

LOCAL PROBES WRAPPING UP THEIR WORK

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Local investigations into last weekend's shooting spree in Illinois and Indiana and into whether avowed racist Benjamin Smith was the gunman were drawing to a close Saturday, officials said.

But federal and state investigators have begun to broaden their investigations into the World Church of the Creator, to which Smith once belonged, as well as the group's leader, Matthew Hale .

Detectives believe Smith, 21, is linked to last weekend's slayings of former Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdson and Indiana University graduate student Won Joon Yoon, as well as to the wounding of six Orthodox Jews, two African-Americans and one Asian-American during a three-day shooting spree in Chicago, Skokie, Northbrook, Springfield, Decatur, Urbana and Bloomington, Ind. Smith killed himself when police caught up with him in Salem in southern Illinois.

A task force of north suburban police departments and Chicago police that was charged with looking into the shootings was disbanded earlier this week, according to police officials in Wilmette, where the group was headquartered.

Bloomington Police Chief Jim Kennedy said the investigation into Yoon's death was awaiting "the result of firearms identification tests being conducted by the Illinois State (Police) Crime Lab" to determine whether the bullet that killed him came from one of the guns recovered when Smith was apprehended.

"We continue to believe that Smith acted alone, but the case continues to be ongoing," Skokie Police Sgt. Michael Ruth said of the Byrdson murder.

Sources close to the investigation said little more is expected to be learned about Smith, but investigators do not want to close the inquiry while the possibility exists that he did not act alone.

Hale and the World Church were among the parties of particular interest to investigators, a source said, although business cards from other Midwestern neo-Nazi groups were among the items found on Smith and in his blue Ford Taurus.

Smith often distributed and helped finance racist literature for the World Church, led since 1996 by Hale, and a computer discovered this week by FBI agents in a storage locker rented by Hale was among the items being scrutinized.

Both Hale and Smith were believed to have had access to the computer, which appeared to contain material for a racist newsletter. Sources said a computer appeared to be missing from Smith's apartment in Downstate Morton.

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