

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A:

**PUBLISHED DECISION OF THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR
THE SECOND CIRCUIT, DATED SEPTEMBER 20, 2021.
(*United States v. Willis*, 14 F.4th 170 (2d Cir. 2021))**

14 F.4th 170
United States Court of Appeals, Second Circuit.

UNITED STATES of America, Appellee,
v.

Larry WILLIS, Isiah Pierce
Defendants-Appellants.

Nos. 18-3617-cr, 19-1051-cr

August Term, 2020

Argued: December 7, 2020

Decided: September 20, 2021

Synopsis

Background: Defendant and codefendant were convicted in the United States District Court for the Western District of New York, Lawrence J. Vilardo, J., of possession of cocaine base with intent to distribute, possession of powder cocaine with intent to distribute, maintaining a drug involved premises, possessing a firearm in furtherance of drug trafficking, and possession of firearms and ammunition as a felon. Codefendant was also convicted of possessing heroin and butyryl fentanyl with intent to distribute and possession fentanyl with intent to distribute. After denial of their motions for judgments of acquittal defendant was sentenced to 210 months' imprisonment and codefendant was sentenced to 168 months' imprisonment. Defendant and codefendant appealed.

Holdings: The Court of Appeals, Parker, Senior Circuit Judge, held that:

evidence was sufficient that codefendant constructively possessed and controlled various controlled substances and weapons found in upper apartment, as required to support convictions;

evidence was sufficient that defendant constructively possessed and controlled the cocaine base and weapons found in lower apartment, as required to support convictions;

evidence was sufficient that defendant aided and abetted codefendant's possession of cocaine powder with intent to

distribute it that was found in upper apartment, as would support defendant's conviction;

evidence was sufficient to support defendant and codefendant's convictions for maintaining a premises where drugs were manufactured or distributed;

district court was not manifestly erroneous in allowing special agent to testify as expert witness in general terms about paraphernalia or tools that were typically found in possession of people who distributed narcotics;

district court was not manifestly erroneous in admitting testimony from defendants' parole officers about their familial relationships and their living situations; and

district court clearly erred in relying on drugs found in interview room where defendant was held to conclude that preponderance of the evidence established defendant conspired with codefendant to possess and distribute drugs found in upper apartment in calculating defendant sentencing guidelines range to include counts for which defendant had been acquitted.

Affirmed in part, vacated in part, and remanded.

***176** Appeal from the United States District Court for the Western District of New York, No. 17-cr-32 (LJV), Lawrence J. Vilardo, District Judge, Presiding.

Attorneys and Law Firms

Katherine A. Gregory, Assistant United States Attorney for James P. Kennedy, Jr., United States Attorney for the Western District of New York, Buffalo, N.Y., for Appellee.

Carla M. Sanderson Carla Sanderson Law, New York, N.Y., for Defendant-Appellant Willis.

Robert A. Culp Garrison, N.Y., for Defendant-Appellant Pierce.

Before: POOLER, PARKER, and LYNCH, Circuit Judges.

Opinion

Barrington D. Parker, Circuit Judge:

*177 Larry Willis and Isiah Pierce appeal from judgments of conviction entered following a three-day trial in the United States District Court for the Western District of New York (Vilardo, *J.*). The defendants, charged in a twelve-count superseding indictment, were convicted of various drug-related crimes and firearms offenses.¹ The district court denied defendants' motions for judgments of acquittal. *See* Fed. R. Crim. P. 29. Pierce was sentenced to 168 months and Willis to 210 months of incarceration.

On appeal, defendants contend that the evidence was insufficient to support the jury's verdict on each of the counts of conviction. They also challenge various of the district court's evidentiary rulings and its calculation of the sentences recommended by the Sentencing Guidelines ("U.S.S.G." or "Guidelines"). For the reasons that follow, we affirm the convictions, but remand Willis's sentence.

BACKGROUND

The issues raised on appeal center on Willis's and Pierce's use of two apartments—the upper and the lower—at 70 Henrietta Avenue, Buffalo, New York ("70 Henrietta") from which they conducted a drug trafficking operation. Officers of the Erie County Sheriff's Office ("ECSO") executed search warrants at that location and seized narcotics, drug trafficking paraphernalia, firearms, and ammunition.

Testimony adduced by the government at trial established that on the morning of December 1, 2016, the ECSO had attempted to execute a warrant authorizing a search of 108 Peck Street, of Willis's person, and of his black Pontiac Grand Prix. Efforts to locate Willis led them to the two apartments at 70 Henrietta. While conducting surveillance, Deputy William Granville of the ECSO saw a dark-colored Dodge Charger pull into the front of 70 Henrietta, followed closely by a blue Chevrolet Equinox (the "Equinox"). Defendant Isiah Pierce was driving the Charger, while Tanzie Fuller was driving the Equinox, which was registered to Willis. The drivers of both vehicles got out and entered the front door at 70 Henrietta.

After a short period, Pierce and Fuller exited 70 Henrietta, and both got into Willis's Equinox. Shortly thereafter, Officer Cully Ferrick stopped Pierce who was driving the Equinox for excessive tint on *178 the glass. After a brief conversation, Detective Timothy Donovan asked him to step out of the vehicle because he "smelled the odor of marijuana." Pierce App'x at 51. The officers searched the vehicle and recovered a "violation" or non-criminal

quantity of marijuana, as well as five cellphones. A search of Pierce's person turned up approximately \$1,700 in cash and a set of keys. At that point, Pierce was arrested, searched, and taken to the ECSO headquarters at 45 Elm Street ("45 Elm"). Once they arrived, Pierce was left handcuffed in an interview room. Detective Donovan testified that at some later point he went back into the interview room and "found a large amount of narcotics that were underneath the desk area" that had not been in the room when he first left Pierce there. Pierce App'x at 55.

Although none of these materials had been found in the search incident to Pierce's arrest, Donovan testified that he found "a plastic bag which contained numerous knotted plastic bags that contained white rock-like substance that appeared to be cocaine, and also bundles full of what appeared to be heroin" along with "glass wax envelopes that are commonly used to package heroin." Pierce App'x at 56.

While Pierce was being detained by the ECSO, Deputy Granville continued his surveillance of 70 Henrietta. Deputy Granville testified that around 2:15 PM, he saw Willis leaving 70 Henrietta, appearing to lock the front door, entering a black Pontiac, and driving away. Around 2:30 PM, officers stopped Willis's car, searched and arrested him, and searched the car from which they recovered cash, keys, and two cellphones. Deputy Granville testified that, after seeing Willis leave, he remained outside 70 Henrietta for two additional hours until about 4:15 PM when he was notified that other officers were coming to 70 Henrietta to execute a search warrant.

After Willis was arrested, he was brought to 45 Elm where he was placed in an interview room. Detective Timothy Carney testified that he saw Willis "digging down his pants," that he and Detective Daniel Granville entered the room, and that Detective Granville located narcotics in a bag on the floor. Willis App'x at 70. In the bag, the officer claimed to find yellow bags commonly used for packaging heroin, and bags that contained crack cocaine and heroin. The drugs found on the floor at 45 Elm were the subject of Counts 10 and 11 charging Willis with possession of heroin and cocaine with intent to distribute and Count 12 charging Pierce with possession of cocaine with intent to distribute. Both defendants were acquitted on these counts.

Later that day, the officers executed a search warrant for the lower apartment at 70 Henrietta. Keys recovered from Willis at his arrest opened the front door at 70 Henrietta, as well as the door to the lower apartment. The officers

recovered a cache of weapons including assault rifles, a pistol, magazines, and rounds of ammunition. The officers also recovered 10.35 grams of cocaine base and tools of the drug trade including baking soda, digital scales with traces of white powder, a metal strainer, bags, whisks, a spoon, a fork, a large quantity of small rubber bands, razors, a latex glove, and a metal weight. In addition, the officers seized a title, in Willis's name, to the Chevrolet Equinox that Fuller and Pierce had been driving earlier, insurance documents in the name of Larry Willis, a Buffalo police incident card, a traffic ticket, DMV paperwork, and photographs of Willis and Pierce together.

Later that evening, the officers executed a search warrant for the upper apartment. Keys recovered from Pierce at his arrest opened the front door of 70 Henrietta, the door to the upper apartment, and a padlocked bedroom door in that apartment. *179 The keys also included a Tops Friendly Markets Bonus Card on the key ring that was connected to the account of Pierce's girlfriend, Courtney Brouse.

Inside the upper apartment, officers recovered a separate cache of weapons that included handguns, a large capacity magazine, rounds of ammunition, a digital scale, packaging materials, and three bags containing 167.98 grams of butyryl fentanyl and heroin. The officers also recovered cocaine base and additional quantities of heroin, fentanyl, and butyryl fentanyl. The total weight of the additional heroin and fentanyl was approximately 50 grams. The weight of the cocaine seized was approximately 142 grams of base, and approximately 253 grams of powder. One of the main factual issues on appeal centers on whether the contraband found in the two apartments could be attributed to either or both defendants.

The arresting officers subsequently obtained warrants to search the phones seized from Willis and Pierce. One of the phones recovered from the Equinox had received texts addressing the recipient as "Zeke," Pierce's nickname, and inquiring about Pierce's girlfriend and daughter, tending to show that the phone belonged to Pierce. The phone had also received a text message saying "Yo, everyone like that tester, said it was real good, the best they seen. But I'm out of work. Got half a bun." Doc. 201 at 19.

