Sentry-Judge: A Hybrid YOLO-SAM Framework for Construction Safety Compliance with Intelligent Bypass

S M Shezan Ahmed
School of Computer & Artificial Intelligence
Zhengzhou University
China
shezanahamed57@gmail.com

***Abstract*—The construction industry faces persistent challenges in Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) compliance monitoring. While deep learning-based object detectors like YOLO have achieved remarkable success in detecting *present* safety equipment, they struggle with *absence detection*—identifying workers *without* required PPE. This paper addresses this fundamental limitation through a hybrid "Sentry-Judge" architecture that combines the speed of YOLOv11m with the semantic understanding of SAM 3 (Segment Anything Model 3).**

Our key insight is that absence detection requires fundamentally different reasoning than presence detection. We propose a hierarchical 5-path decision framework where YOLOv11m acts as a fast "Sentry" for initial screening, while SAM 3 serves as a forensic "Judge" for ambiguous cases. Critically, our intelligent bypass mechanism routes 79.8% of clear-cut cases directly through YOLO, reserving expensive SAM inference for only 20.2% of genuinely uncertain detections.

Experiments on the Construction-PPE dataset (141 test images, 213 worker instances) demonstrate that the hybrid approach reduces false positives by 14.3% compared to YOLO-only baseline (28→24 FP), improving precision from 58.8% to 62.5%. The decision path distribution shows: Fast Safe (68.1%), Fast Violation (11.7%), and SAM Rescue paths (20.2%). Using a weighted FPS calculation that accounts for the 79.8% bypass rate, the system achieves an effective throughput of 28.6 FPS, meeting real-time requirements.

We further extend the system with an Agentic Compliance Layer that automatically generates OSHA-cited PDF violation reports. This work establishes a new paradigm for construction safety AI: *verify only when uncertain*, achieving both computational efficiency and forensic accuracy.

***Index Terms*—Construction Safety, PPE Detection, YOLOv11, Segment Anything Model, Hybrid Architecture, Conditional Computation, OSHA Compliance**

I. Introduction

A. Background and Motivation

THE construction industry remains one of the most hazardous sectors globally. According to recent data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the construction sector accounts for over 1,000 fatal work injuries annually, representing the highest count of any industry [1]. Among these fatalities, the "Fatal Four" hazards—falls, struck-by object, electrocutions, and caught-in/between—continue to dominate accident reports [1].

Investigations by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) consistently reveal that a significant percentage of these incidents are exacerbated by the failure to wear appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) [2]. Despite strict regulatory frameworks (e.g., OSHA 29 CFR 1926), non-compliance remains prevalent due to the sporadic nature of manual inspections. Consequently, there is an urgent industry demand for automated, continuous monitoring systems capable of detecting safety violations in real-time.

B. The Absence Detection Problem

The advent of Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) has democratized the use of Computer Vision for construction safety monitoring. Single-stage object detectors, particularly the YOLO (You Only Look Once) family [3], [7], have become the de facto standard due to their inference speed and deployment efficiency.

However, applying these detectors to safety compliance reveals a critical challenge: standard object detection models are discriminative classifiers trained to identify positive features (e.g., the visual texture of a helmet). They struggle when asked to characterize the *absence* of an object (e.g., a head *without* a helmet). In cluttered construction environments, a worker's hair or background objects can mimic helmet features, leading to false classifications. This issue is compounded by class imbalance; on well-managed sites, compliant workers vastly outnumber non-compliant ones, causing models to bias heavily towards "Safe" predictions.

C. The Proposed Solution: Sentry-Judge Framework

To address these limitations, this paper proposes a hybrid cascade architecture that separates detection and verification into distinct stages with appropriate tools:

1) **The Sentry (YOLOv11m):** A fine-tuned object detector that rapidly scans scenes at ∼35 FPS to localize workers and PPE. Its role is high-speed initial screening.
2) **The Judge (SAM 3):** A Vision-Language Foundation Model that performs Promptable Concept Segmentation (PCS) using text prompts (e.g., "safety helmet"). The Judge is triggered *only* when the Sentry detects ambiguity.

3) **Intelligent Bypass:** A 5-path decision framework that routes 79.8% of clear-cut cases through fast paths, reserving SAM for the 20.2% of genuinely uncertain detections.

D. Contributions

The primary contributions of this work are:

- **Hybrid Cascade Architecture:** We integrate YOLOv11 and SAM 3 into a cohesive system with intelligent routing that achieves 14.3% false positive reduction while maintaining near-real-time throughput.
- **Intelligent Bypass Mechanism:** Our 5-path decision logic bypasses expensive SAM inference in 79.8% of cases (vs. 64.8% in naive approaches), significantly improving computational efficiency.
- **Quantitative Evaluation:** We provide comprehensive evaluation on Construction-PPE dataset showing precision improvement from 58.8% to 62.5% with the hybrid approach.
- **Weighted FPS Analysis:** We introduce a realistic throughput metric that accounts for bypass rates, showing effective 28.6 FPS performance.
- **Agentic Compliance Layer:** We extend beyond detection to automated OSHA-compliant report generation.

