Improved Measurement of Muon Antineutrino Disappearance in MINOS


We report an improved measurement of \( \bar{\nu}_\mu \) disappearance over a distance of 735 km using the MINOS detectors and the Fermilab Main Injector neutrino beam in a \( \bar{\nu}_\mu \)-enhanced configuration. From a total exposure of \( 2.95 \times 10^{20} \) protons on target, of which 42% have not been previously analyzed, we make the most precise measurement of \( \Delta m^2 = [2.62^{+0.31}_{-0.28} \text{(stat)} \pm 0.09 \text{(syst)}] \times 10^{-3} \text{ eV}^2 \) and constrain the \( \bar{\nu}_\mu \) mixing angle \( \sin^2(2\theta) > 0.75 \) (90% C.L.). These values are in agreement with \( \Delta m^2 \) and \( \sin^2(2\theta) \) measured.

(The MINOS Collaboration)
Observations of neutrinos and antineutrinos created in the Sun, the Earth’s atmosphere, reactors, and accelerators provide strong evidence [1–9] that neutrinos undergo transitions between their flavor eigenstates \((\nu_\mu, \nu_\mu, \nu_\tau)\) as they propagate. These transitions can occur due to quantum mechanical mixing between the neutrino flavor and mass \((\nu_1, \nu_2, \nu_3)\) eigenstates. The mixing may be parametrized with a unitary matrix \(U_{\text{PMNS}}\) [10] which is typically expressed in terms of three mixing angles \(\theta_{12}, \theta_{23}, \theta_{13}\) and a charge-parity \((CP)\) violating phase \(\delta\). This interpretation, referred to as “neutrino oscillations,” requires that neutrinos have mass and motivates extensions to the standard model (SM) of particle physics. Extensions that explain the origin of neutrino masses, for example, the addition of right-handed sterile neutrinos \(\nu_R\) [11], may also explain the baryon asymmetry [12] of the Universe.

The \(CP\) symmetry of the SM requires that \(\nu_\mu\) and \(\bar{\nu}_\mu\) have the same masses and mixing parameters. In vacuum, the probability \(P(\nu_\mu \rightarrow \nu_\mu)\) that a \(\nu_\mu\) is detected after a distance \(L\) as a \(\nu_\mu\) (rather than a \(\nu_e\) or \(\nu_\tau\)) must be equal to the corresponding probability \(P(\bar{\nu}_\mu \rightarrow \bar{\nu}_\mu)\) for antineutrinos. For a \(\nu_\mu\) with energy \(E\), the probability may be written as

\[
P(\nu_\mu \rightarrow \nu_\mu) = 1 - \sin^2(2\theta)\sin^2\left(\frac{1.267\Delta m^2 (\text{eV}^2) L (\text{km})}{E (\text{GeV})}\right),
\]

(1)

where \(\Delta m^2\) and \(\sin^2(2\theta)\) are effective parameters that are functions of the angles parametrizing \(U_{\text{PMNS}}\) and the differences in the squared masses \(\Delta m^2_{ij} = m_i^2 - m_j^2\) of the \(\nu_1, \nu_2, \nu_3\) states. Experiments have demonstrated \(|\Delta m^2_{13}| \gg |\Delta m^2_{23}|\) [13]. In the limiting case that \(\theta_{13} = 0\) we have \(\theta = \theta_{23}\) and \(\Delta m^2 = \sin^2(2\theta_{12})|\Delta m^2_{13}| + \cos^2(2\theta_{12})|\Delta m^2_{23}|\) [14,15]. Muon antineutrino oscillations are described by an equation which has the same form as Eq. (1) with parameters \(\Delta \tilde{m}^2\) and \(\sin^2(2\tilde{\theta})\). The extended SM predicts \(\Delta \tilde{m}^2 = \Delta m^2\) and \(\sin^2(2\tilde{\theta}) = \sin^2(2\theta)\) for vacuum oscillations [16,17]. Observation of \(P(\nu_\mu \rightarrow \nu_\tau) \neq P(\bar{\nu}_\mu \rightarrow \bar{\nu}_\mu)\) would therefore be evidence for physics beyond the SM, such as neutrino interactions in the Earth’s crust that do not conserve lepton flavor.

