I. INTRODUCTION

The first observing run (O1) of the Advanced Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO) detectors [11] took place from September 12, 2015 to January 19, 2016. During this period, there were a total of 51.5 days of coincident analysis time between the two detectors, located in Hanford, Washington (H1), and Livingston, Louisiana (L1). This resulted in the detection of gravitational-wave (GW) signals from the coalescence of two binary black hole (BBH) systems. This paper reports on an all-sky search for gravitational waves (GWs) from merging intermediate mass black hole binaries (IMBHBs). The combined results from two independent search techniques were used in this study: the first employs a matched-filter algorithm that uses a bank of filters covering the GW signal parameter space, while the second is a generic search for GW transients (bursts). No GWs from IMBHBs were detected; therefore, we constrain the rate of several classes of IMBH mergers. The most stringent limit is obtained for black holes of individual mass 100 $M_\odot$, with spins aligned with the binary orbital angular momentum. For such systems, the merger rate is constrained to be less than 0.93 Gpc$^{-3}$ yr$^{-1}$ in comoving units at the 90% confidence level, an improvement of nearly 2 orders of magnitude over previous upper limits.

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matched-filter search algorithm, GstLAL [17–19], that uses inspiral–merger–ringdown waveform templates [4,5] which are cross-correlated with the data, and an unmodeled transient search algorithm, coherent WaveBurst (cWB)

A. Modeled analysis

The GstLAL pipeline, which is a matched-filter search algorithm for GWs from compact binary coalescences [17–19], was used in its offline mode to analyze the entirety of O1 [4,5]. The GstLAL IMBHB analysis is based on a discrete bank of GW templates constructed over a total mass between 50 $M_\odot$ and 600 $M_\odot$ in the detector frame, with mass ratios less extreme than 1:10, and with dimensionless spin $\chi_{1,2}$ between $-0.99$ and 0.99, where positive values are aligned with the orbital angular momentum of the system and negative values are antialigned. The templates used in this search are a reduced-order model of a double aligned-spin effective-one-body waveform [24,25]. As a consequence of the noise characteristics at low frequencies [12], GstLAL began its analysis at a frequency of 15 Hz.

In this analysis, the data are filtered through a singular-value decomposition of the template bank, and the matched-filter SNR time series for each template in the bank is reconstructed from the filtered output of the basis templates [19]. Maxima in the SNR, called triggers, are [20–22], which looks for excess power which is coherent across the network of GW detectors. Instead of setting distinct upper limits, however, the results presented in this paper are the combined statistics from both independent search techniques. No IMBHBs were detected in this combined search in O1; based on this, we set a 90% confidence level limit on the rate of mergers (see Table I below).

The paper is organized as follows: Section II summarizes our search techniques and how they are combined for the current analysis. Section III describes how upper limits on rates are calculated and includes Table I and Fig. 2 as main results. Section IV discusses the astrophysical implications inferred from this analysis, and Sec. V presents our conclusions. We use the “TT + lowP + lensing + ext” parameters from Table 4 of the Planck 2015 results [8] for cosmological calculations.

II. SEARCH TECHNIQUE

For O1, a new search was inaugurated, in which both modeled and unmodeled analyses, specifically tuned to search for IMBHBs, were combined to form a single search. The modeled analysis employs a matched filter, which yields the optimal detection efficiency for signals of known form in stationary, Gaussian noise [23] and thus requires a sufficiently accurate signal waveform model for use as a template. The unmodeled transient analysis, by contrast, can identify burstlike signals which do not correspond to any currently available waveform model. IMBHB signals, as a consequence of their sources’ high mass, have relatively few cycles in the LIGO frequency band; therefore, the IMBHB search benefits from the combination of the two complementary analysis techniques.

