



How Sean Spicer uses rape case to scapegoat immigrants

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Last week, White House press secretary Sean Spicer weighed in on a crime that he called "horrendous and horrible and disgusting." He was speaking about reports that two students raped a 14-year-old girl at Rockville High School in Maryland on March 16.

One of the alleged assailants was an undocumented immigrant from Guatemala. "I think part of the reason the President has made illegal immigration and crackdown such a big deal is because of tragedies like this," Spicer said.

If the allegations in the Rockville case are true, they represent a horrific case of sexual assault. Nothing more, nothing less. The alleged incident should not be conflated with the immigration debate and should not be manipulated for political purposes. The fact is, immigration status actually has little to do with violent crime.

Asked about the Rockville High case at a press briefing, Spicer said, "The President recognizes that education is a state-run and a local-run issue but I think it is -- it is cause for concern, what happened there. And I think that the city should look at its policies and I think that this is something that authorities are going to have to look at."

Spicer seems to suggest that the undocumented student accused of raping his classmate did not belong in school. But this is not a matter of any city "policies" that "authorities" should examine. In 1982, the Supreme Court ruled in Plyler v. Doe that all children, including the undocumented, have a right to a public education.

State laws require young people to be in school (where, in any case, they have a much better chance of avoiding criminal activity to begin with). No one should be criticizing Montgomery County for meeting its legal obligations to students.

What is troubling is how the Trump administration leaps at this chance -- and any other like it -- to advance the false idea that undocumented immigrants are dangerous criminals. For his address

to Congress last month, for example, President Trump invited several people whose family members had been killed by undocumented immigrants. In that speech, the President announced the creation of a new office within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that will highlight crimes committed by undocumented immigrants. And on Thursday, the Department of Justice released the annual federal justice statistics, with a focus on immigration-related arrests.

However, research has consistently shown that that immigrants, including the undocumented, are associated with lower levels of crime than native-born Americans. Studies by the American Immigration Council, the Marshall Project, the Cato Institute and criminologists all support this conclusion.

So Americans are more likely to be the victim of a crime committed by a fellow citizen than by an undocumented immigrant. The alleged assailant in the Rockville High case is no more representative of all undocumented immigrants than the Border Patrol agent accused of sexually assaulting two sisters is representative of all border patrol agents.

One byproduct of the rhetoric surrounding the Rockville High incident is that Montgomery County Public Schools district, where the school is situated, has been besieged by threatening and xenophobic phone calls, tweets and emails. One caller threatened to burn down the school; another vowed to "shoot the illegals."

How sad that for so many individuals, their response to reports of an unacceptable act of violence is to threaten more violence. And consider that some of these individuals who are so angry about the sexual assault allegations against an undocumented immigrant may well have supported a President with his own lengthy history of sexual assault allegations.

Yes, perhaps the Rockville High attack might not have happened if the alleged perpetrator had not been in this country without authorization. But we don't know that -- just as we don't know yet if the allegations are in fact true. If we believe in the presumption of innocence, the cornerstone of our justice system, we should withhold judgment until the case has been tried in a court of law.

In the meantime, the focus of our concern should be our need for safer schools. Although the alleged attack by an undocumented student has generated outrage from everyone from Fox News host Bill O'Reilly to Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, it is not the first such incident.

In the last school year, there were 250 sex-related "serious incidents" in the Montgomery County Public Schools district, 64 of which resulted in calls to police. Should one victim receive more attention because her attacker happened to be undocumented? Of course not. The same holds true for other cases across the country involving students who are victims of sexual assault. Crime is crime, and all of these cases deserve a complete investigation.

The Trump administration is wrong to play the blame game with undocumented immigrants. Crime victims need support, not scapegoats.