

11 dead, 6 injured in shooting at Tree of Life Congregation in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh

The gunman told police “he wanted all Jews to die and also that they (Jews) were committing genocide to his people.”



11 people were fatally shot at Tree of Life synagogue on Oct. 27, 2018. LEXI BELCULFINE / THE INCLINE

The Incline Staff
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Updated: 5:12 a.m. Oct. 28

Three women and eight males were killed and six more people were injured after a Pittsburgh-area man armed with an assault rifle and three handguns opened fire in the Tree of Life Congregation in Squirrel Hill on Saturday morning, authorities said.

The gunman – Robert Bowers, 46, of Baldwin – told a SWAT operator “that he wanted all Jews to die and also that they (Jews) were committing genocide to his people” while receiving medical treatment after being taken into custody, Pittsburgh Detectives Edward A. Fallert and James D. McGee wrote in a criminal complaint (<https://twitter.com/theinclinepgh/status/1056459095815917568>), released early Sunday morning.

The Anti-Defamation League said it believed this was the deadliest attack on the Jewish community (<https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-statement-on-synagogue-shooting-in-pittsburgh>) in the nation’s history.

The FBI is investigating the shooting as a hate crime, U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Pennsylvania Scott Brady told members of the media gathered at the Allegheny County Emergency Operations in Point Breeze on Saturday afternoon.

“Know justice will be swift and severe,” Brady said.

At 8:05 p.m. Saturday, federal prosecutors filed 29 charges (<https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdpa/pr/statement-filing-federal-charges>) against Bowers:

- 11 counts of obstruction of exercise of religious beliefs resulting in death
- 11 counts of use of a firearm to commit murder during and in relation to a crime of violence
- 4 counts of obstruction of exercise of religious beliefs resulting in bodily injury to a public safety officer
- 3 counts of use and discharge of a firearm during and in relation to a crime of violence

“The crimes of violence are based upon the federal civil rights laws prohibiting hate crimes,” per a statement from the U.S. Attorney’s Office Western District of Pennsylvania.

Bowers was also charged (<https://ujsportal.pacourts.us/DocketSheets/MDJReport.aspx?docketNumber=MJ-05003-CR-0009000-2018>) by Pittsburgh Police on Saturday with:

- 11 counts of criminal homicide
- 6 counts of criminal attempt
- 6 counts of aggravated assault

13 counts of ethnic intimidation, a first-degree felony, “based on what Bowers described himself as his hatred for ‘Jews,’” per the criminal complaint filed by Pittsburgh police.

The shooting

At 9:54 a.m. Saturday, an active shooter was reported in the synagogue, which did not have security on hand, authorities said.

“At that time, multiple people were in attendance of the Tree of Life Synagogue and engaged in religious service and worship,” according to the Pittsburgh criminal complaint.

911 callers inside the synagogue told dispatchers “they were being attacked,” per the complaint.

“After he entered the synagogue, it looks like at that point, he murdered the 11 parishioners,” Bob Jones, special agent in charge of the Pittsburgh office of the FBI, said Saturday.

By 9:55 a.m. Saturday, authorities were on their way there.

When two Pittsburgh officers encountered Bowers, who had an assault-style rifle, they exchanged gunfire. One of the officers was shot in the hand, while the other was cut in the face by broken glass and shrapnel, per the affidavit.

Bowers retreated further into the building and moved to the third floor, where a Pittsburgh SWAT team encountered him as they were searching for additional victims.

Bowers shot at them. Officers fired back.

Bowers shot two SWAT members multiple times, injuring one of the men critically, per the Pittsburgh affidavit. The gunman was also injured during the encounter and was taken into custody.

Jones described the scene as “the most horrific crime scene I’ve seen in 22 years with the FBI.”



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The victims

Eleven people were killed, Pittsburgh Public Safety Director Wendell Hissrich said, adding that no children were among the dead. Authorities did not release names of those victims on Saturday, though the criminal complaint filed by Pittsburgh Police said they included three women and eight males.

Hissrich, a former FBI official, also called it one of the worst scenes he’s seen in his career.

A total of six people, not including the gunman, were also injured.

Two were in critical condition Saturday afternoon, with the other four “doing well,” said Don Yealy, chair of emergency medicine at UPMC.

Two people injured during the shooting were treated at UPMC Presbyterian on Saturday:

A 61-year-old female with soft-tissue injuries to her extremities that needed to be cleaned in the operating room “is doing well now and recovering,” Yealy said.

A 70-year-old male with gunshot wounds that hit major organs in his abdomen was in critical condition as of 5:30 p.m. He underwent an initial surgery, but Yealy said he will need more.

Two Pittsburgh officers were injured when they encountered Bowers in the synagogue. Both officers were in stable condition Saturday, Yealy said.