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![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

**TABLE I.** Results of our analysis for IMBHB systems with (source-frame) component masses $m_{1,2}$ and spins $\chi_{1,2}$ parallel to the orbital angular momentum. For each set of parameters, we report the 90% confidence combined upper limit on the rate density $R_{90\%}$ and the combined- and single-pipeline sensitive distance $D_{90\%}\text{VT}$, Uncertainty in the detectors’ amplitude calibration introduces an $\approx 18\%$ uncertainty in the rates and an $\approx 6\%$ uncertainty in the sensitive distance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$m_1 / M_\odot$</th>
<th>$m_2 / M_\odot$</th>
<th>$\chi_{1,2}$</th>
<th>$R_{90%}$ [GC$^{-1}$yr$^{-1}$]</th>
<th>$D_{90%}\text{VT}$ [Gpc]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>−0.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
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<td>0.94</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.45</td>
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<tr>
<td>300</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIG. 1.** Horizon distance for equal-mass, nonspinning black hole systems with a single-detector SNR threshold of 8 in the first observing run (O1) of the Advanced LIGO detectors [12]. Comparison curves are also given for the previous sixth science run (S6) of the initial LIGO detectors [15].
identified, and corresponding values of a signal consistency

For validation, another independent matched-filter

 identified, and corresponding values of a signal consistency
test, which is a comparison of the SNR time series for the
data to the SNR time series expected from a real signal,
are computed. Triggers found in one detector that are not
coincident with triggers in another detector are assumed to
be nonastrophysical and are used to estimate the probability
distribution of noise events in each detector. Coincident
triggers are considered GW candidates and are ranked
against each other via a likelihood ratio, which compares
the probability that each is a signal to the probability that
each is noise\footnote{See Ref. [26] for a study of the properties of different methods to estimate the \( p \)-value in a coincident search for transient GW signals.}. Finally, a coincident trigger is assigned a

For validation, another independent matched-filter search algorithm, PyCBC \cite{27,28}, was also run over the
same GW parameter space using a spin-aligned frequency-
domain phenomenological waveform model \cite{29,30} as
templates. PyCBC uses a different SNR-based ranking
statistic \cite{4,27,28,31}. These two independent matched-
filter algorithms find consistent results over the IMBH
parameter space, which increases our confidence in their
reliability and robustness.

The three most significant events from the GstLAL
matched-filter analysis correspond to GW150914,
LVT151012, and GW151226, which have already been
reported \cite{2–6}. Since parameter-estimation studies have
placed these events outside of the IMBH mass range

\footnote{See Ref. [26] for a study of the properties of different methods to estimate the \( p \)-value in a coincident search for transient GW signals.}, we have removed these triggers from our analy-

We discuss the production of our overall IMBH
results in Sec. II C.

The bank of waveform templates used by the GstLAL
IMBH analysis notably overlaps with the O1 stellar-mass
BBH search \cite{4,5} between \( M = 50 \, M_{\odot} \) and \( 100 \, M_{\odot} \). It
was therefore expected that this new analysis would find
GW150914 and LVT151012 as two of its most significant
events, since the masses of these two signals have posterior
support in this range \cite{4–6}. Additionally, GW151226 being
the third most significant event in this analysis demonstr-
ates the robustness of modeled analyses to identify
signals even outside of their covered parameter spaces.

This is the first modeled analysis that includes the
inspiral, merger, and ringdown portions of the compact
binary coalescence waveform to extend above \( M = 100 \, M_{\odot} \) and into the IMBH parameter space. Even
though IMBH mergers potentially have large values of
SNR, detecting them with this analysis can be difficult.
Signal consistency checks are often inefficient at distin-
guishing true signals from background events. This prob-
lem is caused primarily by the short duration of signals
produced by high-mass systems, especially those with
antialigned spin configurations. Continuing to pursue
improvements in IMBH search methods will undoubtedly
improve the sensitivity of the analysis.

\section{B. Unmodeled analysis}

The unmodeled analysis was conducted with cWB, the
data-analysis algorithm used for previous LIGO-Virgo
unmodeled IMBH searches \cite{13,33}. More recently, this
algorithm has been used extensively on O1 data \cite{22}.
cWB performs a coherent analysis on data from multiple detectors [21]; for the O1 analysis, just the H1 and L1 detectors were available. After decomposing the data into a time-frequency representation, the algorithm identifies coherent triggers from regions in the time-frequency domain with excess power relative to the noise level. GW candidate events are subsequently reconstructed in the framework of a constrained maximum-likelihood analysis.