In this Letter, we describe a measurement of \(P(\bar{\nu}_\mu \rightarrow \bar{\nu}_\mu)\) conducted over a baseline \(L = 735\) km using a \(\bar{\nu}_\mu\)-enhanced beam with a peak energy of 3 GeV. The beam was produced by directing 120 GeV/c protons from the Fermilab Main Injector onto a graphite target to produce \(\pi/K\) mesons that decay to produce neutrinos. Two magnetic horns focus the mesons, allowing us to control the energy spectrum and \(\nu/\bar{\nu}\) content of the beam.

The neutrino beam is pointed towards two detectors, referred to as near and far. The 980 ton near detector (ND) measures the \(\nu_\mu\) and \(\bar{\nu}_\mu\) content of the beam as a function of energy at a distance of 1.04 km from the \(\pi/K\) production target. The 5.4 kton far detector (FD) is located in the Soudan Underground Laboratory, 734 km from the ND, and remeasures the beam composition. The neutrino detectors are steel-scintillator, tracking-sampling calorimeters optimized to identify and measure the energy of muon neutrinos and antineutrinos and reject backgrounds from neutral-current (NC) and \(\nu_e\) interactions [18]. The detectors are magnetized with an average field of 1.3 T to distinguish \(\nu_\mu\) from \(\bar{\nu}_\mu\) based on the charge of the \(\mu\) produced in weak interactions.

We previously reported \(\nu_\mu\) oscillations with an energy dependence consistent with Eq. (1) and \(\Delta m^2 = [2.32^{+0.12}_{-0.11}(\text{stat. + syst.})] \times 10^{-3} \text{ eV}^2\) and \(\sin^2(2\theta) = 0.90 (90\% \, \text{C.L.})\) [3]. The measurements utilized \(7.25 \times 10^{20}\) protons on target (POT) of data collected between 2005–2009 with a \(\nu_\mu\)-enhanced beam [19]. Measurements made by Super-Kamiokande [4] and T2K [20] are in good agreement with our values.

In 2009–2010 we collected \(1.71 \times 10^{20}\) POT in a \(\bar{\nu}_\mu\)-enhanced beam [19] created by reversing the polarity of the horns. The magnetic fields in the FD and ND were also reversed to focus the \(\mu^+\) created in \(\bar{\nu}_\mu\) interactions. These antineutrino data also exhibited oscillations in agreement with Eq. (1), but with parameters \(\Delta \tilde{m}^2 = [3.36^{+0.46}_{-0.40}(\text{stat.}) \pm 0.06(\text{syst.})] \times 10^{-3} \text{ eV}^2\) and \(\sin^2(2\tilde{\theta}) = 0.86 \pm 0.11(\text{stat.}) \pm 0.01(\text{syst.})\) [21]. We found no systematic effects which could explain the difference between the \(\nu_\mu\) and \(\bar{\nu}_\mu\) parameters. Assuming identical true values for \((\Delta \tilde{m}^2, \sin^2(2\tilde{\theta}))\) and \((\Delta m^2, \sin^2(2\theta))\), we calculated that such a difference would occur by random chance about 2% of the time. To clarify the situation, we collected an additional \(1.24 \times 10^{20}\) POT with the \(\bar{\nu}_\mu\)-enhanced beam during 2010–2011. We have also updated the analysis to improve the sensitivity to \(\Delta \tilde{m}^2, \sin^2(2\tilde{\theta})\), reduce uncertainties due to Monte Carlo (MC) modeling in the ND, and increase the similarity to the \(\nu_\mu\) oscillation analysis.