Both defendants were subsequently indicted and proceeded to trial. The government's theory was that the two apartments were jointly used by Willis and Pierce to manufacture and distribute drugs. The government argued that Willis resided in the lower apartment, pointing to his

ownership of keys to the unit and the presence of his personal effects there. Pierce, according to the government, controlled the upper unit as evidenced by his possession of keys to the unit and to the padlocked interior bedroom where the drugs and guns were found. As evidence of joint control, the government argued that after being taken to 45 Elm, Willis discarded heroin and cocaine wrapped in the same yellow packaging found in the upper unit and that the crack cocaine Pierce discarded at 45 Elm was wrapped in blue envelopes that were the same as those found in the lower unit.

The jury returned a mixed verdict. Willis was convicted of possessing less than 28 grams of cocaine base with intent to distribute (Count 2); possessing powder cocaine with intent to distribute (Count 5); maintaining a drug involved premises (Count 6); possessing a firearm in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime (Count 7); and possession of firearms and ammunition as a felon (Count 9).

Pierce was convicted of possessing 28 or more grams of cocaine base with intent to distribute (Count 2); possessing 100 grams or more of heroin and butyryl fentanyl with intent to distribute (Count 3); possessing 40 grams or more of fentanyl with intent to distribute (Count 4); possessing powder cocaine with intent to distribute (Count 5); maintaining a drug involved premises (Count 6); possessing a firearm in furtherance of drug trafficking (Count 7); and possession of firearms and ammunition as a felon (Count 8).

Both defendants were acquitted of the narcotics conspiracy charged in Count 1, and of possessing the cocaine base and heroin that two officers claimed to have found in the interview rooms at 45 Elm as charged in Counts 10, 11, and 12. Willis was also acquitted of possessing the heroin and fentanyl found in the upper apartment charged in Counts 3 and 4. After trial, both defendants moved for judgments of acquittal under Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 29 challenging the sufficiency of *180 the evidence supporting their convictions. The district court denied both motions.

Prior to sentencing, Willis filed objections to certain factual portions of the Pre-Sentence Investigation Report ("PSR"). He argued against the PSR's attribution to him of: currency recovered from Pierce, currency recovered from 369 Wabash Avenue ("369 Wabash"), the quantities of drugs found in the upper apartment, and the total quantity of drugs found at 45 Elm (which he had been acquitted of possessing).

The district court agreed with Willis in part, finding that

the currency found at 369 Wabash, the home of Pierce's girlfriend Courtney Brouse, was not attributable to Willis, but accepted the remaining facts in the PSR as its findings. The district court concluded that the drugs located in the upper apartment and the interview rooms at the police station were "possessed within the scope and in furtherance of the jointly undertaken criminal activity and were reasonably foreseeable," Willis App'x at 135, and incorporated into the Guidelines calculation all the drugs from the upper apartment and the cocaine base that Willis and Pierce were acquitted of possessing in the police interview rooms at 45 Elm. These findings had a significant effect on the district court's Guidelines calculation. The inclusion of the disputed contraband increased Willis's base offense level on Counts 2, 5, and 6 from 24 to 30.²

The district court determined that Willis's Guidelines range was 248 to 295 months. The district court agreed with Willis that the Guidelines were "too high," Willis App'x at 163, and sentenced Willis to 150 months concurrently on all counts, except for a mandatory consecutive 60-month term for possession of a firearm in furtherance of drug trafficking, for an aggregate term of 210 months' imprisonment. The district court did not state explicitly whether Willis's federal sentence would run concurrently to a then-anticipated state sentence, although Willis's counsel had noted on the record his assumption that this was the district court's intention. After calculating Pierce's Guidelines range, the district court sentenced Pierce to 168 months.³

This appeal followed.

DISCUSSION

Defendants contend that the government failed to adduce sufficient evidence on all counts of conviction. Because, as discussed below, the government's evidence of guilt on nearly all counts was substantial, we discuss in detail only the defendants' colorable insufficiency arguments. Willis, in this regard, contends that though the evidence at trial supported the inference that he had access to the lower apartment, it was insufficient to prove that he possessed the cocaine base and firearms found in the lower apartment, and *181 the powder cocaine found in the upper apartment. Willis also argues that the district court improperly calculated his Guidelines range when it found that, though acquitted of the charged conspiracy, he jointly possessed all the narcotics in the upper apartment with Pierce. As noted, this issue bears heavily on his sentence.

Pierce, for his part, argues that the evidence produced at trial equally supports the inference that others connected to the apartments controlled the drug operation and possessed the drugs and the weapons seized by law enforcement. Pierce also contends that the district court abused its discretion in denying his motion for a new trial on ineffective assistance of counsel grounds, and that the defendants were denied a fair trial because the district court improperly allowed expert testimony of a Drug Enforcement Agency ("DEA") witness concerning the means and methods of drug trafficking, allowed testimony of the parole officers of Willis and Pierce "thus underscoring their prior convictions," and allowed the government in its summation to "improperly invite[] the jury to help law enforcement solve the drug problem." Pierce Br. at 51-52.

I

A. Legal Standards

In evaluating the sufficiency of the evidence, we ask "whether, after viewing the evidence in the light most favorable to the prosecution, *any* rational trier of fact could have found the essential elements of the crime beyond a reasonable doubt." *Jackson v. Virginia*, 443 U.S. 307, 319, 99 S.Ct. 2781, 61 L.Ed.2d 560 (1979) (emphasis in original). In performing this analysis, we are required to draw all permissible inferences in favor of the government and resolve all issues of credibility in favor of the jury's verdict. *United States v. Kozeny*, 667 F.3d 122, 139 (2d Cir. 2011). In addition, we must "consider the evidence presented in its totality, not in isolation." *United States v. Anderson*, 747 F.3d 51, 59 (2d Cir. 2014).⁴

The defendants contend that the government adduced insufficient evidence that either of them possessed any of the contraband recovered from 70 Henrietta. At trial, the government pursued theories of constructive possession. "Constructive possession exists when a person has the power and intention to exercise dominion and control" over the contraband in question and may be shown by direct or circumstantial evidence. *United States v. Payton*, 159 F.3d 49, 56 (2d Cir. 1998). Mere presence is insufficient. However, "presence under a particular set of circumstances from which a reasonable jury could conclude that the defendant constructively possessed contraband" is sufficient. *United States v. Facen*, 812

F.3d 280, 287 (2d Cir. 2016). For example, documents pertaining to a defendant found in the same location as narcotics, possession of a key to the location where drugs are found, or whether the drugs are in plain view, are factors relevant to constructive possession. *Facen*, 812 F.3d at 287 (collecting cases). Once possession of narcotics has been established, a defendant's possession of firearms, and "of equipment to weigh, cut and package drugs is highly probative of a purpose to distribute." *United States v. Martinez*, 54 F.3d 1040, 1043-44 (2d Cir. 1995).

B. Discussion

Pierce argues that the evidence produced at trial supports the inference that ***182** other people—some combination of Tanzie Fuller, his codefendant Willis, or the individuals named on the lease and otherwise connected to the apartments—possessed the drugs and the weapons found in the upper apartment. Regarding the keys in particular, Pierce argues that the circumstances of the surveillance and arrest suggest that Tanzie Fuller also could have been the owner of the keys.

To be sure, it is true that the evidence produced at trial connecting Pierce to 70 Henrietta—and consequently to the drugs and weapons which were recovered—did not rule out an inference that others were involved in the drug trafficking at that location. However, the government was not required to prove that the contraband was not subject to the control of others, because possession need not be exclusive, and the jury was not required to accept Pierce's alternative explanation of innocence. *United States v. Gaines*, 295 F.3d 293, 300 (2d Cir. 2002); see *United States v. Ogando*, 547 F.3d 102, 107 (2d Cir. 2008) ("the Government is not required to preclude every reasonable hypothesis which is consistent with innocence"). In other words, the fact that others may have also possessed the keys, drugs, and weapons does not preclude a finding that Pierce did so as well.

Even so, the government's evidence that the keys belonged to Pierce was compelling. Pierce was arrested in possession of the keys and a key ring on the keys held a Tops Friendly Markets Bonus Card belonging to Courtney Brouse, his girlfriend and the mother of his child. In addition, the government introduced a recorded statement made by Pierce to Brouse from jail that "they have my keys." Gov't App'x at 88. Law enforcement officers found large quantities of narcotics and multiple weapons in a padlocked room inside the upper apartment to which Pierce held the keys. A test of DNA found on a

loaded Ruger 9mm semi-automatic firearm there could not exclude Pierce as a contributor to the mixture of DNA, with it being 33,000 times more likely to be a match to Pierce than to a random individual. Finally, the jury heard evidence that a cell phone tied to Pierce received multiple text messages discussing what a law enforcement witness testified was evidence of drug transactions. Given these facts, a rational trier of fact could conclude that Pierce controlled the upper apartment as well as the contraband seized there.

For similar reasons, the evidence was sufficient for a jury to conclude that Willis constructively possessed the cocaine base and weapons found in the lower apartment. Willis was observed alone at 70 Henrietta for several hours on December 1, 2016. He possessed keys to the front door and to the lower apartment which contained various of his personal effects including his car registration, insurance documents, clothing, and personal photos. Additionally, law enforcement recovered a semi-automatic rifle on which DNA that likely matched Willis's was identified as well as tools of the narcotics trade. This evidence was sufficient for a jury to conclude that Willis had access to, and control over, the lower apartment, and therefore possessed the weapons and cocaine base therein.