As this reconstruction of signal is agnostic to the waveform modeling of the specific astrophysical source, this algorithm can be used in a variety of searches, including eccentric BBH mergers [34]. Past simulation studies have shown that the cWB unmodeled analysis is sensitive to BBH mergers over large regions of the binary parameter space accessible with initial GW detectors [35]; analogous conclusions were reached for the case of advanced detectors [36].

For this analysis, we applied a further, weak constraint to favor the reconstruction of chirality-polarized waveforms [21]. Moreover, with respect to the generic burst search reported in [22], frequency-dependent postproduction selection cuts were tuned in order to minimize the impact of such cuts on IMBHB mergers: the low-frequency part of the spectrum of GW data is often polluted by various environmental and instrumental noises that effectively mimic the expected waveforms for massive binary mergers. The cWB analysis began at a frequency of 16 Hz.

The significance of any GW candidate event is estimated by comparing it with the noise background distribution in order to calculate its p-value. The background set was empirically produced by analyzing ≃9000 independent time-shifted O1 data sets.3 Approximately 1100 yr of effective background livetime was accumulated with this procedure. Additional time lags would have been analyzed had loud IMBHB candidates been identified and a more precise estimate of the background tails been required. The only GW signal found in the O1 data by cWB was GW150914, which is louder than all background events. Similarly to the aforementioned matched-filter searches, GW150914 was then removed from the unmodeled analysis.

C. Combining analyses

After running on the data collected by the detectors, each search algorithm produces a trigger list with times and associated p-values \( P \). We combine the two lists together to form a single list of triggers ranked by their p-value. To avoid double counting of events, we remove triggers within 100 ms of a more significant trigger found by the other search algorithm. To account for the use of two search algorithms, we apply a trials factor of 2 to produce the final p-value of our search,

\[
\hat{P} = 1 - (1 - P)^2.
\]

This assumes that the triggers produced by the two algorithms are independent; a correlation in the two lists of triggers from the pipelines would reduce the effective trials factor, making 2 a conservative choice. Of the top 150 triggers output by the two pipelines, only GW150914 is common between the lists, indicating that the noise triggers are independent here. We consider \( P \) as the ranking statistic for the combined search algorithm. Excluding GW150914, LVT151012, and GW151226, the most significant trigger has \( \hat{P} = 0.26 \), well below the significance needed to be considered as a detection candidate.

III. UPPER LIMITS ON RATES

Since no IMBHB coalescences were detected during O1, we can calculate upper limits on the astrophysical rate (density) of such events. With the loudest-event method [37], if the most significant IMBHB trigger is consistent with noise, the 90% confidence upper limit is given by

\[
R_{90\%} = -\ln(0.1) \langle VT \rangle = 2.303 \left( \frac{\bar{V}}{\bar{T}} \right),
\]

where \( \langle VT \rangle \) is the averaged spacetime volume to which our search is sensitive at the loudest-event threshold. We compute \( \langle VT \rangle \) by injecting a large number of simulated waveforms into the O1 data, then analyzing the data with both pipelines (GstLAL and cWB) to produce a list of combined p-values \( \hat{P} \). A simulated signal is considered to be detected by the search if \( \hat{P} \) is smaller than the p-value of the loudest event, 0.26. The sensitive \( \langle VT \rangle \) is then given by

\[
\langle VT \rangle = T_0 \int dz d\theta \frac{dV_c}{dz} \frac{1}{1+z} s(\theta)f(z,\theta),
\]

where \( T_0 \) is the total time covered by the injections (in the detector frame), \( V_c(z) \) is the comoving volume contained within a sphere out to redshift \( z \) [38], \( s(\theta) \) is the injection distribution of binary parameters \( \theta \) (e.g., masses, spins, orientation angles, distance), and \( 0 \leq f(z,\theta) \leq 1 \) is the selection function indicating the fraction of injections with redshift \( z \) and parameters \( \theta \) that are detected by our search. We evaluate the integral (3) using a Monte Carlo technique.