We isolate a sample of \(\nu_\mu\) and \(\bar{\nu}_\mu\) charged-current (CC) \(\nu_\mu N \rightarrow X\) events by searching for interaction vertices inside our detectors with a muon track and possible hadronic activity from the recoil system \(X\). We reject hadron tracks reconstructed in NC events by combining four topological variables describing track properties into a single discriminant variable, \(\mu\)ID, using a \(k\)-nearest-neighbor...
(kNN) technique [22]. The kNN algorithm calculates the distance in the four-variable space between each measured event and an ensemble of simulated events; the output is the fraction of signal in the $k = 80$ closest MC events. This discriminant was used in our previous analyses [3,21] and, as shown in Fig. 1(a), is well modeled by our MC simulation. We maximize the statistical sensitivity to $\Delta m^2$ by requiring $\mu ID > 0.3$, which results in a MC estimated efficiency (redundancy) of 90.7% (99.0%) at the ND and 91.6% (99.0%) at the FD. We then discriminate $\nu_\mu$ from $\bar{\nu}_\mu$ on an event-by-event basis by analyzing the track curvature in the detector’s magnetic field. Figure 1(b) shows the track charge/momentum $(q/p)$ divided by its uncertainty $[\sigma(q/p)]$, as determined by our track reconstruction algorithm. We select $\bar{\nu}_\mu$ and reject $\nu_\mu$ by requiring $q/p > 0$ with a MC estimated efficiency (redundancy) of 98.4% (94.7%) in the ND and 98.8% (95.1%) in the FD. The $\nu_\mu$ background accepted by the selection is predominantly due to high energy muons with small curvature.

We reconstruct the neutrino energy by summing muon and hadronic shower energies. The muon energy is measured using track range and curvature. We reconstruct the hadronic shower energy using three variables: the sum of the reconstructed energy deposited by showers that start within 1 m of the track vertex, the sum of the energy in the detector’s magnetic field. Figure 2 shows the reconstructed $\mu$ID as the mean true hadronic energy of the $\Delta m^2$. This technique improves the hadronic energy resolution when compared to a method which uses only the energy deposited by the largest shower, increases the statistical sensitivity to $\Delta m^2$ by 10%, and was previously used to analyze the $\nu_\mu$ disappearance [3,23].

Data from the ND are used to predict the neutrino energy distribution at the FD. Though both detectors have the same segmentation and very similar average magnetic fields, for economic reasons the ND is smaller and asymmetric about the magnetic field coil and is more coarsely instrumented with scintillator in the downstream “muon spectrometer” region [18]. In addition, the ND coil occupies a larger fractional area than the FD coil and more muons enter it. In the ND data, we observe a reconstruction failure rate of 6.1%, mostly associated with tracks entering the coil region, but the MC simulation predicts 4.2%. Previously, we dealt with this issue by assigning a systematic error. Now, we remove ND events with a track that starts less than 60 cm from the coil. We also remove events with a track that ends less than 60 cm from the coil. With the exception of Feb. 2011 (the last point in each bin in Fig. 2), all months are in statistical agreement, and we expect a constant counting rate per POT at the FD.

Under normal conditions, the ND measures about 2400 $\bar{\nu}_\mu$-CC events per day in the oscillation energy region ($E_\nu < 6$ GeV). These data are essential for monitoring the neutrino beam and the quality of the experiment. Figure 2 shows the reconstructed $\bar{\nu}_\mu$ energy distribution measured in each month during the data-taking periods. With the exception of Feb. 2011 (the last point in each bin in Fig. 2), all months are in statistical agreement, and we expect a constant counting rate per POT at the FD. Part of the February dataset was taken after the neutrino target’s cooling system had failed, leaking water into the target canister. This resulted in a decrease in the neutrino flux of 4% from 0–6 GeV when integrated over the entire month.
The decrease is adequately modeled by our beam simulation, and we account for it at the FD using the ND data.

Measurements of the beam position and width at the target, the position of the remnant proton beam at the end of the decay pipe, and the integrated muon flux from meson decays in the pipe, all further indicate that the expected number of $\bar{\nu}_\mu$-CC per POT is constant at the FD. Using the proton beam and monitors, we measured the target and horn misalignments as well as the residual magnetic field in the neck of the focusing horns [26]. We conclude that these effects introduce $\lesssim 1\%$ uncertainty in the rate at the FD.

