

**The New York Times**

June 5, 2012

# Driver Fatigue and Speed Caused Fatal Bus Crash, Investigators Say

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Except for a few naps, the driver of the bus that crashed last year in the Bronx, killing 15 passengers, had gotten no significant sleep in the three days leading to the wreck, federal investigators concluded on Tuesday.

The National Transportation Safety Board, in its final hearing on the crash, attributed the accident to the sleep-deprived driver's fatigue. Investigators said records from his cellphone and a car rental agency showed that the driver, Ophadell Williams, had been driving around the New York City area and talking almost continuously on his phone when he should have been resting.

The crash could have been avoided if Mr. Williams had not been so sleepy and had not been driving so fast, investigators said. They determined that the bus had been traveling as fast as it could go — 78 miles per hour — just before the crash and was going 64 m.p.h. when it veered into a guardrail on Interstate 95.

“Together, fatigue and speed are an especially lethal combination,” Deborah A. P. Hersman, the chairwoman of the safety board, said during the hearing in Washington. “This deadly accident did not have to happen.”

The board also found that the company based in Brooklyn that employed Mr. Williams — World Wide Travel of Greater New York — had not kept track of logs of his driving or maintained adequate safety controls.

Mr. Williams, who suffered minor injuries during the crash, was indicted last fall on charges of manslaughter and negligent homicide. He pleaded not guilty and has been jailed at Rikers Island on \$250,000 bail since then.

The bus, carrying 32 passengers, was returning to Manhattan's Chinatown from an overnight trip to the Mohegan Sun casino in Connecticut in the predawn hours of March 12, 2011. Investigators said that evidence from the crash scene in the Bronx, just south of the border with Westchester County, fit with the reports of surviving passengers who said that

Mr. Williams had fallen asleep at the wheel. They said there were no signs that he had braked or had taken any actions to keep the bus on the highway.

After the bus hit the guardrail twice, it rolled onto its side and skidded into a stanchion that held up an overhead sign. The signpost sliced through the bus, shearing the roof from its body and killing several passengers instantly as they slept.

Besides the 15 passengers who died, an additional 7 suffered serious injuries.

Mr. Williams said he had lost control after being clipped by a speeding truck, an account that could not be verified by investigators. Indeed, no mention was made of a truck near the crash scene. But investigators said three truck drivers reported having seen the bus drifting onto the shoulder of the highway 10 to 20 minutes before it crashed at 5:38 a.m.

The crash was the deadliest among a few involving low-cost buses that operate from Chinatown in Manhattan that prompted a crackdown last week by federal officials resulting in the shutdown of 26 bus lines. Some of those companies did not verify that their drivers had valid licenses, federal regulators said.

Mr. Williams's license had been suspended eight times, and he had been dismissed from previous jobs with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and another private bus company, the safety board's investigators found.

World Wide has not operated since the accident, but most of its buses and employees were absorbed by an affiliated company, Great Escapes Tours and Travel. Great Escapes continues to operate, even though the safety board found that it had "continued to show weakness in safety management controls," investigators said.

Federal investigators also found that the New York State Thruway Authority had not shielded the signpost with a guardrail designed to deflect vehicles that weighed as much as a bus. Instead, the guardrail was strong enough to deflect only cars.

The signpost was 15 feet from the edge of the highway, leaving it in the middle of the 30-foot-wide "clear zone" that allows drivers to recover from swerving off the roadway, they said. Fixed objects within the clear zone should be shielded with guardrails strong enough to deflect heavier vehicles, the investigators said.

The safety board made several other recommendations at the hearing, including using devices to limit the speed of passenger buses and having bus companies demand to see 10 years of an applicant's driving history. They also concluded that fewer passengers would

have been killed in the Bronx crash if the bus had been outfitted with seat belts and shoulder harnesses.