It is a closer question whether sufficient evidence supports Willis's conviction for possession of the powder cocaine found in the upper apartment. There was no evidence that Willis possessed a key to the upper apartment or to the padlocked closet in which the cocaine powder was stored. Neither his documents nor personal effects were found there and no forensic evidence otherwise connected him to it. The drugs found there were not in plain ***183** view, and he was not arrested under circumstances that suggested that he had complete control over the drugs. In other words, the indicia of dominion and control that tied Willis so strongly to the lower apartment do not exist for the upper apartment.

Nonetheless, even if the evidence did not establish that Willis had dominion and control over the upper apartment, a rational jury could have concluded that he possessed the cocaine powder found there, if not directly, then through others, namely Pierce. This is because the superseding indictment charged Willis with committing and, in the alternative, aiding and abetting, the crime of possession of cocaine with intent to distribute it and the district court instructed the jury on this charge.

"Under 18 U.S.C. § 2, a defendant may be convicted of aiding and abetting a given crime where the government proves that the underlying crime was committed by a

person other than the defendant, that the defendant knew of the crime, and that the defendant acted with the intent to contribute to the success of the underlying crime.” *United States v. Hamilton*, 334 F.3d 170, 180 (2d Cir. 2003). A conviction under § 2 requires sufficient proof that the defendant knowingly and willfully participated in the offense in a way that showed he intended to make it succeed.

Willis argues that a finding that he “aided” Pierce is impermissible because the government failed to prove that Willis joined Pierce’s venture with knowledge of Pierce’s crimes and the specific intent to further them. He asserts that the government’s contention that the firearms in the downstairs apartment were meant to protect the drugs in the upstairs apartment was not supported by evidence because there were firearms in the upper apartment as well as the lower apartment. He also asserts that “tools and materials [of the trade] were also present in the upper unit, including digital scales, plastic sandwich bags, other plastic baggies and a plastic spoon with suspected drug residue.” Willis Br. at 44. But the fact that others may have also packaged and manufactured drugs in the upper apartment does not mean that Willis did not aid and abet the crime charged. All the tools necessary to manufacture cocaine base were found in the lower apartment including baking soda, digital scales with traces of white powder, a metal strainer, bags, spoons, latex gloves, and a metal weight. Most of these items were not found in the upper apartment. Given these facts, a jury could reasonably have concluded that Willis intended for Pierce, the guilty principal, to possess the powder cocaine. There was sufficient evidence for a reasonable jury to conclude that Pierce possessed the cocaine, and that Willis aided in the commission of the crime by maintaining a stash house in the lower apartment, by manufacturing cocaine base (a necessary ingredient of which is cocaine powder) with the tools of the trade found exclusively in the lower apartment, and by keeping firearms there to protect the enterprise. See *United States v. Santos*, 541 F.3d 63, 72 (2d Cir. 2008) (explaining that “advancing the aim of a narcotics conspiracy can involve performing ancillary functions”); *United States v. Boissoneault*, 926 F.2d 230, 234 (2d Cir. 1991) (noting that evidence of intent may be found in the “paraphernalia usually possessed by drug dealers” or the “materials needed to process cocaine or to package it”). The government also presented evidence that Pierce was arrested driving a car registered to Willis, the keys of which were linked to the multi-key ring that also opened the upper apartment. On the basis of these facts, we conclude that a rational jury could conclude that Willis aided and ***184** abetted Pierce’s possession of cocaine powder with intent to distribute it.⁵

II

Both defendants were convicted under Count 6 for maintaining a premises where drugs were manufactured or distributed. See 21 U.S.C. § 856(a)(1). To convict under this statute, the government was required to prove that the defendants “(1) used a place; (2) for the purpose of distributing or packaging controlled substances; and (3) did so knowingly.” *Facen*, 812 F.3d at 290.

The government adduced sufficient evidence that both defendants violated this provision. That evidence established that Willis possessed the cocaine powder and cocaine base as well as cutting agents, packaging materials, and firearms found at 70 Henrietta. That evidence also established that Pierce possessed powder cocaine, cocaine base, heroin, and fentanyl at that location and that the upper apartment contained little else but this contraband. Indeed, the evidence strongly supported an inference that the apartment was used for little else than for distributing and packaging narcotics. The seized narcotics and drug paraphernalia were in sufficient quantity for the jury to conclude that the defendants intended to distribute them.

III

To convict for possession of a firearm in furtherance of a drug trafficking offense under 18 U.S.C. § 924(c), “the government must prove that the defendant possessed the firearm and that the possession occurred in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime.” See *United States v. Albarran*, 943 F.3d 106, 118 (2d Cir. 2019).

Section 924(c) requires the government to establish a “nexus” between the charged firearm and the charged drug selling operation. *United States v. Finley*, 245 F.3d 199, 203 (2d Cir. 2001). That nexus is established where the firearm “afforded some advantage (actual or potential, real or contingent)” to the drug trafficking. *United States v. Lewter*, 402 F.3d 319, 322 (2d Cir. 2005). Section 924(c)(1)(A) applies where the charged weapon is readily accessible to protect drugs, drug proceeds, or the dealer himself. See *id.* at 323. We conclude that the evidence of guilt on this Count was sufficient as to both defendants.

Regarding Willis, a semi-automatic rifle—attributed to him as a likely match by DNA evidence—was concealed

in a box by the front door of the lower apartment. A loaded .357 caliber Magnum pistol was found under a couch cushion, and Willis's DNA generated a likely match. Both weapons were readily accessible to protect the contraband. While Willis argues that he could have possessed the weapons for purposes other than drug trafficking, the combination of drugs and tools of the drug trade in the lower apartment, and the fact that Willis lived elsewhere, provide adequate support for the jury's verdict that ***185** the firearms were used in furtherance of drug trafficking.

Regarding Pierce, a loaded Ruger handgun—attributed to him as a likely match by DNA evidence—was found inside the padlocked upper apartment room to which he held the key. This loaded handgun was readily accessible to protect the powder cocaine, cocaine base, heroin, and fentanyl found near the gun. Notably, Pierce did not live where the weapons were located and kept them at an apartment that served as a stash house. Because the weapons were readily accessible to protect drugs or drug proceeds, a rational trier of fact could have found that Pierce was guilty of possessing a weapon in furtherance of drug trafficking.

IV

A. Evidentiary and Summation Challenges

Defendants argue that the district court abused its discretion in certain of its evidentiary rulings. They argue that it was error for the district court to allow a DEA witness to present expert testimony concerning the “means and methods of drug trafficking” and then to permit the testimony of the parole officers of Willis and Pierce which, according to them, served no purpose other than underscoring their prior convictions. Finally, they contend that the district court improperly allowed the prosecutors to excessively compliment the investigating officers during closing arguments, thereby allowing the government to “improperly invite[] the jury to help law enforcement solve the drug problem.” Pierce Br. at 51-52. Defendants assert that this trio of errors combined to deny them a fair trial. Defendants’ challenges are without merit.

We review the district court’s evidentiary rulings for abuse of discretion. *See United States v. Fazio*, 770 F.3d 160, 165 (2d Cir. 2014). “[S]o long as the district court has conscientiously balanced the proffered evidence’s

probative value with the risk for prejudice, its conclusion will be disturbed only if it is arbitrary or irrational.” *United States v. Scully*, 877 F.3d 464, 474 (2d Cir. 2017).

When parties seek to introduce expert testimony in accordance with Rule 702 of the Federal Rules of Evidence, the trial judge has “the task of ensuring that an expert’s testimony both rests on a reliable foundation and is relevant to the task at hand.” *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharms., Inc.*, 509 U.S. 579, 597, 113 S.Ct. 2786, 125 L.Ed.2d 469 (1993). The district court must analyze whether the proffered expert testimony is relevant and “whether the proffered testimony has a sufficiently reliable foundation to permit it to be considered.” *United States v. Cruz*, 363 F.3d 187, 192 (2d Cir. 2004). “A district court’s decision to admit expert testimony will not be reversed unless it is manifestly erroneous.” *Boissoneault*, 926 F.2d at 232.

Over Pierce’s objection, the government proffered that it intended to ask Special Agent James McHugh, a DEA expert witness, whether certain items found at 70 Henrietta were “the kinds of paraphernalia or tools that are typically found in the possession of people who are distributing narcotics.” Doc. 201 at 205. The district court ruled that the expert witness could testify only “in general terms,” about those items but could not review photos of or testify about the actual paraphernalia found at 70 Henrietta. Doc. 201 at 206; *see United States v. Nersesian*, 824 F.2d 1294, 1308 (2d Cir. 1987).

When testifying, the government’s witness stayed within these bounds. The government asked whether items like “whisks, sifters, and mixers [] have any role [in] ***186** narcotics trafficking,” and the witness confirmed that these were “typical tools” of the trade. Doc. 201 at 212-13. Further, the witness testified that references to “stamps” in text messages could refer to packaging for cocaine or heroin.