The injected waveforms are generated using a spin-aligned effective-one-body model [24], which is the waveform model used as a base for the reduced-order model [25] that the GstLAL search pipeline used for its template bank. Precession and higher-order modes are possibly important for IMBHB detection [39–45], particularly for sources with

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3Since the noise sources are uncorrelated between H1 and L1, introducing relative time delays larger than the GW travel time (\( \lesssim 10 \text{ ms} \)) is an effective way to generate an empirical noise distribution.
more extreme mass ratios; however, we neglect both effects due to current limitations in the waveform models.

Since the true population of IMBHBs, and thus the true function $s(\theta)$, is unknown, we focus on placing limits on 12 specific locations in the IMBHB parameter space. We choose 10 specific combinations of masses (see Table I). For 9 of these mass combinations, we consider only nonspinning black holes. In the case $m_1 = m_2 = 100 M_\odot$, we consider nonspinning black holes and two spinning cases. In both spinning cases, we choose dimensionless spins $\chi_{1,2}$ of magnitude 0.8 which are aligned with each other. In one case, the spins are also aligned with the orbital angular momentum of the system ($\chi_1 = \chi_2 = 0.8$); in the other, they are antialigned ($\chi_1 = \chi_2 = -0.8$). Angular parameters (i.e., binary orientation and sky location) are chosen from a uniform distribution on a sphere.

The luminosity distances of the sources are chosen approximately uniformly in comoving volume out to a maximum redshift $z = 1$.

The sources are distributed uniformly in the O1 observation time ($T_0 = 130$ days), with a correction factor to account for time dilation. In the detector frame, the injections are spaced by 100 s on average. The total number of injections in each set is $N_{\text{total}} = 112000$, with some slight variation between sets due to the random nature of assigning injection times. Each set includes times during which the detectors were not taking coincident data; the procedure is insensitive to their inclusion in the total. The total spacetime volume covered by the injection sets is $\langle VT \rangle_{\text{total}} = 35$ Gpc$^3$ yr. With these choices, expression (3) for the sensitive $\langle VT \rangle$ reduces to the form

$$\langle VT \rangle = \frac{N_{\text{below cutoff}}}{N_{\text{total}}} \langle VT \rangle_{\text{total}},$$

where $N_{\text{below cutoff}}$ is the number of injections assigned a $p$-value lower than 0.26.

The results are given in Table I. The table shows the 90% confidence rate upper limit for each of the 12 injection sets. Amplitude and phase errors arising from detector calibration [46] have not been included in the analysis; we expect uncertainty in $R_{90\%}$ to be $\approx 18\%$ because of the $\approx 6\%$ uncertainty in the detectors’ amplitude calibration [5]. The tightest bound is placed on the merger of two $100 M_\odot$ black holes whose spins are aligned with their orbital angular momentum: the rate of these mergers is constrained to be less than 0.93 Gpc$^{-3}$ yr$^{-1}$. Since IMBHB merger rates are commonly expressed in events per GC per Gyr, we convert our results into these units by assuming, for the sake of simplicity, a redshift-independent

$$D(VT) = \frac{3 VT}{4 \pi T_0^2} \left( \frac{1}{3} \right)^{1/3},$$

where $T_0 < T$ is the total time analyzed by the search. The sensitive distance is analogous to the sense-monitor range [48], except that (5) includes cosmological effects. It is given in Table I for the combined $\langle VT \rangle$, used to generate $R_{90\%}$, as well as for the GstLAL and cWB search algorithms individually. The searches are most sensitive to binaries with $m_1 = m_2 = 100 M_\odot$ and aligned spins. Figure 2 also reports $R_{90\%}$ and $D(VT)$ for the combined search with lines of constant mass ratio $q = m_2/m_1$ and total mass $M = m_1 + m_2$ to guide the eye.

IV. ASTROPHYSICAL IMPLICATIONS

There are currently few good candidates for IMBHs, but if one extrapolates the observed relation between supermassive black holes and the masses of their host galaxies to lower-mass systems, it is plausible to infer the existence of IMBHs [49–56]. While the formation channel of IMBHs is unknown, there are a small number of proposed scenarios: (i) the direct collapse of massive first-generation, low-metallicity Population III stars [57–60], (ii) runaway mergers of massive main sequence stars in dense stellar clusters [61–65], (iii) the accretion of residual gas onto stellar-mass black holes [66], and (iv) chemically homogeneous evolution [67].

