UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE THIRD CIRCUIT

No. 24-2527

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

v.

RACOCO WILLIAMS,
Appellant

On Appeal from the U.S. District Court, W.D. Pa.
Judge Joy Flowers Conti, No. 2:17-cr-00246-001

Before: RESTREPO, PHIPPS, AND MASCOTT, *Circuit Judges*
Submitted: Jan. 23, 2026; Decided: Oct. 28, 2026

NONPRECEDENTIAL OPINION*

RESTREPO, *Circuit Judge*. Racoco Williams was convicted of several offenses relating to drug trafficking and money laundering. He challenges his convictions and sentence, largely focusing on probable cause, sufficiency of the evidence, and Eighth Amendment issues. Because Williams's claims lack merit, we will affirm his conviction and sentence.

I.

From 2012 to 2018, Williams ran a drug-trafficking organization, overseeing associates in several cities and arranging for couriers to transport suitcases filled with drugs and cash via airplane. By 2017, Williams had prior convictions in Arizona stemming from such trafficking. In April 2017, law enforcement in Carnegie, Pennsylvania, seized marijuana, cocaine, and a large amount of cash from the home of

*This is not an opinion of the full Court and, under 3d Cir. IOP 5.7, is not binding precedent.

Williams's romantic partner. Williams was arrested in Pittsburgh the next month on suspicion of driving under the influence, and a subsequent search of his vehicle and hotel room resulted in the recovery of a large amount of cash and evidence of drug trafficking. In August, Pennsylvania State Troopers went to a hotel where Williams was staying and smelled marijuana emanating from him and his room. Homeland Security Investigations ("HSI") Agent Brianna Coleman[1] then obtained a warrant to search Williams's hotel room "for controlled substances, including marijuana," relying on the troopers' marijuana odor observations and her knowledge from other drug investigations involving Williams. App. 146. The search resulted in the recovery of seventeen kilograms of cocaine, two packs of rolling papers, a jar with marijuana residue, and a package of incense. Williams was arrested that day and indicted on six counts related to his role in the trafficking operation.

Before trial, Williams sought to suppress the evidence recovered from his hotel room. He argued that Agent Coleman's affidavit was misleading and inaccurate because (1) it stated that law enforcement became aware of possible narcotics activities at Williams's hotel "[o]n August 29, 2017"; (2) the search's "real purpose" was not to search for "a small amount of marijuana"; and (3) it deliberately, falsely stated that the troopers smelled burnt marijuana coming from Williams's hotel room. App. 132, 135.

[1] When she submitted the affidavit, Agent Coleman's last name was Tetrault.

The District Court held a *Franks* hearing[2] on the issue of the marijuana smell,[3] concluded that Williams had not proven that the troopers' statements were false, and denied the suppression motion.

Then, three days before trial, the Government's Jencks Act productions[4] revealed that a confidential informant ("CI") had given Agent Coleman information on Williams's activities prior to his August 2017 arrest. At trial, the Government presented numerous exhibits and testimony from several witnesses—including narcotics couriers and Williams's cellmate, but not including the CI.

The jury convicted Williams on all six counts. Williams unsuccessfully moved for judgment of acquittal and a new trial, raising, among other arguments, the challenges to his convictions. The District Court sentenced Williams to a mandatory term of life imprisonment for his conviction under 21 U.S.C. § 848(b), with concurrent sentences for the other offenses. We now turn to his timely appeal.

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[2] *See Franks v. Delaware*, 438 U.S. 154, 155–56 (1978).

[3] The District Court did not hold a *Franks* hearing on Williams's two other asserted falsehoods in the affidavit. It concluded that Williams failed to make a substantial preliminary showing that the date inaccuracy was material to the probable cause determination. And though the Court agreed that law enforcement's original investigative purpose was to obtain evidence regarding Williams's involvement in a large-scale narcotics crime, it distinguished between the investigation's purpose and the affidavit's purpose and concluded that—given this distinction and the affidavit's other statements—Agent Coleman's statement that the purpose of the search warrant was to search for marijuana was not false.