We are cautious of “the risk that ‘dual’ police testimony may prejudice defendants at trial, both inflating an officer’s expert opinions through his personal involvement in the case and bathing his lay testimony in the aura of ‘expertise’.” Anna Lvovsky, *The Judicial Presumption of Police Expertise*, 130 Harv. L. Rev. 995, 2025 (2017); *see United States v. Dukagjini*, 326 F.3d 45, 53-54 (2d Cir. 2003). Here, however, McHugh was not such a witness. While he described the significance of language and physical evidence in the abstract, he drew no specific conclusions about the significance of that conduct or of the language in this particular case, which weakens any claim of prejudice. We conclude that the district court did not err in admitting McHugh’s

testimony.

Nor was it manifestly erroneous for the district court to admit testimony from defendants' parole officers. The government justified the need for the testimony on the theory that the parole officers were familiar with the defendants' familial relationships and their living situations. At trial, Parole Officer McPartland testified to the familial relationship between Pierce and the leaseholder at 70 Henrietta, Pierce's nickname "Zeke," Pierce's long-term relationship with his girlfriend Courtney Brouse, and the fact that Pierce lived with Brouse at 369 Wabash.

Defendants objected on the grounds that the testimony "underscor[ed] their prior convictions," "was of minimal value," and was merely cumulative. Pierce Br. at 51, 55. Although the testimony may well have reminded the jury that the defendants had prior criminal convictions, any prejudice was minimal. The jury already knew that the defendants were predicate felons because they had stipulated to those prior convictions. Moreover, the testimony did have probative value. It was probative of Pierce's relationship to individuals directly connected to 70 Henrietta, and of Pierce's nickname, "Zeke" which appeared in multiple text messages discussing drug transactions, and the district court weighed the evidence's risk of prejudice with its probative value. Pierce asserts that this information "came in through other witnesses anyway," but does not provide any record support for the assertion. Pierce Br. at 55. In any event, a mere showing "of some alternative means of proof" is insufficient to establish an abuse of discretion. *Old Chief v. United States*, 519 U.S. 172, 183 n. 7, 117 S.Ct. 644, 136 L.Ed.2d 574 (1997).

Finally, the defendants' challenge to the government's summation likewise fails. Defendants assert that it was inappropriate for the government to comment on the "dedication and perseverance of the Erie County Sheriff's office detectives working to get [] weapons and [] addictive drugs ... out of the community" and to reference the detectives "chas[ing] down all sorts of leads, every red herring, until the last pieces of the puzzle came together and the picture was clear." Gov't App'x at 83–84.

"A defendant asserting that a prosecutor's remarks warrant a new trial faces a heavy burden, because the misconduct alleged must be so severe and significant as to result in the denial of his right to a fair trial." *United States v. Banki*, 685 F.3d 99, 120 (2d Cir. 2012). "In determining whether an inappropriate remark amounts to prejudicial error, we look to the severity of the misconduct, the measures adopted to cure the misconduct,

and *187 the certainty of conviction absent the misconduct." *United States v. Caracappa*, 614 F.3d 30, 41 (2d Cir. 2010). Because the defendants did not object to any of the summation at trial, their challenge is subject to plain error review. *See* FED. R. CRIM. P. 52(B).

Applying these principles, we see no error and certainly no plain error. The defendants have not demonstrated that any of these remarks were sufficiently improper to have denied them a fair trial. In other words, this is not the "rare case in which [alleged] improper comments in a prosecutor's summation are so prejudicial that a new trial is required." *United States v. Rodriguez*, 968 F.2d 130, 142 (2d Cir. 1992).⁶

B. Rehaif-related Section 922(g) Challenges

Defendants argue that their convictions as felons in possession of firearms under 18 U.S.C. § 922(g) must be vacated in light of the Supreme Court's decision in *Rehaif v. United States*, — U.S. —, 139 S. Ct. 2191, 204 L.Ed.2d 594 (2019). There, the Court held that a defendant's knowledge of his status as a felon is an element of the offense and that the government bore the burden of proving that knowledge. *Id.* at 2194. *Rehaif* was decided after their convictions and the issue reaches us on plain error review.

Subsequent to *Rehaif*, this Court decided *United States v. Miller, et al.*, 954 F.3d 551 (2d Cir. 2020) and *United States v. Balde*, 943 F.3d 73 (2d Cir. 2019). Both cases effectively foreclose the defendants' attacks on their convictions. When reviewing for plain error, we consider whether "(1) there is an error; (2) the error is clear or obvious, rather than subject to reasonable dispute; (3) the error affected the appellant's substantial rights; and (4) the error seriously affects the fairness, integrity or public reputation of judicial proceedings." *United States v. Miller*, 954 F.3d 551, 557–58 (2d Cir. 2020). Here, it is undisputed that the first two elements of the plain error test were met. The jury was not instructed consistent with *Rehaif*, and that was clearly error. We need not reach the third element – whether the error affected the appellant's substantial rights – since we conclude that the fourth element was not met; the error did not affect the fairness, integrity or public reputation of the judicial proceedings.⁷

In *Miller*, this Court held that the erroneous jury instruction was not reversible *188 plain error because the defendant's PSR revealed that he was sentenced to, and served, more than one year in prison for a prior felony conviction. 954 F.3d at 559–60. In this case, it is

undisputed that both defendants were sentenced to, and served, more than one year in prison for their prior felony convictions. Their stipulations to that fact conclusively prove that they knew of their status. *See id.* at 560 (noting that “had the *Rehaif* issue been foreseen by the district court, [defendant] would have stipulated to knowledge of his felon status to prevent the jury from hearing evidence of his actual sentence”). Therefore, the district court’s erroneous jury instruction on this issue was not plain error.

V

A. Guidelines Calculation

Willis contends that the district court erroneously calculated his Guidelines range when it found that, although he had been acquitted of the conspiracy and most substantive narcotics possession counts, Counts 3, 4, 10, and 11, he nonetheless, for sentencing purposes, possessed all the narcotics seized from 70 Henrietta and 45 Elm because he participated in jointly undertaken criminal activity with Pierce. Specifically, Willis argues that the government failed to meet its burden of proving jointly undertaken criminal activity between Willis and Pierce by a preponderance of the evidence and that this failure was conspicuous insofar as the district court rested its finding on its conclusion that Willis possessed the drugs found at 45 Elm.

This Court has recognized that to hold the defendant accountable for jointly undertaken criminal activity, the district court must make two findings: “(1) that the acts were within the scope of the defendant’s agreement and (2) that they were foreseeable to the defendant.” *United States v. Studley*, 47 F.3d 569, 574 (2d Cir. 1995). When applying these requirements, district courts look to (1) “whether the participants pool[ed] their profits and resources, or whether they work[ed] independently”; (2) “whether the defendant assisted in designing *and* executing the illegal scheme”; and (3) “what role the defendant agreed to play in the operation, either by an explicit agreement or implicitly by his conduct.” *Id.* at 575 (emphasis in original).

A court may consider as “relevant conduct” drugs distributed by coconspirators in the course of the conspiracy even where a defendant is acquitted of a drug conspiracy. *United States v. Bell*, 795 F.3d 88, 105-06 (D.C. Cir. 2015); *but see United States v. Bell*, 808 F.3d

926, 927 (D.C. Cir. 2015) (Kavanaugh, J.) (“Allowing judges to rely on acquitted or uncharged conduct to impose higher sentences than they otherwise would impose seems a dubious infringement on the rights to due process and to a jury trial.”). Acquitted conduct may be considered by the sentencing court so long as it is based on reliable information and is proven by a preponderance of the evidence. *See United States v. Reese*, 33 F.3d 166, 174 (2d Cir. 1994); *United States v. Romano*, 825 F.2d 725, 728 (2d Cir. 1987).

Willis’s contention that the district court improperly relied on the narcotics allegedly recovered by law enforcement at 45 Elm—and which he was acquitted of possessing—to find that he and Pierce engaged in jointly undertaken criminal activity has merit.⁸ Detective Carney testified *189 that he and Detective Daniel Granville entered the interview room and “located the narcotics on the floor ... on the side of the desk that Mr. Willis was sitting on” inside a “plastic baggy [that] appeared to have human feces on it.” Willis App’x at 70. The detectives, however, did not submit the bag for DNA testing. And though Detective Carney testified that “the interview room that Mr. Willis was placed in has a video camera,” it was apparently set to live feed and made no recording. Doc. 198 at 91. Detective Carney further testified that after he and Detective Granville recovered the drugs, he obtained a search warrant for the lower apartment at 3:35 PM and then went on to execute the search warrant. But the search warrant application submitted by Detective Carney did not include the fact that Willis dropped drugs in the interview room. Doc. 34, Exh. A.

Additional record evidence renders this testimony implausible, including the fact that no drugs were found on either defendant when they were searched at the time of their arrest. Furthermore, Willis was apparently found to have had drugs concealed in his body despite the fact that there was no particular reason for him to go to such lengths to hide any drugs he was carrying while driving around the neighborhood; that each defendant independently decided to extract and discard these drugs while handcuffed in an isolated police station interview room makes this set of events all the less likely. More unlikely still that each defendant had drugs matching only the packaging found in the apartment to which he was less strongly linked.