It has been suggested that the most likely locations to find IMBHs are at the centers of GCs [68–80]. It follows that these are also the most likely places to find IMBHs. Again, while the formation mechanisms are unknown, it is postulated that an IMBHB can be formed in a GC with a fraction of binary stars higher than $\approx 10\%$ [81] or as a result of a merger of two clusters, each of which contains an IMBH [82,83]. While no direct observational evidence of IMBHs exists, this hypothesis is supported by recent simulations of dense stellar systems [84]. Measurements of an IMBHB’s components would allow us to not only constrain IMBH formation channels, but also make statements on the link between IMBHs and both ultraluminous [85] and hyperluminous [86–88] x-ray systems.

This density encompasses GCs with a range of masses and central concentrations; we make the further simplifying assumption that all GCs have the potential to form IMBHs with the masses we consider.

Since IMBHs are potentially formed via different channels than stellar-mass black holes, we do not attempt to extrapolate the BBH mass distribution to IMBHs. The O1 BBH merger rate and mass distribution reported in [5,10] were calculated assuming that the total mass is less than $100 M_\odot$.\footnote{A flat cosmology with an incorrect value of $\Omega_m = 0.3156$ (instead of 0.3065) was used to generate the injection sets. We find that the error has no significant effect on our results, introducing an error of less than 1%.}
As stated in Table I, the minimal $R_{90\%}$ is found to be \( \approx 0.3 \text{ GC}^{-1} \text{Gyr}^{-1} \). The improvement in detector sensitivity since the S6 run means that this result is nearly 2 orders of magnitude lower than the lowest upper limit set using previous LIGO-Virgo data [13,16]. This number is within a factor of a few of 0.1 GC\(^{-1}\) Gyr\(^{-1}\), the IMBHB merger rate corresponding to one event occurring in each GC within the lifetime of the cluster (assumed equal to 10 Gyr), although it only refers to a single point in the IMBHB mass-spin parameter space and not to the full physical distribution of IMBHBs. The bounds are compatible with rate predictions coming from astrophysical models of IMBHB formation [83,89,90]. To make a full comparison of the upper limits with predictions, or with the BBH merger rate (9–240 Gpc\(^{-3}\) yr\(^{-1}\) [5,10]), it would be necessary to assume a mass, spin, and redshift distribution for IMBHB mergers; this distribution is currently uncertain, so we defer a comparison to future studies.

Further improvements to the detector sensitivity in the next observing runs will allow us to increasingly improve the IMBHB merger-rate estimation and provide relevant constraints on the merger rate in the local Universe. A single GW detection of an IMBHB merger could provide the first conclusive proof of the existence of IMBHBs in the Universe [91–93]. Multiple detections, where astrophysically important parameters, such as mass and spin, are measured, would allow us to make statements not only on the formation and evolutionary channels of IMBHBs but also on their link with other observed phenomena.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper describes a search for intermediate mass black hole binaries during the first observing run of the Advanced LIGO detectors. Due to improvement in detector sensitivity, this run had an increase in search horizon of a factor of \( \approx 6 \) compared to the previous science run. The search uses the combined information from a modeled matched-filter pipeline and an unmodeled transient burst pipeline. While no IMBHBs were found, 90\% confidence limits were placed on the merger rates of IMBHBs in the local Universe. The minimum merger rate of \( \approx 0.3 \text{ GC}^{-1} \text{Gyr}^{-1} \) constitutes an improvement of almost 2 orders of magnitude over the previous search results. The results presented here are based on non-precessing and, in most cases, nonspinning waveforms, that also omit higher modes. It is believed that these higher-order physical effects may be important for IMBHBs, but they should be less important for the near equal-mass systems where we can set best upper limits. We plan to include these effects in future analyses. It is also believed that continued improvements in the detector performance during future observing runs [94] will allow us to further tighten these bounds and may lead to the first detections of IMBHBs.

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SEARCH FOR INTERMEDIATE MASS BLACK HOLE ...


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