Two Pittsburgh SWAT officers were hit later “during an engagement inside the building,” Pittsburgh Police Chief Scott Schubert said, adding that he spoke with two of the four injured officers and would return to the hospital Saturday evening.

Those officers were described as:

A 55 year-old male officer, who was in critical condition after having multiple extremity wounds repaired and cleaned in a UPMC Presbyterian operating room. As of 5:30 p.m., he was in stable condition.

Another male officer, who also was taken to UPMC Presbyterian, had soft tissue wounds and grazing but “looks to be doing fine now” after a complete evaluation.

A 27-year-old male officer with extremity wounds went to UPMC Mercy for “intervention and evaluation” in the operating room, Yealy said. “That officer is doing fine.”

A fourth officer was taken to Allegheny General Hospital, and his condition was unknown.

UPMC tweeted that as of 5:30 p.m., a male SWAT officer was in critical condition and one officer was treated and released. They did not offer further details.

“Watching those officers run into the danger to remove people into safety was unbelievable,” Schubert said.

Indeed, Hissrich said, “without their courage this tragedy would have been far worse.”

An emergency hotline has been established for family members in search of information at 412-432-4400. A victim assistance and reunification center was established at Chatham University at 106 Berry St. Grief counselors and the Red Cross will be made available.

Blood donation centers

(<https://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2018/10/27/pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting-blood-donations/>) extended their hours today in response to the shooting, KDKA-TV reported.

The gunman

Bowers, a Pittsburgh-area resident, was taken to Allegheny General Hospital in fair condition with multiple gunshot wounds, Hissrich said but would not confirm if Bowers was cooperating with authorities.

“We believe it was police [who shot Bowers], but a definitive determination will have to be done with the investigation being conducted by the FBI,” Hissrich said.

Authorities said Bowers brought an assault rifle and three handguns to the synagogue but would not confirm how those guns were obtained. The investigation will determine if he used all four guns.

“The actions of Robert Bowers represent the worst of humanity,” Brady said.

Authorities entered Bowers’ apartment (<http://www.post-gazette.com/news/crime-courts/2018/10/27/squirrel-hill-synagogue-shooting-suspect-pittsburgh-mass-officers-victims-casualties/stories/201810270072>) on Saturday afternoon, taking all precautions including a bomb squad.

“We’re in the early stages of this investigation and will look at everything in the suspect’s life in the coming weeks,” Jones said. “I want the people of Pittsburgh to know the FBI will work around the clock to get answers to why and how this happened.”

Jones added, “This gunman targeted [the victims] simply because of their faith. The suspect’s full motive is unknown, but it is believed he acted alone.”

Much has been made about Bowers' social media trail. Multiple media outlets say that trail included an account on the alt-right forum Gab, a subversive platform described as a hub of the alt-right and by *The New York Times* as an "alt-Twitter social network." An account believed linked to Bowers included a stream of anti-semitic rants and postings of a bevy of firearms.



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The vigils

During the press conference, Hissrich said police would provide adequate coverage of forthcoming vigils in Pittsburgh. While hundreds gathered inside Sixth Presbyterian Church this evening in a vigil for those killed and injured, scores more shut down the intersection of Forbes and Murray in a massive vigil.

Vigils for the victims at Tree of Life are also planned for tonight in other cities including [Baltimore](https://m.facebook.com/events/632160050559410/) (<https://m.facebook.com/events/632160050559410/>), [Philadelphia](https://www.facebook.com/events/319087012156443/) (<https://www.facebook.com/events/319087012156443/>) and [New York](https://www.facebook.com/events/317288422421036/) (<https://www.facebook.com/events/317288422421036/>).

The Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh and Jewish synagogues will have an [interfaith community vigil](https://twitter.com/JewishFedPGH/status/1056293382908198912) (<https://twitter.com/JewishFedPGH/status/1056293382908198912>) at 5 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 28 at Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall and Museum, per a tweet from the federation. Doors open at 3 p.m.

The synagogue

[Tree of Life](https://www.tolols.org/) (<https://www.tolols.org/>) Or L'Simcha describes itself online as "a traditional, progressive and egalitarian congregation based in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill neighborhood."

During the week, the building's doors are locked, but there's a different protocol on Shabbat. Three congregations meet at the synagogue, but less than 50 people were likely in the building when the shooting was reported, per a former rabbi.

The Jewish Federation of Pittsburgh had sponsored security training, Rabbi Chuck Diamond said.

"We offer a warm and welcoming environment where even the oldest Jewish traditions become relevant to the way our members live today," the synagogue said on its website. "From engaging services, social events, family-friendly activities and learning opportunities to support in times of illness or sorrow, we match the old with the new to deliver conservative Jewish tradition that's accessible, warm and progressive."

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