In a footnote, the district court stated that “even though the evidence may not have met the standard of beyond a reasonable doubt, it did constitute proof by a preponderance of the evidence.” Willis App’x at 135 n. 2. But the district court did not say why. In failing to do so, the district court did not account for the gaps in the

government's evidence. *See Doe v. Menefee*, 391 F.3d 147, 164 (2d Cir. 2004) ("We have found a district court's factual findings to be clearly erroneous where the court has failed to synthesize the evidence in a manner that accounts for conflicting evidence or the gaps in a party's evidentiary presentation."). It was therefore clearly erroneous for the district court to rely on the drugs found at 45 Elm to conclude that a preponderance of the evidence establishes that Willis conspired with his co-defendant Pierce to possess with intent to distribute and to distribute the drugs found upstairs at 70 Henrietta Avenue. In failing to account for the gaps in the government's evidentiary presentation for this acquitted conduct, the district court erred in cross-attributing the drugs found in the upper apartment when it sentenced Willis. The error requires a remand for resentencing and reconsideration of whether the government met its burden of proving jointly undertaken criminal activity between Willis and Pierce by a preponderance of the evidence, and if so, the scope of that activity.

B. Concurrent Sentencing

Guidelines § 5G1.3(c), provides that if "a state term of imprisonment is anticipated to result from another offense that is relevant *190 conduct to the instant offense of conviction ... the sentence for the instant offense shall be imposed to run concurrently to the anticipated term of imprisonment." U.S.S.G. § 5G1.3(c).

Section 5G1.3(c) applied to Willis's federal sentencing. A state term of imprisonment was anticipated to result from his pending New York weapons possession charges and although at sentencing the district court acknowledged

that this conduct was relevant it failed to explicitly rule whether Willis's federal sentence would run concurrently. Because section 5G1.3(c) was a pertinent Sentencing Commission policy statement, the district court was required to take it into account. *United States v. Cavera*, 550 F.3d 180, 188–89 (2d Cir. 2008) (en banc) (citing 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a)(5)). But the only reference to whether Willis's sentence would run concurrently came from Willis's counsel who stated on the record that he understood that Willis's seven-year state sentence was "going to run concurrent to whatever" sentence the district court imposed. Willis App'x at 157. Nowhere did the district court express a contrary intention; nevertheless, neither the transcript nor the written judgment confirms counsel's understanding that the sentence would be concurrent. Therefore, Willis's sentence is remanded to the district court to expressly rule whether the sentence will run concurrently with his state sentence.

CONCLUSION

For the reasons stated herein, the judgment of the district court is **AFFIRMED** in part and **VACATED** in part. Willis's sentence is remanded for resentencing and clarification.

All Citations

14 F.4th 170, 116 Fed. R. Evid. Serv. 1207

Footnotes

¹ Both defendants were charged in the following: Count 1, narcotics conspiracy in violation of 21 U.S.C. § 846; Count 2, possessing 28 grams or more of cocaine base with intent to distribute in violation of 21 U.S.C. §§ 841 (a)(1) and (b)(1)(B); Count 3, possessing 100 grams or more of heroin and butyryl fentanyl with intent to distribute in violation of 21 U.S.C. §§ 841(a)(1) and (b)(1)(B); Count 4, possessing 40 grams or more of fentanyl with intent to distribute in violation of 21 U.S.C. §§ 841(a)(1) and (b)(1)(B); Count 5, possessing powder cocaine with intent to distribute in violation of 21 U.S.C. §§ 841(a)(1) and (b)(1)(C); Count 6, maintaining a drug involved premises in violation of 21 U.S.C. § 856(a)(1); Count 7, possessing firearms in furtherance of drug trafficking crimes in violation of 18 U.S.C. §§ 924(c)(1)(A)(i) and 2. For Counts 2 through 7, both defendants were also charged with aiding and abetting the alleged crimes in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 2.

Willis was individually charged in Count 9, possessing firearms and ammunition as a felon in violation of 18 U.S.C. §§ 922(g)(1) and 924(a)(2); Count 10, possessing heroin with intent to distribute in violation of 21 U.S.C. §§ 841(a)(1) and (b)(1)(C); and Count 11, possessing cocaine base with intent to distribute in violation of 21 U.S.C. §§ 841(a)(1) and (b)(1)(C).

Pierce was individually charged in Count 8, possessing firearms and ammunition as a felon, in violation of 18 U.S.C. §§ 922(g)(1) and 924(a)(2); and Count 12, possessing cocaine base with intent to distribute in violation of 21 U.S.C. §§ 841(a)(1) and (b)(1)(C).

² The district court also applied a two-level enhancement under U.S.S.G. § 2d1.1(b)(12) for maintaining a premises for the purpose

of manufacturing or distributing a controlled substance.

- 3 Pierce does not challenge his sentence. Accordingly, we need not discuss the details of his sentencing. While Pierce contends that the district court plainly erred in authorizing forfeiture of currency and cars, Pierce has not sufficiently argued this issue on appeal. “Merely mentioning or simply stating an issue in an appellate brief is insufficient to preserve it for our review.” *Niagara Mohawk Power Corp. v. Hudson River-Black River Regulating Dist.*, 673 F.3d 84, 107 (2d Cir. 2012). Pierce fails to cite to any evidence that the currency and cars did not constitute drug proceeds, and the order itself notes that no third parties filed claims to the assets despite receiving notice that the assets would be forfeited.
- 4 Unless otherwise indicated, in quoting cases, all internal quotation marks, alterations, emphases, footnotes, and citations are omitted.
- 5 Any arguable inconsistency between the jury’s conclusion that the government had not established a conspiracy beyond a reasonable doubt and the jury finding that Willis aided and abetted Pierce does not change this conclusion. *See Dunn v. United States*, 284 U.S. 390, 393, 52 S.Ct. 189, 76 L.Ed. 356 (1932) (“Consistency in the verdict is not necessary.”); *see also United States v. Carbone*, 378 F.2d 420, 422 (2d Cir. 1967) (discussing *Dunn*); *United States v. Tyler*, 758 F.2d 66, 70-71 (2d Cir. 1985) (noting that “there is nothing inconsistent in our determination that the evidence was insufficient with respect to the conspiracy count but sufficient with respect to the aiding and abetting count” because the “two offenses are separate and distinct”).
- 6 Pierce also raises various issues relating to the effectiveness of his trial counsel. Though it is not a rigid rule, this circuit has a “baseline aversion to resolving ineffectiveness claims on direct appeal.” *United States v. Leone*, 215 F.3d 253, 256 (2d Cir. 2000). We do not believe that the record is sufficiently developed for us to appropriately assess Pierce’s ineffective assistance of counsel claim. We thus refrain from deciding it and Pierce is free to raise the claim in a petition for habeas corpus under 28 U.S.C. § 2255. *See United States v. Oladimeji*, 463 F.3d 152, 154 (2d Cir. 2006).
- 7 Defendants’ *Rehaif*-related jurisdictional challenge to the superseding indictment also fails. Federal courts have jurisdiction to adjudicate a criminal charge as long as “the indictment alleges an offense under U.S. criminal statutes.” *United States v. Prado*, 933 F.3d 121, 134 (2d Cir. 2019). “[T]he standard for the sufficiency of an indictment is not demanding,” *Balde*, 943 F.3d at 89, and requires little more than that the indictment “track the language of the statute charged and state the time and place (in approximate terms) of the alleged crime,” *United States v. Stringer*, 730 F.3d 120, 124 (2d Cir. 2013). The superseding indictment here, which tracks the language of § 922(g)(1), plainly meets this standard. *See Balde*, 943 F.3d at 89–91 (holding that an indictment tracking the statutory language of § 922(g)(5)(A) remains jurisdictionally sufficient after *Rehaif*).
- 8 Specifically, Detective Carney testified that he recovered about 3.08 grams of cocaine base and about 1.32 grams of heroin in yellow glassine envelopes—which were found only in the upper apartment attributed to Pierce—on the floor of the interview room where Willis was detained after arrest that appeared to have human feces on it. Likewise, Detective Donovan testified that Pierce left cocaine base in blue glassine envelopes in his separate interview room, which matched the envelopes found in the lower apartment to which Willis held keys. Detective Donovan did not testify that the recovered contraband appeared to have feces on it.

APPENDIX B:

**DECISION AND ORDER OF THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR
THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK DENYING DEFENDANT'S
MOTION FOR JUDGMENT OF ACQUITTAL, DATED FEBRUARY 21, 2018
(*United States v. Pierce*, 2018 WL 991793 (W.D.N.Y. 2018))**

2018 WL 991793

Only the Westlaw citation is currently available.
United States District Court, W.D. New York.

UNITED STATES of America,
v.
Isiah PIERCE a/k/a Isiah Johnson and
Larry Willis, Defendants.

17-CR-32

|
Signed 02/21/2018

Attorneys and Law Firms

Laura A. Higgins, U.S. Attorney's Office, Buffalo, NY,
for United States of America.

Jeremy D. Schwartz, Michael L. D'Amico, Buffalo, NY,
for Defendants.

DECISION AND ORDER

LAWRENCE J. VILARDO, UNITED STATES
DISTRICT JUDGE

*1 On November 22, 2017, after hearing evidence over three days and deliberating for a day and a half, the jury returned a verdict on the 12-count superseding indictment in this matter. The charges were based on narcotics and weapons recovered from both the upper and lower apartments at 70 Henrietta Avenue in Buffalo, New York, as well as narcotics found in police interview rooms at 45 Elm Street in Buffalo. Docket Item 32. Defendant Isiah Pierce was acquitted of conspiring to sell narcotics and possessing narcotics found in the interview room where he was placed after his arrest; he was convicted on seven counts of possessing narcotics and weapons consistent with what was found in the upper apartment at 70 Henrietta. Defendant Larry Willis was acquitted of conspiring to sell narcotics, of possessing those narcotics found only in the upper apartment, and of possessing the narcotics found in the interview room where he was placed after his arrest; he was convicted on five counts of

possessing narcotics and weapons consistent with what was found in the lower apartment.

