our officers is aiding and abetting this kind of atmosphere. It’s not acceptable,” Mayor Bill de Blasio said. “You can protest whatever for whatever you believe in, but you cannot vilely attack those who are here to protect us. It creates this kind of dynamic.”

Local officials provided no evidence to support their argument that the recent protests played a role in the rampage, and it is unclear if politics motivated the shooter in any way. The police have not yet determined if Mr. Williams, who was paroled in 2017, long before the recent changes to several state criminal justice laws were implemented, was connected to a protest group, one law enforcement official said.

Mary Williams, Mr. Williams’s grandmother, said her grandson has been withdrawn since the death of his only son, Robert Williams Jr., about two years ago.

“He had one son. He was 18, he was getting ready to go to college upstate, and somebody shot him in the street and killed him,” said Ms. Williams, 80. “He never got over it.”

Mr. Williams keeps a white candle lit in his own bedroom to remember his son, and has his baby picture hanging above his bed, she said. Ms. Williams said she believes her grandson started using heavy drugs to cope with his grief: “I think that was his downfall.”

Police records show that in 2018, Robert Williams, 18, died in a shooting in the Bronx. Ms. Williams confirmed that was her great-grandson.

In surveillance video, a man, who the police said was Mr. Williams, is seen calmly entering the 41st Precinct, which serves the Hunts Point neighborhood, at around 8 a.m. on Sunday. He glanced around and almost immediately opened fire, sending officers and civilian staff scrambling to shield themselves. One bullet struck the arm of a lieutenant, who then returned fire, but missed.

The man paused, appeared to hear returning gunshots, and then lay on the ground, sliding his gun along the floor to officers at the other end of the room.

"This coward immediately laid down, but only after he ran out of bullets," Commissioner Shea said.

Mr. Williams was taken into custody at the precinct without further incident. He was charged Sunday with attempted murder, criminal possession of a weapon and resisting arrest.

Just 12 hours earlier, at around 8 p.m. on Saturday, the police said, Mr. Williams had approached two officers in a marked police vehicle a few blocks from that same station house. The officers had been posted in the neighborhood because there had been reports of drug dealing and shootings there recently, Commissioner Shea said.

Mr. Williams spoke with the officers and then asked for directions before pulling out a gun and opening fire into the vehicle, the police said.

The officer driving the van was struck in the chin and the neck by a bullet that just missed his carotid artery, the police said. The officer's partner drove him to a nearby hospital. In surveillance video from the shooting, a man can be seen pointing something at the vehicle as it sped away. He then fled.

"We are confident that he is the same person who attempted to assassinate our police officers last night," Commissioner Shea said at a news conference on Sunday.

Officers are also questioning a woman, Liza Valdez, in connection to the shootings. Ms. Valdez, who according to city records was a civilian employee of the department until 2019, was not considered a suspect, the police said.

Ms. Valdez returned to her apartment on Sunday in tears.

"She is a great woman. She is a good mom, she is a good daughter," her mother, Virginia, told reporters. Mr. Williams had asked Ms. Valdez to drive him to his mother's house on Sunday, but on the way had bolted out of the car and into the precinct, her mother said.

"He's her friend, and he lied to her," she said.

Both officers who were shot in the two attacks are expected to make full recoveries, police officials said. A third officer was injured at the precinct, but the police did not specify how.

"By the grace of God that we're not planning a funeral," said Commissioner Shea.

A 9-millimeter gun was recovered from Mr. Williams at the precinct and will be tested to see if it matches the gun used in Saturday's shooting, Commissioner Shea said.

According to police officials and court documents, Mr. Williams had been convicted of attempted murder after a shooting in 2002. Mr. Williams had shot someone, carjacked a woman in trying to flee the scene, wrecked the stolen vehicle and then engaged responding

officers in a gun battle, the police said. He was released on parole in 2017.

Mr. Williams also had a recent encounter with the police. The details of that incident remain unclear, but he was charged with resisting arrest and obstruction of government administration, according to court records. He was due in court in the Bronx on Monday.

The commissioner said the unprovoked shooting evoked memories of other attacks on the police over the years, including the killings of the two Brooklyn officers, Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos. "This harkens back to some very bad times," he said.

In 2014, Officer Ramos and Officer Liu were sitting in their patrol car when they were shot at point-blank range and killed during an ambush. The suspect then turned the gun on himself, dying by suicide, the authorities said. The incident came at a moment when New York and cities across the country were experiencing widespread protests over police brutality.

And in 2017, Officer Miosotis Familia was in a mobile command vehicle in the Bronx when she was assassinated by a gunman.

The attacks in the Bronx occurred just a week after hundreds of demonstrators showed up Grand Central Terminal to rally against an increased police presence in the subway. In December, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority approved Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's plan to add 500 more officers to patrol the transit system, which has spurred several protests that have led to arrests.

"We have people marching in New York City last week and I condemned it and I condemn it right here again today — using profanities against the Police Department," Commissioner Shea said on Sunday. "Everyone should be speaking out against this, and you have to be careful about the words you use whether it's on social media or on written papers or speaking, because words matter and words affect people's behavior."

Johnny Diaz, Aimee Ortiz, Ashley Southall and Michael Levenson contributed reporting.