[4] *See* 18 U.S.C. § 3500(a).

II.[5]

Williams argues that the District Court erred by denying his motions to (1) suppress evidence recovered from his hotel room following a *Franks* hearing; (2) receive a new trial based on purported *Brady* and *Franks* violations and cross-examination limitations at the *Franks* hearing and trial; and (3) obtain a judgment of acquittal based on insufficient evidence for the 21 U.S.C. § 848(b) offense. He also asserts that his life sentence violates the Eighth Amendment. These claims lack merit.

A. Motion to Suppress

Williams argues that the evidence from his hotel room should have been suppressed because of demonstrably false statements in Agent Coleman's affidavit. He challenges three statements: (1) that the warrant's purpose was "to search . . . for controlled substances, including marijuana"; (2) that investigators "became aware of possible narcotics activities" at the hotel "[o]n August 29, 2017"; and (3) that officers "identified the smell of marijuana emanating from the door" of Williams's hotel room. App. 146. Williams preserved these arguments by raising them below. *United States v. Joseph*, 730 F.3d 336, 341 (3d Cir. 2013). We review the denial of a suppression motion

[5] The District Court had jurisdiction pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 3231. We have jurisdiction under 28 U.S.C. § 1291 and 18 U.S.C. § 3742(a)(1).

de novo and for clear error as to factual findings.[6] *United States v. Brown*, 595 F.3d 498, 514 (3d Cir. 2010); *United States v. Brown*, 631 F.3d 638, 642 (3d Cir. 2011).

An affidavit of probable cause supporting a search warrant is presumed valid. *United States v. Yusuf*, 461 F.3d 374, 383 (3d Cir. 2006). Under *Franks*, a defendant may defeat this presumption by making a "substantial preliminary showing" that (1) the affidavit contained a false statement; (2) the affiant made the false statement "knowingly or with reckless disregard for the truth"; and (3) the false statement was material to the probable cause determination. *Id.* If the defendant makes that showing, he is entitled to a *Franks* hearing. To obtain suppression, he must then prove by a preponderance of the evidence that (1) the affidavit contained a deliberately or recklessly false statement or omission; and (2) the falsehood or omission was material to the probable cause determination. *Id*.

The District Court did not err in declining to hold a *Franks* hearing on the purpose-of-the-search and date statements. It did not clearly err in finding that the purpose-of-the-search statement was neither false nor misleading because the affidavit made clear that the search warrant's purpose was to obtain evidence of controlled substances, including marijuana, as part of law enforcement's investigation into large-

[6] For example, we review determinations regarding the materiality of a false statement *de novo*, while determinations regarding whether a statement was made with reckless disregard of the truth are reviewed for clear error. *Brown*, 631 F.3d at 642 n.4; *United States v. Desu*, 23 F.4th 224, 229, 235 (3d Cir. 2022).

scale narcotics trafficking involving Williams. The record supports the finding that this was a true representation of the purposes of the search and investigation. As for the date statement, if we excise the incorrect date (August 29, 2017) and replace it with Williams's proffered date (August 28, 2017), the magistrate judge still would have probable cause to issue a warrant to search Williams's hotel room "for controlled substances, including marijuana" based on (1) the troopers' detection of a marijuana odor; (2) evidence regarding Williams's occupancy of the room; and (3) Agent Coleman's expertise and knowledge of other investigations into Williams's drug trafficking (including marijuana). App. 146. The incorrect date was immaterial.

The District Court also did not clearly err in finding that Agent Coleman did not make a deliberately false statement regarding the troopers' marijuana odor observations. The Court made this finding based on the marijuana-related evidence recovered from Williams's room, the troopers' testimony at the *Franks* hearing regarding their marijuana odor detection and observation of Williams's open room window, the troopers' training and experience with detecting such odors, and the lack of evidence contradicting the troopers' odor detection. We defer to the District Court's credibility determinations. *Kairys v. S. Pines Trucking, Inc.*, 75 F.4th 153, 163 (3d Cir. 2023). As this record supports a finding that the troopers smelled marijuana coming from Williams and his room, it was not clear error for the Court to find that Agent Coleman's statement relaying this odor detection was not deliberately false.