At the conclusion of the government's proof at trial, both defendants moved for judgments of acquittal under [Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 29](#). After trial, both defendants renewed those motions as to the counts of conviction. For the following reasons, those motions are denied.

FACTS

On December 1, 2016, as part of a narcotics investigation, police officers obtained and executed two search warrants for the duplex at 70 Henrietta Avenue, Buffalo, New York—first for the lower apartment and then for the upper apartment. On the same day, but before the warrants were obtained and executed, police arrested both Pierce and Willis, who had been seen exiting the house separately.

The officers who executed the search found narcotics and weapons in both the upper and lower apartments. In addition, the officers who processed both defendants at the police station found narcotics on the floor of the separate rooms in which each defendant was held. More specifically, in the room where Willis was held, the officers found a quantity of heroin and a quantity of cocaine base; in the room where Pierce was held, the officers found a quantity of cocaine base.

Both defendants were charged with conspiring to possess and distribute narcotics; possessing narcotics with intent to distribute them; possessing firearms in furtherance of drug trafficking crimes; possessing firearms when they were precluded from doing so by prior felony convictions; and maintaining a drug-involved premises. More specifically, the most recent charges—filed on May 19, 2017—included the following:

- Count 1—conspiring to possess with intent to distribute and to distribute heroin and butyryl fentanyl, cocaine base, cocaine, and fentanyl; and conspiring to use and maintain 70 Henrietta Avenue for the purpose of manufacturing, distributing, and using those substances (both defendants);
- Count 2—possessing cocaine base with intent to distribute (both defendants);
- *2 • Count 3—possessing heroin and butyryl fentanyl with intent to distribute (both defendants);
- Count 4—possessing fentanyl with intent to

distribute (both defendants);

- Count 5—possessing cocaine with intent to distribute (both defendants);
- Count 6—maintaining a drug-involved premises (both defendants);
- Count 7—possessing firearms in furtherance of drug trafficking (both defendants);
- Count 8—possessing firearms and ammunition by a felon (defendant Pierce);
- Count 9—possessing firearms and ammunition by a felon (defendant Willis);
- Count 10—possessing heroin with intent to distribute post arrest at the police station (defendant Willis);
- Count 11—possessing cocaine base with intent to distribute post arrest at the police station (defendant Willis); and
- Count 12—possessing cocaine base with intent to distribute post arrest at the police station (defendant Pierce).

Counts 2 through 9 involved the possession of narcotics and weapons at 70 Henrietta Avenue. Counts 10 through 12 involved the possession of narcotics found in the interview rooms where each defendant was placed after his arrest. Docket Item 32.

The prosecution's theory of the case was that both defendants conspired to sell narcotics from 70 Henrietta. In support of that theory, the government presented evidence that both defendants were at 70 Henrietta while that property was under surveillance on December 1, 2016. The government showed the jury clothing purportedly belonging to both defendants, as well as photos of both defendants, that were found in the upper and lower apartments. And the government provided the key ring that Willis was found with when he was arrested, which included keys that opened both the main door of the duplex and the door to the lower apartment; and the key ring that Pierce was found with when he was arrested, which included keys that opened both the main door and the door to the upper apartment.

The verdict makes clear that the jury rejected the government's theory that the two defendants were involved in a narcotics conspiracy. Not only did the jury acquit both defendants of the conspiracy count, but the jury found defendant Pierce guilty only of those counts that were consistent with the amounts and types of

narcotics found in the upper apartment and defendant Willis guilty only of those counts consistent with the amounts and types of narcotics found in the lower apartment.

DISCUSSION

In their post-trial motions, both defendants claim that the evidence was insufficient for the jury have convicted them of anything. The defendants propose alternative views of the facts that they say should have led to each defendant's acquittal and that they claim "are just as reasonable" as the jury's conclusion of guilt. *See, e.g.*, Docket Item 84 at 3 ("at best, the evidence presented lends to an inference of innocence just as reasonable as one of guilt"); Docket Item 81 at 4 ("the evidence is equally, if not more consistent, with an inference that the defendant was at 70 Henrietta" for an innocent purpose).

On a [Rule 29](#) motion for acquittal, however, the defendant bears a heavy burden. The defendant's conviction "must be affirmed if any rational trier of fact could have found the essential elements of the crime beyond a reasonable doubt." *United States v. Cote*, 544 F.3d 88, 98 (2d Cir. 2008) (quotations and alterations omitted). All inferences must be drawn in favor of the government, and the court must view the evidence in the light most favorable to the government. *See id.* at 93; *United States v. Puzzo*, 928 F.2d 1356, 1361 (2d Cir. 1991). The court may not substitute its own view of the evidence for that of the jury, and if both a reasonable doubt and no reasonable doubt are "fairly possible, the court must let the jury decide the matter." *United States v. Autuori*, 212 F.3d 105, 114 (2d Cir. 2000) (quotations and alterations omitted).

***3** Here, the jury's verdict was not only reasonable but was careful, thoughtful, and logically consistent. The jury found the evidence that the defendants conspired together insufficient to convict either defendant of conspiracy. It convicted each defendant of possessing only those narcotics, and therefore presumably those weapons, located in the apartment over which that defendant clearly had dominion and control. The jury also found the proof about narcotics found on the floor of the interview rooms insufficient to link those narcotics beyond a reasonable doubt to the defendants. And that careful, mixed verdict ought not to be disturbed, especially in light of the strong evidence connecting defendant Willis to the lower apartment and defendant Pierce to the upper. Docket Item 89 at 7-8; Gov't Exs. 29A, 29B, 29D, 30B, 30C, 30D, 30E, 30K, 30N, 50, 56, 57; 3506-E; 3506-F.

PIERCE

Pierce was seen leaving the duplex at 70 Henrietta and was arrested with keys that opened both the main door and the door to the upper apartment. The key ring Pierce possessed also had a key for the padlock that secured the bedroom door in the upper apartment, as well as a Tops Market bonus card that belonged to Courtney Brouse, the mother of Pierce's child. Locked in that second floor closet were narcotics and weapons, one of which had DNA matching Pierce's profile. Gov't Exs. 3506-E, 3506-F.

Pierce claims that the evidence at trial was insufficient for the jury to conclude that the keys were his. Docket Item 81. He proposes two theories that he claims are equally as plausible as the government's theory: 1) that the keys belonged to Tanzie Fuller, the passenger in the vehicle Pierce was driving when he was stopped and arrested; and 2) that Pierce was test driving the car for possible purchase, noting that the car was registered to defendant Willis. And because the keys did not necessarily belong to him, Pierce argues, the link between him and the upper apartment was tenuous at best.

There are several problems with Pierce's arguments. First, other than the fact that Fuller was once in Brouse's home, no evidence connected Fuller to Brouse in a way that would explain why Brouse's Tops Market card might be on Fuller's key ring. In contrast, there was a great deal of evidence connecting Brouse with Pierce. As noted above, Brouse was Pierce's girlfriend and is the mother of his child. Moreover, shortly after Pierce was arrested, he called Brouse and discussed bail money that was located at her residence. In fact, police officers later obtained a search warrant for Brouse's residence and recovered a safe containing \$20,000 and a shoebox containing over \$5,500. Even though, as Pierce notes, the government did not present evidence that Pierce still lived with Brouse or was still in a relationship with her, there clearly was enough of a connection between Pierce and Brouse for the jury to find beyond a reasonable doubt that the key ring with Brouse's Tops Market card recovered from Pierce indeed belonged to him.

The connection between Pierce and Brouse also supports the jury's rejection of Pierce's second theory: that he was test driving Willis's car when he was arrested and that the keys therefore were not his. The car may have been registered to Willis, but the evidence did not offer any reason why Brouse's Tops card would be on Willis's key ring; in fact, there was no apparent connection between Brouse and Willis, in marked contrast to Brouse and Pierce. So regardless of the name on the car's registration, the jury's rejection of Pierce's second theory at trial was

neither unreasonable nor unwarranted.

WILLIS

The evidence connecting Willis to the lower apartment was even stronger. When Willis was arrested, he was alone and in possession of keys that opened the main entrance and the lower apartment at 70 Henrietta. A photograph found in that apartment showed Willis with that same key ring on his belt. So the jury certainly could have concluded that those keys belonged to Willis and gave him dominion and control over the lower apartment.

*4 In addition, there were numerous photos of Willis in the lower apartment. One of those photos showed Willis in distinctive clothing—clothing that the police recovered when they searched the lower apartment. The fact that Willis's clothes—as proven by the photos—were found in the apartment further supports the conclusion that he had dominion and control over it.

What is more, the lower apartment was littered with several documents, including motor vehicle records and insurance records, bearing Willis's name. One of those documents was a Buffalo Police Department incident card that had been given to Willis at the scene of a motor vehicle accident about a month before the search of the apartment. Those documents likewise linked Willis to the lower apartment.

All that evidence, combined with the testimony that Willis was at 70 Henrietta for several hours while that duplex was under surveillance by law enforcement, amply supports the jury's verdict.