Events at the FD are read out in a 100 $\mu$s window surrounding the 10 $\mu$s long beam spill [27]. We select events coincident with the beam spill that have a vertex in the fiducial volume and a track identified as a muon by $\mu$ID. We remove the cosmic-ray background by requiring that the cosine of the angle between the track and beam direction be $>0.6$. A total of 521 events satisfy our criteria, 273 in the 2009–2010 data set and 248 in 2010–2011. Using the muon charge, we identify 328 as $\bar{\nu}_\mu$-CC per POT is constant at the FD. We predict 273 in the 2009–2010 data set and 248 in 2010–2011.

The systematic errors stated above were evaluated by computing the standard deviation in the best fit parameters as the fits were repeated using MC samples that were shifted in accordance with uncertainties in neutrino cross sections, the beam matrix and relative FD normalization, NC and $\nu_e$-CC backgrounds, the relative FD to ND energy calibration, the absolute muon energy scale, and the absolute hadronic energy scale, including final state hadronic interactions. The input uncertainties are as in our previous analyses [3,21] and were derived from $in situ$ data, bench tests of detector and beam components, a test beam experiment, and published neutrino and hadron cross sections [2,30]. We increased the uncertainty in the axial-vector mass from 15% to 30% to account for additional uncertainties in $\bar{\nu}_\mu$ quasielastic scattering [31].

The $\bar{\nu}_\mu$ confidence regions shown in Fig. 4 were calculated according to the unified procedure of [32] and incorporate both statistical and systematic uncertainties. Contours for the larger $\nu_\mu$ data set were produced with two analysis enhancements [3], namely, binning events by energy resolution and treating some systematic effects as nuisance parameters, which do not benefit the lower statistics $\bar{\nu}_\mu$ analysis presented here. We assess the consistency of the $\nu_\mu$ and $\bar{\nu}_\mu$ measurements by doing a joint $\Delta m^2 = \Delta m^2, \sin^2(2\theta) = \sin^2(2\theta)$ fit to the data to establish the null hypothesis. We then perform four-parameter $[\Delta m^2, \Delta m^2, \sin^2(2\theta), \sin^2(2\theta)]$ fits on an ensemble of $\nu_\mu$
and $\bar{\nu}_\mu$ MC experiments generated at the joint best fit. The joint fit had a larger likelihood than $p = 42\%$ of the four-parameter fits, indicating consistency between $\nu_\mu$ and $\bar{\nu}_\mu$.

In conclusion, we have used a $\bar{\nu}_\mu$-enhanced Fermilab accelerator beam and detectors that discriminate $\nu_\mu$ from $\bar{\nu}_\mu$ to make the most precise measurement of $\Delta m^2$. Our results remove the tension reported in [21] and establish consistency between $\nu_\mu$ and $\bar{\nu}_\mu$ oscillations at $L/E = 200$ km/GeV.

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*Deceased.

[16] In matter, $P(\nu_\mu \rightarrow \nu_\mu)$ and $P(\bar{\nu}_\mu \rightarrow \bar{\nu}_\mu)$ can differ by as much as 0.1% due to $\nu_\mu \rightarrow \nu_\tau$ mixing and $\bar{\nu}_\mu$ and $\bar{\nu}_\tau$ scattering on electrons. This effect is too small to be observed in our experiment.
[19] Accounting for flux and cross sections, the $\nu_\mu(\bar{\nu}_\mu)$-enhanced beam consists of 91.7%(58.1%) $\nu_\mu$, 7.0%(39.9%) $\bar{\nu}_\mu$, and 1.3%(2.0%) $\nu_\tau + \bar{\nu}_\tau$.
[26] A zero field is expected due to symmetry around the beam axis. We measure a $1 \times 10^{-2}$ mrad deflection of the primary proton beam, corresponding to $B \cdot d \ell = 43$ Gm.
[27] The window is defined by GPS time stamping each beam extraction and transmitting the time stamp over the Internet to the FD, which buffers data to cope with latency.
[28] $\nu_\mu$ are assumed to oscillate with $\Delta m^2 = 2.32 \times 10^{-3}$ eV$^2$ and $\sin^2(2\theta) = 1$.
[29] The “$p$ value,” $p$, is the probability, assuming our fit hypothesis is true, of obtaining data more incompatible with our hypothesis than the data we actually observe. See the discussion in Sec. 33.2.2 of [13].