B. Cross-Examination and Rule 33 Motion for a New Trial

Williams argues the District Court erred in denying his Rule 33 motion based on the Court's restriction of his cross-examination of the CI during the *Franks* hearing and trial, asserting these restrictions violated the Confrontation Clause. He also argues the Court abused its discretion by denying his Rule 33 motion and clearly erred in rejecting his *Brady* and *Franks* claims regarding the CI. He preserved these arguments by sufficiently raising them in his Rule 33 motion. *Cf. Joseph*, 730 F.3d at 341 (discussing preservation of suppression arguments); *United States v. Abrams*, 165 F.4th 784, 792 (3d Cir. 2026) (discussing preservation in the Rule 29 context).

We review limits on cross-examination for abuse of discretion, but we exercise *de novo* review if "that discretion turns on the scope of the Confrontation Clause." *United States v. Noel*, 905 F.3d 258, 267 (3d Cir. 2018). Ordinarily, we review the denial of a Rule 33 motion for abuse of discretion, but we review legal conclusions *de novo*. *United States v. Quiles*, 618 F.3d 383, 390 (3d Cir. 2010). For a motion based on a *Brady* claim, we review legal conclusions *de novo* and factual findings for clear error. *United States v. Milan*, 304 F.3d 273, 286 (3d Cir. 2002).

Williams's Confrontation Clause argument lacks merit. "[T]rial judges retain wide latitude insofar as the Confrontation Clause is concerned to impose reasonable limits on [ ] cross-examination." *Delaware v. Van Arsdall*, 475 U.S. 673, 679 (1986). The Confrontation Clause ensures "an opportunity for effective cross-examination, not cross-examination that is effective in whatever way, and to whatever extent, the defense might wish." *Id.* (citation omitted). A defendant states a Confrontation Clause violation

if he demonstrates that he was foreclosed from conducting "otherwise appropriate cross-examination designed to show a prototypical form of bias on the part of the witness" and thus from "expos[ing] to the jury the facts from which jurors . . . could appropriately draw inferences relating to the reliability of the witness." *Id.* at 680 (citation modified).

Williams faults the District Court for limiting his cross-examination at the *Franks* hearing regarding (1) whether the troopers were monitoring individuals at the hotel; (2) the source of the troopers' knowledge that Williams was staying in the specific hotel room; and (3) whether the troopers believed the room contained cocaine. He faults the Court at trial for precluding him from cross-examining Agent Coleman on her relationship with the CI. But none of these limitations "significantly inhibited [Williams's] effective exercise of [his] right to inquire into [the] witness's motivation in testifying," *Noel*, 905 F.3d at 268 (citation modified), particularly because the Court permitted him to question law enforcement extensively about (1) their motive to survey the floor where his hotel room was located, develop probable cause, and search his room; (2) whether they knew what room he was staying in (including whether a CI told Agent Coleman that Williams was staying at the hotel); (3) whether and how they smelled marijuana emanating from him and his room; (4) their efforts to investigate other people carrying bags around the hotel at the time of the surveillance; and (5) whether fingerprints other than those belonging to Williams were found on packaging recovered

from the search of his room.[7] And Williams chose not to subpoena the CI, although the District Court offered to issue a subpoena. The District Court neither violated Williams's Confrontation Clause rights nor abused its discretion in limiting cross-examination.