DOMINION

Both defendants argue that because the narcotics and weapons were hidden rather than exposed in the upper and lower apartments, the jury had no basis for concluding that the defendants knew that the narcotics and weapons were in the apartments. Willis cites *United States v. Navedo*, 443 F. Supp. 2d 431, 436 (W.D.N.Y. 2006) in support of the proposition that narcotics hidden in a house may not be constructively possessed by someone found in the house. But the facts of *Navedo* were markedly different from the facts here. *Navedo* was at the house only to purchase narcotics; other than that, he had no connection to it. *Id.* at 434-35. Here, in marked contrast, the defendants had keys giving them access to—and control over—the respective apartments. Pierce also had a key to the locked closet where the narcotics

and weapons were found in the upper apartment. And other evidence—photos, clothing, and documents, for example—connected each defendant to his respective apartment.

Given the strong evidence connecting each defendant to one of the apartments, the jury inferred that each defendant exercised dominion and control over, and knew about, the narcotics and weapons hidden in his respective apartment. That inference was no stretch. Especially, because this Court must draw all reasonable inferences in favor of the government on a [Rule 29](#) motion, the defendants' argument offers no reason to disturb the jury verdict.

The verdict makes clear that the jury linked Willis with the lower apartment and Pierce with the upper apartment. The jury's acquittal of both defendants on the conspiracy charge, its acquittal of both defendants on the charge of

possessing narcotics at the police station, and its acquittal of Willis on the charges of possessing narcotics found only in the upper apartment evidences a careful and logical review of the proof; it also demonstrates a good understanding of the jury's responsibility to convict a defendant only if it were convinced of that defendant's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. There is no reason to revisit that thoughtful verdict, and the defendants' [Rule 29](#) motions therefore are DENIED.

SO ORDERED.

All Citations

Not Reported in Fed. Supp., 2018 WL 991793

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APPENDIX C:

**DECISION AND ORDER OF THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR
THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK DENYING DEFENDANT'S
MOTION FOR A NEW TRIAL, DATED FEBRUARY 6, 2019
(*United States v. Pierce*, 2019 WL 468124 (W.D.N.Y. 2019))**

2019 WL 468124

Only the Westlaw citation is currently available.

United States District Court, W.D. New York.

UNITED STATES of America,

v.

Isiah PIERCE, Defendant.

17-CR-32

Signed 02/06/2019

Attorneys and Law Firms

Laura A. Higgins, Richard D. Kaufman, Paul E. Bonanno, U.S. Attorney's Office, Buffalo, NY, for United States of America.

Judith M. Kubiniec, Jeremy D. Schwartz, Buffalo, NY, Robert A. Liebers, Burgett & Robbins, Jamestown, NY, for Defendant.

DECISION AND ORDER

LAWRENCE J. VILARDO, UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE

*1 On November 22, 2017, a jury convicted Isiah Pierce on seven of nine counts charged against him in the superseding indictment, including possessing controlled substances with the intent to distribute them, maintaining a drug-involved premises, possessing a firearm in furtherance of drug trafficking, and being a felon in possession of a firearm. Docket Item 72. All counts on which Pierce was convicted involved drugs or weapons found in the upper apartment at 70 Henrietta Street, Buffalo, New York. *Id.* The jury acquitted Pierce of conspiracy and possessing cocaine base that was found in the interview room where Pierce was taken after his arrest. *Id.*

After he was convicted and while sentencing was pending, Pierce asked for a new attorney. Docket Item 114. On April 9, 2018, this Court appointed new counsel

to represent Pierce, Docket Item 115, and on April 23, 2018, Pierce moved under [Fed. R. Crim. P. 33](#) for a new trial due to the alleged ineffective assistance of his trial counsel, Docket Item 118. The Court held oral argument and set a further briefing schedule on July 9, 2018. Docket Item 135. But the newly-appointed defense attorney became ill, and so the Court appointed another attorney on July 31, 2018. Docket Item 143. After new counsel asked for additional time to submit papers, *see* Docket Item 150, briefing was completed on December 22, 2018, and the Court heard oral argument on January 25, 2019, Docket Item 171.

Pierce contends that his trial counsel was ineffective because he did not move to suppress physical evidence illegally obtained on December 1, 2016, when law enforcement stopped and searched a vehicle that Pierce was driving. Docket Item 156 at 2. The government argues that Pierce's motion should be denied because he cannot show that the hypothetical suppression motion would have been meritorious. Docket Item 162 at 2. For the reasons below, this Court denies Pierce's motion for a new trial.

BACKGROUND

The Court assumes the parties' familiarity with the facts underlying Pierce's offenses and briefly recounts only those most relevant to Pierce's [Rule 33](#) motion.

On December 1, 2016, the Erie County Sheriff's Department was conducting surveillance of suspected drug trafficking at 70 Henrietta. Law enforcement officers observed Pierce arrive in a Dodge Charger, enter 70 Henrietta, and, a short time later, drive away in a Chevrolet Equinox registered to his co-defendant, Larry Willis. Docket Item 156 at 4. Officers stopped the Equinox about a mile away for having excessive window tint. *See id.*; [N.Y. Veh. & Traf Law § 375 \(12-a\)\(b\)\(2\)](#) (McKinney 2018) ("No person shall operate any motor vehicle ... [the] side windows of which ... are composed of ... any material which has a light transmittance of less than seventy percent."). Deputy Cully Ferrick wrote Pierce a ticket charging that violation. Docket Item 156, Exhibit A.

While Pierce was stopped and still in the vehicle, Detective Timothy Donovan arrived on the scene. Docket Item 136 at 6. Detective Donovan spoke to Pierce and "asked him to step out of the vehicle because [he] smelled the odor of marijuana." *Id.* Law enforcement searched the

vehicle and recovered keys, five cell phones, a black wallet, and “loose marijuana.” Docket Item 156, Exhibit B; *see also id.* at 7,19.

*2 The keys—and the key ring holding them—were central to the prosecution and are central to this motion. One key opened the front exterior door of 70 Henrietta; another opened the upper apartment; and a third opened a padlocked room in the apartment. Docket Item 156 at 5-6. On the key ring with them was a Bonus Card for Tops Supermarket in the name of Courtney Brouse, Pierce’s girlfriend. Docket Item 156 at 5-6. Detective Donovan could not recall at trial whether he found the keys in Pierce’s pocket or in the ignition. Docket Item 136 at 20. Those keys were critical evidence for the government at trial because they linked Pierce to the upper apartment at 70 Henrietta and the controlled substances and weapons found there.

Following his arrest, Pierce was taken to the Erie County Sheriff’s Office headquarters at 45 Elm Street, Buffalo, New York. Docket Item 156 at 6. At 7:30 p.m., while Pierce was in custody, New York State Supreme Court Justice Timothy Drury issued a search warrant for the upper apartment at 70 Henrietta. Docket Item 156, Exhibit H. Law enforcement officers used the keys recovered from the Equinox to gain entry. Docket Item 136 at 9. Inside, they found controlled substances and firearms. *Id.* at 12.

In his omnibus pretrial motions, Pierce’s trial counsel moved to suppress physical evidence obtained from the search of 70 Henrietta. Docket Item 28 at 22. But he did not move to suppress evidence obtained from Pierce’s traffic stop, the subsequent search of the Equinox, or the seizure of the keys. *Id.* Pierce now contends that the failure to do so was ineffective assistance of counsel that entitles him to a new trial.

DISCUSSION

A court may grant a new trial under [Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 33](#) “if the interest of justice so requires.” [Fed. R. Crim. P. 33](#). Rule 33 confers broad discretion on a trial court to avert a perceived miscarriage of justice, *see United States v. Sanchez*, 969 F.2d 1409, 1413 (2d Cir. 1992), and a defendant may use a [Rule 33](#) motion to raise a claim that counsel was ineffective, *see United States v. Brown*, 623 F.3d 104, 113 n.5 (2d Cir. 2010).

The Sixth Amendment guarantees “the right to the

effective assistance of counsel.” *McMann v. Richardson*, 397 U.S. 759, 771 n.14 (1970). To obtain relief due to the ineffective assistance of counsel, a defendant must meet the two-prong test outlined by the Supreme Court in *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668 (1984). First, counsel’s performance must have fallen below an objective standard of reasonableness. *Id.* at 687-88. Second, that failure must have prejudiced the outcome of the proceeding. *Id.*

Failing to file a suppression motion can amount to ineffective assistance of counsel. *See Kimmelman v. Morrison*, 477 U.S. 365, 385 (1986). But a defendant “must also prove that his Fourth Amendment claim is meritorious and that there is a reasonable probability that the verdict would have been different absent the excludable evidence in order to demonstrate actual prejudice.” *Id.* at 375. Moreover, the prejudice prong of the *Strickland* test is not met if a defendant cannot “show, at a minimum, that he could have prevailed on a properly pursued [suppression] motion.” *McLary v. Conway*, 492 Fed. Appx. 157, 159 (2d Cir. 2012); *see also Walker v. Bennett*, 262 F. Supp. 2d 25, 40 (W.D.N.Y. 2003) (“In light of the record before it, the Court cannot say that a motion to suppress [the defendant’s] statement to the police would have been successful. Because Walker has failed to demonstrate actual prejudice, his Sixth Amendment claim premised on counsel’s failure to move to exclude his confession is without merit.”).