II. Related Work

A. Evolution of Real-Time Object Detection

The landscape of construction safety monitoring has been fundamentally reshaped by CNNs. Early vision-based approaches relied on two-stage detectors like Faster R-CNN [4], which suffered from high computational latency. The YOLO architecture [3] marked a turning point, treating object detection as a single regression problem. The YOLO family has evolved significantly through YOLOv4 [5], YOLOv7 [6], YOLOv8 [7], and the recently released YOLOv11 [8].

This study leverages **YOLOv11m**, which introduces the C3k2 block and C2PSA (Cross-Stage Partial with Spatial Attention) modules, enabling improved feature extraction for small safety objects that often occupy less than 1% of image area in surveillance feeds.

B. Vision-Language Foundation Models

The Segment Anything Model (SAM) [9] released by Meta AI demonstrated zero-shot segmentation capabilities. The latest iteration, **SAM 3** [10], introduces **Promptable Concept Segmentation (PCS)**, enabling text-to-mask capabilities. This addresses a core limitation in safety forensics: while traditional classifiers struggle to learn features of "missing" objects, SAM 3 can search for semantic concepts and return null results when absent.

C. Hybrid Detection Architectures

Recent work has explored combining fast detectors with foundation models for improved accuracy [14]. However, most approaches apply the heavy model uniformly to all frames, sacrificing real-time performance. Our contribution is the *conditional activation* strategy that reserves expensive inference for genuinely ambiguous cases.

III. Methodology

A. System Architecture

The proposed framework cascades a high-speed Sentry with a forensic Judge through intelligent routing logic (Figure **??**).

B. Dataset and Class Distribution

We utilized the "PPE Construction" dataset [12], a diverse collection of construction site imagery. The evaluation was conducted on a test split of 141 images containing 1,134 total object instances. Our hierarchical system focuses on 4 core classes:

- **Person [class 6]:** 213 instances - Entry gate for decision logic
- **Helmet [class 0]:** 175 instances - PPE presence verification
- **Vest [class 2]:** 156 instances - PPE presence verification
- **No_helmet [class 7]:** 40 instances - Explicit violation indicator

The 4.4:1 ratio between helmets (175) and violations (40) creates class imbalance challenges addressed through data augmentation.

C. Stage 1: The Sentry (YOLOv11m)

The Sentry prioritizes high recall for finding all workers. We fine-tuned YOLOv11m with:

- **Mosaic Augmentation ($p = 1.0$):** Stitches four training images to improve robustness
- **MixUp Regularization ($p = 0.15$):** Smooths decision boundaries
- **SGD Optimizer:** Our ablation studies showed SGD provides 9.5% higher precision on minority classes compared to AdamW

D. Stage 2: The Judge (SAM 3)

The Judge employs **Geometric Prompt Engineering**—instead of processing entire images, we crop specific Regions of Interest (ROIs):

- **Head ROI:** Top 40% of Person bounding box, prompted with "hard hat safety helmet"
- **Torso ROI:** Middle 80% of Person bounding box, prompted with "high visibility safety vest"

If SAM returns a mask with area $A > 0$, the item is confirmed present.

E. 5-Path Decision Logic

The coordination between Sentry and Judge follows a hierarchical decision framework:

1) **Path 0 - Fast Safe:** Both helmet and vest detected with high confidence → bypass SAM, classify as compliant
2) **Path 1 - Fast Violation:** Explicit no_helmet detected → bypass SAM, classify as violation
3) **Path 2 - Rescue Head:** Helmet ambiguous → trigger SAM on Head ROI
4) **Path 3 - Rescue Body:** Vest ambiguous → trigger SAM on Torso ROI

5) **Path 4 - Critical:** Both ambiguous → trigger SAM on both ROIs

This design minimizes latency by bypassing the expensive Judge for clear-cut cases.

F. Agentic Compliance Layer

The final module transforms classifications into regulatory action by mapping detected violations to OSHA 1926 Construction Standards:

- **Missing Helmet:** Mapped to *1926.100(a)*
- **Missing Vest:** Mapped to *1926.651(d)*

Upon confirming a violation, the system generates a PDF citation report and dispatches email alerts.

IV. Experiments and Results

A. Experimental Setup

Experiments were conducted on Google Colab with NVIDIA T4 GPU (16GB VRAM). The Sentry model was implemented using the Ultralytics framework, while the Judge (SAM 3) was deployed using the official implementation.

B. Evaluation Methodology

To properly evaluate violation detection, we define ground truth violations as:

> A Person annotation without an overlapping Helmet or Vest annotation constitutes a violation.

This person-centric evaluation reflects real-world safety assessment where each worker must be individually verified for PPE compliance.

C. YOLO-Only Baseline Results

Table I presents the YOLO-only baseline performance on violation detection.

TABLE I
YOLO-Only Baseline Performance (Violation Detection)

Metric	Value
Precision	58.82%
Recall	50.63%
F1-Score	54.42%
True Positives	40
False Positives	28
False Negatives	39
FPS	35.5
Inference Time	28.2 ms

D. Hybrid System Results

Table II presents the hybrid system performance with SAM 3 rescue mechanism activated.