Williams's *Brady* and *Franks* arguments in support of a new trial also fail. *Brady v. Maryland* established a duty to disclose impeachment and exculpatory evidence "material either to guilt or to punishment." 373 U.S. 83, 87 (1963); *Banks v. Dretke*, 540 U.S. 668, 691 (2004). Williams has not shown a reasonable probability that earlier disclosure of the CI's relationship with Agent Coleman would have produced a different result. *United States v. Walker*, 657 F.3d 160, 185 (3d Cir. 2011) (citation omitted). As explained above, even if the CI's existence was known to the magistrate judge, there was probable cause to issue the warrant for Williams's room. Moreover, Williams challenged the credibility of law enforcement's investigation on cross-examination—including by asking Agent Coleman whether she "base[d] [her] information [in the affidavit] on information [she] obtained from a confidential informant," to which Agent Coleman replied affirmatively. App. 2257. So, information about the CI would have been cumulative. Williams's *Franks* claim similarly fails. The District Court found the troopers credible, despite knowing of law enforcement's larger-scale investigation into Williams for narcotics trafficking and Williams's theory that the troopers fabricated the

[7] We express no opinion as to whether the Confrontation Clause applies to a pretrial suppression hearing such as a *Franks* hearing.

marijuana odor observation. We see no reason to conclude that the Court would have reached a different determination had the defense known of the CI prior to the *Franks* hearing. And, again, there was probable cause to search Williams's room without this CI information. *See Yusuf*, 461 F.3d at 389 (explaining that a misrepresentation is material if it affected "the magistrate's probable cause determination"). Because the underlying claims are meritless, we will affirm the District Court's denial of Williams's Rule 33 motion.

C. Rule 29 Motion for Judgment of Acquittal and Sentencing Challenge

Williams contends there was insufficient evidence to convict him under 21 U.S.C. § 848(b). He argues that the Government failed to prove that (1) his violations involved at least 150 kilograms of cocaine; (2) he acted in concert with at least five other individuals; and (3) those individuals acted subject to his supervision, management, or organizational direction. Williams preserved this argument via his Rule 29 motion. *See Abrams*, 165 F.4th at 792. In reviewing the sufficiency of the evidence, we uphold the verdict unless it "fall[s] below the threshold of bare rationality." *Noel*, 905 F.3d at 267 (citation modified).

The record demonstrates that the § 848(b) verdict was rational. We view the evidence in the light "most favorable to the government." *United States v. Gonzalez*, 905 F.3d 165, 179 (3d Cir. 2018) (citation omitted). Here, the evidence established that Williams's large-scale drug-trafficking operation spanned several years, involved large

quantities of cocaine[8] and significant cash proceeds, and positioned Williams as "a high[-]level wholesaler dealer" and "boss" who employed numerous couriers and managed dealers. App. 1075, 1597. On this record, it was rational for the jury to conclude that all elements of § 848(b) were satisfied.

Finally, Williams argues that his mandatory life sentence under § 848(b) violates the Eighth Amendment. He preserved this issue by raising it at sentencing. *United States v. Adams*, 252 F.3d 276, 278 (3d Cir. 2001). We exercise plenary review over this preserved constitutional challenge. *United States v. Walker*, 473 F.3d 71, 75 (3d Cir. 2007). Section 848(b) mandates a life sentence, and a sentence imposed within statutory limits generally does not violate the Eighth Amendment unless it is "grossly disproportionate to the severity of the crime." 21 U.S.C. § 848(b); *United States v. Miknevich*, 638 F.3d 178, 185–86 (3d Cir. 2011) (citation modified); *Rummel v. Estelle*, 445 U.S. 263, 271–72 (1980). Though we acknowledge the severity of a life sentence, we are not persuaded that this sentence is grossly disproportionate because (1) this was a serious offense involving the trafficking of at least 150 kilograms of cocaine; and (2) Williams has not presented relevant sentencing disparities to demonstrate disproportionality. *See United States v. Martorano*, 866 F.2d 62, 69–70 (3d Cir. 1989)

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[8] At trial, law enforcement presented evidence of 29 kilograms of cocaine recovered from Williams's drug-trafficking operation. Wendell Caldwell, Williams's cellmate, also testified that Williams told him that he trafficked 50–100 kilograms of cocaine per month prior to his arrest.

(rejecting defendant's Eighth Amendment argument with respect to his § 848(b) offense). Williams's Eighth Amendment claim fails.

III.

For the foregoing reasons, we will AFFIRM Williams's judgment and sentence.