Here, Pierce has not shown that a motion to suppress the fruits of the traffic stop and the search of the Equinox would have succeeded, the minimum needed to show he was prejudiced by his trial counsel’s failure to make the motion. *See Kimmelman*, 477 U.S. at 375 (defendant “must [] prove that his Fourth Amendment claim is meritorious”). Based on the record here, neither the initial traffic stop nor the subsequent search of the vehicle violated the Fourth Amendment, and Pierce has not shown otherwise.¹

*3 Even if law enforcement officers do not have a warrant, they may stop a person upon “probable cause or a reasonable suspicion, based on specific and articulable facts, of unlawful conduct.” *United States v. Scopo*, 19 F.3d 777, 781 (2d Cir. 1994); *see also Arizona v. Johnson*, 555 U.S. 323, 326-27 (2009). An “observed traffic violation” provides the necessary factual basis to justify a stop. *Scopo*, 19 F.3d at 781 (finding law enforcement had probable cause to stop the defendant’s vehicle, leading to incriminating evidence, after observing him fail to signal before changing lanes). Here, the window tint of the Equinox was a traffic violation easily observed by law enforcement. In sum, because Deputy

Ferrick observed the window tint and reasonably suspected that it was too dark, the stop was justified.²

Moreover, even if a stop for a minor traffic offense is pretextual and the investigating officer is actually motivated to investigate something else, the stop does not violate the Fourth Amendment. See *Whren v. United States*, 517 U.S. 806, 813 (1996). So even if Deputy Ferrick stopped the Equinox to investigate illegal drug activity at 70 Henrietta, that would not change the analysis. For that reason as well, Pierce has not shown that he was actually prejudiced by trial counsel's failure to challenge the stop. *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 687-88.

The search of the automobile likewise was justified. Under the so-called automobile exception to the warrant requirement, if law enforcement has probable cause to believe that a vehicle contains evidence of a crime, officers may search the vehicle without a warrant. See *Carroll v. United States*, 267 U.S. 132 (1925); *Colorado v. Bannister*, 449 U.S. 1, 3 (1980); *United States v. Gaskin*, 364 F.3d 438, 456 (2d Cir. 2004). Probable cause exists when the facts available to law enforcement, "viewed through the lens of common sense, would make a reasonably prudent person think that a search would reveal contraband or evidence of a crime." *Florida v. Harris*, 568 U.S. 237, 248 (2013). Here, Detective Donovan smelled marijuana, and that odor reasonably led him to suspect that a search of the Equinox would find marijuana. In fact, Detective Donovan found what he believed to be exactly that.³

Furthermore, the search of the Equinox that followed Pierce's arrest was justified as an inventory search. Law enforcement may search and inventory property within "automobiles impounded or otherwise in lawful police custody where the process is aimed at securing or protecting the car and its contents." See *South Dakota v. Opperman*, 428 U.S. 364, 373 (1976); *Colorado v. Bertine*, 479 U.S. 367, 372 (1987). Here, when Pierce and the only other occupant of the car both were arrested, Detective Donovan took the Equinox to the Erie County Sheriff's Office's headquarters. Docket Item 136 at 8. After transporting the vehicle, Detective Donovan inventoried the property that was in the vehicle—including the keys—and took possession of it. *Id.* Because an "inventory search is not an independent legal concept but rather an incidental administrative step," it is not unreasonable when conducted without a warrant or probable cause. *Illinois v. Lafayette*, 462 U.S. 640, 643-44 (1983).

*4 For both these reasons—probable cause to search the stopped automobile and an inventory search after it was

impounded—the search of the Equinox was justified, and Pierce has not shown that he was actually prejudiced by trial counsel's failure to challenge it. See *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 687-88.

Pierce specifically objects to the use of the keys to unlock the front door at 70 Henrietta, the upper apartment at 70 Henrietta, and a padlock securing a door inside it. Docket Item 156 at 13. He relies on *United States v. Rodriguez*, 2011 WL 2470714, at *16 (D. Conn. June 20, 2011), where the court suppressed keys to a house because the warrant to search the vehicle in which the keys were found did not authorize the seizure of any house keys. According to the *Rodriguez* court, "if the officers discovered that Mr. Rodriguez possessed a key to the House by attempting to unlock doors to the House using keys seized from the Honda, that evidence presumably must be excluded because it resulted from 'action ... unrelated to the objectives of the authorized intrusion,' which constituted an 'additional invasion of [Mr. Rodriguez's] privacy interest.'" *Rodriguez*, 2011 WL 2470714, at *16 (quoting *Arizona v. Hicks*, 480 U.S. 321, 325 (1987)).

Pierce's argument fails for two reasons. First, as noted above, seizure of the keys was authorized both as a search pursuant to a permissible automobile stop and as an inventory search. And using those keys to open the doors at 70 Henrietta was authorized by a warrant to search those premises. That makes this case different from *Rodriguez*, where the search warrant did not permit seizure of the house keys. *Id.* Second, Pierce's trial strategy was to distance himself from the 70 Henrietta location; so, accepting as true Pierce's contention that he had nothing to do with those premises, he did not have standing to object to the search of anything at the location. For both those reasons, the suppression motion would not likely have succeeded, and Pierce's claim of ineffective assistance of counsel based on the failure to make such a motion is therefore without merit.

Finally, even if that were not true—that is, even if the suppression motion would have been successful—Pierce's claim of ineffective assistance would fail for another reason. As noted above, the police had good reason to possess the keys as the fruit of a permissible search, and the police had a warrant to search the premises at 70 Henrietta. So even if the argument that using the keys to open the premises raises a distinct Fourth Amendment issue as Pierce contends the *Rodriguez* case suggests, the failure to raise such a novel and sophisticated argument—the merit of which is indeed open to question—does not amount to ineffective assistance of counsel. See *Knowles v. Mirzayance*, 556

U.S. 111, 127 (2009) (“The law does not require counsel to raise every available nonfrivolous defense.”). For assistance of counsel to be ineffective, it must fall “below an objective standard of reasonableness.” *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 688. Failure to raise a novel argument does not fall below that standard. See *Weingarten v. United States*, 865 F.3d 48, 53 (2d Cir. 2017) (“[N]either argument was so obvious that it was unreasonable for Weingarten’s counsel to forgo it.”).

*5 Pierce has not met his burden of demonstrating that trial counsel should have raised this argument, see *id.* at 52, let alone that the failure to do so “amounted to incompetence under prevailing professional norms.” *Harrington v. United States*, 689 F.3d 124, 129-30 (2d Cir. 2012). “When counsel focuses on some issues to the exclusion of others, there is a strong presumption that he did so for tactical reasons rather than through sheer neglect.” *Yarborough v. Gentry*, 540 U.S. 1, 8 (2003). Here, Pierce’s trial counsel opted to argue that Pierce had no connection to 70 Henrietta and therefore not to challenge using the keys to search that property. In sum, Pierce’s suppression argument neither rebuts his trial counsel’s presumed competence nor demonstrates that

counsel’s performance “fell below an objective standard of reasonableness.” *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 688.

CONCLUSION

The motion Pierce now suggests that his trial counsel should have made would not likely have been successful. But even if it had some merit, his counsel did not fall below the objective standard of reasonableness in failing to make it. For either and both of these reasons, Pierce’s Rule 33 motion for a new trial due to ineffective assistance of counsel is DENIED.

SO ORDERED.

All Citations

Not Reported in Fed. Supp., 2019 WL 468124

Footnotes

- 1 The Court notes, without deciding the issue, that it is unclear whether Pierce would have had standing to challenge the stop and search of the Equinox because it was registered to his co-defendant Willis and he claimed at trial to be only test driving the vehicle. See Docket Item 69; Docket item 162 at 6; *United States v. Smith*, 621 F.2d 482 (2d Cir. 1980). This Court does not reach the issue of standing because the parties did not address it and because the Court denies Pierce’s motion for other reasons.
- 2 Pierce questions whether the tint was illegally dark, but speculation about such evidence does not give merit to a suppression motion.
- 3 Pierce questions whether the material found in the car was, in fact, marijuana, but that does not demonstrate that a suppression motion would have been successful. It is whether an officer’s evaluation of the facts known to him or her at the time of the search reasonably establishes probable cause to justify the search, not whether he or she turns out to have been correct, that matters for a suppression motion. See *Illinois v. Rodriguez*, 497 U.S. 177, 185-86 (1990).

APPENDIX D:

**ORDER OF THE COURT OF APPEALS, DATED OCTOBER 19, 2021,
DENYING THE PETITION FOR REHEARING**

**UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE
SECOND CIRCUIT**

At a Stated Term of the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, held at the Thurgood Marshall United States Courthouse, 40 Foley Square, in the City of New York, on the 19th day of October, two thousand twenty-one,

Before: Rosemary S. Pooler,
 Barrington D. Parker,
 Gerard E. Lynch,

Circuit Judges.

United States of America,

Appellee USA

ORDER
Docket No. 18-3617(L), 19-1051(Con)

v.

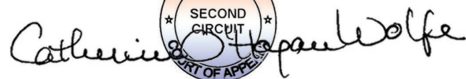
Larry Willis, Isiah Pierce,

Defendants - Appellants.

Appellant, Isiah Pierce, having filed a petition for panel rehearing and the panel that determined the appeal having considered the request,

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that the petition is DENIED.

For The Court:
Catherine O'Hagan Wolfe,
Clerk of Court

A circular seal of the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit is positioned over the signature. The seal features the text "UNITED STATES" at the top, "SECOND CIRCUIT" in the center, and "COURT OF APPEALS" at the bottom, with stars on either side of the center text.