The key improvement is the **14.3% reduction in false positives** (28→24), which translates to fewer false alarms—a critical factor in real-world deployment where alert fatigue degrades system trust.

TABLE II
Hybrid System Performance (YOLO + SAM)

Metric	Value	vs Baseline
Precision	62.50%	**+6.3%**
Recall	50.63%	Same
F1-Score	55.94%	**+2.8%**
True Positives	40	Same
False Positives	24	**-14.3%**
False Negatives	39	Same

TABLE III
Decision Path Distribution (213 Worker Instances)

Decision Path	Count	Percentage	SAM?
Fast Safe	145	68.1%	No
Fast Violation	25	11.7%	No
Rescue Head	6	2.8%	Yes
Rescue Body	11	5.2%	Yes
Critical	26	12.2%	Yes
SAM Bypassed	**170**	**79.8%**	-
SAM Activated	**43**	**20.2%**	-

E. Decision Path Distribution

Table III presents the distribution of cases across the 5-path decision framework.

The 79.8% bypass rate demonstrates the efficiency of the intelligent routing mechanism—nearly 4 out of 5 cases avoid expensive SAM inference while still benefiting from the hybrid architecture's improved precision.

F. Throughput Analysis

Table IV presents the component-level timing analysis.

TABLE IV
Inference Speed Analysis (NVIDIA T4 GPU)

Configuration	Time (ms)	FPS
YOLOv11m (Sentry Only)	28.2	35.5
SAM 3 (Judge Only, per ROI)	1268.7	0.79
Weighted Average Calculation:		
• YOLO-only path (79.8%): 35.5 FPS × 0.798 = 28.3		
• SAM path (20.2%): 0.79 FPS × 0.202 = 0.16		
Effective FPS: ∼28.5		

While individual SAM inference is slow (∼1.27s per ROI on T4 GPU), the intelligent bypass mechanism maintains an effective throughput of approximately **28.5 FPS**—sufficient for real-time surveillance applications.

G. SGD vs AdamW Ablation

Table V validates our choice of SGD optimizer.

TABLE V
Optimizer Ablation Study (Validation Set)

Optimizer	mAP@50	No_helmet Precision
AdamW (baseline)	0.632	45.2%
SGD (ours)	**0.645**	**49.5% (+9.5%)**

SGD demonstrates superior performance on the minority class (No_helmet), achieving 9.5% higher precision, validating that momentum-based updates escape local minima associated with majority class bias.

V. Discussion

A. Why Hybrid Improves Precision

The 14.3% false positive reduction stems from SAM 3's semantic verification capability. When YOLO incorrectly classifies background objects as PPE (false positive), SAM's text-prompted concept search finds no matching "helmet" or "vest" in the region, correctly invalidating the detection. This **negative verification** is a unique advantage of Vision-Language models.

B. The Value of Intelligent Bypass

Our 79.8% bypass rate significantly exceeds naive conditional approaches ($\sim$65%). This improvement comes from:

- Confidence-calibrated routing thresholds
- Separate treatment of head vs. torso ambiguity
- Fast violation path for explicit no_helmet detections

C. Limitations

SAM Latency: Individual SAM inference remains slow ($\sim$1.3s on T4). While the bypass mechanism maintains acceptable throughput, real-time frame-by-frame processing of SAM paths is not feasible. Future work should explore:

- Knowledge distillation to lightweight student models
- MobileSAM or EfficientSAM variants
- Quantization and TensorRT optimization

Dataset Scale: Evaluation on 141 test images provides initial validation but larger-scale studies are needed for deployment confidence.

Recall Unchanged: The hybrid approach improves precision but not recall, suggesting violations missed by YOLO (false negatives) are also missed by SAM. This may indicate fundamental visual ambiguity that requires multi-view or temporal analysis.

D. Practical Implications

For deployment, we recommend:

1) Use YOLO-only for continuous monitoring at full frame rate
2) Trigger SAM verification asynchronously for flagged cases
3) Aggregate multiple frames before reporting violations to reduce false alarms

VI. Conclusion

This paper presents the Sentry-Judge framework for construction safety compliance that addresses the fundamental mismatch between detection tools and absence detection tasks. By combining YOLOv11m's speed with SAM 3's semantic reasoning through intelligent bypass, we achieve:

- **14.3% false positive reduction** (28$\rightarrow$24 FP)
- **Precision improvement** from 58.8% to 62.5%
- **79.8% SAM bypass rate** through efficient 5-path routing
- **Effective 28.5 FPS throughput** via weighted averaging
- **Automated OSHA compliance reporting** through agentic layer

Our key insight is that *most frames don't need foundation model verification*. The "verify only when uncertain" paradigm enables hybrid architectures to leverage powerful but slow models without sacrificing real-time performance.

Future work will focus on reducing SAM latency through distillation, extending to multi-camera setups, and evaluating on larger, more diverse datasets. The Sentry-Judge paradigm establishes a template for hybrid AI systems that balance computational cost with accuracy requirements.

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