

Livengood: In Grand Rapids, Republicans have found the migrant crime they were seeking

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The known facts surrounding the horrific slaying of Ruby Garcia read like a campaign ad Republican political consultants have been waiting to produce.

A 25-year-old Mexican national who entered the U.S. illegally not once, but twice, has been charged in the death of his girlfriend, a 25-year-old Grand Rapids woman.

Brandon Ortiz-Vite was sent back to Mexico in September 2020 by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement under the administration of then-President Donald Trump. Sometime since then, he re-entered the country illegally, according to ICE.

It's unclear if Ortiz-Vite crossed the southern border a second time during the final months of Trump's presidency or if he unlawfully immigrated back to Michigan during President Joe Biden's three-plus years in office.

Brandon Ortiz-Vite, a Mexican national who was deported from the United States in 2020, is accused of killing his girlfriend, Ruby Garcia. *Kent County*

Despite that missing context, some Republicans and political strategists are already planning to hang the circumstances of Garcia's death on Biden, fellow Democrats in Congress, and existing border policy and security procedures amid a surge in illegal crossings at the U.S.-Mexico border since Biden took office in January 2021.

The alleged gruesome details of Garcia's death — Ortiz-Vite is accused of shooting her in a car and dumping her body on the side of a freeway near downtown Grand Rapids — will almost assuredly be rolled up into TV, print and digital ads and marketed to voters in Grand Rapids suburbs such as Kentwood and Grandville and Detroit suburbs like just about every community in Macomb County.

"The massive problem at the border and corresponding media attention is now on the verge of turning these 'soccer moms' into 'security moms' in west Michigan and changing their perspective in the presidential race," John Yob, a veteran Republican strategist based in Grand Rapids, wrote this past week in a memo titled "Electoral Impact of Illegal Immigrant Murder."

The Garcia slaying is the second recent homicide in Grand Rapids involving an immigrant in the past year. Last month, a Kent County jury convicted 27-year-old Mexican national Luis Fabian Bernal-Sosa in the murder of the mother of his young child.

Prosecutors said Bernal-Sosa used an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle to kill Leah Gomez in her car in May, highlighting another Republican talking point that criminals will gain access to firearms no matter what laws are put in place to make it harder for people to get their hands on guns.

Prior to Gomez's death, Bernal-Sosa had been facing a charge of assault with intent to murder Gomez for trying to strangle her in July 2022. A judge had released Bernal-Sosa on bond but ordered him to have no contact with Gomez. Now, Bernal-Sosa is scheduled to be sentenced to prison on April 17 for Gomez's murder, according to court records.

"We have two cases now that have resulted in homicides," Kent County Prosecutor Christopher Becker said at a Tuesday press conference.

Yob and other Republican strategists see the deaths of Garcia and Gomez as something to politically seize on, despite studies showing illegal immigrants have a low homicide conviction rate. Yob argues that the localized crimes will hit home in west Michigan, fundamentally changing the dynamics of the presidential election in Trump's favor.

"Immigration is once again the most determinative issue in national electoral politics, and critical Grand Rapids, Michigan is now ground zero for the presidential race," Yob predicted in his memo.

Unsurprisingly, former President Donald Trump is scheduled to come to Grand Rapids on Tuesday to highlight what his campaign calls "Biden's border bloodbath" in what looks like a new campaign strategy centered around Garcia's killing that mirrors the focus Republicans have placed on the slaying of a University of Georgia nursing student. The man facing murder charges in Laken Riley's death is a Venezuelan national who had been previously arrested by U.S. Customs and Border Protection for unlawfully entering the country.

Grand Rapids Democrat responds

Once rock-ribbed Republican, Kent County is now a battleground in statewide elections. Burgeoning Grand Rapids is becoming markedly more progressive while Democrats have enjoyed electoral success in the suburbs, winning seats on the county commission, in the state Legislature and a congressional seat in 2022 — a first since Watergate.

U.S. Rep. Hillary Scholten is the Democrat who won that seat in west Michigan's 3rd Congressional District in 2022 over a Trump-endorsed Republican. She also has a background as an immigration lawyer, so the policy issues of border security are likely to be red hot in her bid for a second term.

Scholten said this past week that Garcia's death deserves dignity and respect and not the kind of "glory hogging for the cameras" that Republicans have been engaged in "to politically grandstand over this issue."

Hillary Scholten, a Grand Rapids Democrat seen here in November 2022, argues that Ruby Garcia's death near Grand Rapids deserves dignity and respect and not the kind of "glory hogging for the cameras" that Republicans have been engaged in "to politically grandstand over this issue." *Chris DuMond, Special To The Detroit News*

"It has been appalling to watch my Republican colleagues tripping over themselves to try to get to the news cameras to highlight that the perpetrator of this crime was an individual who was here in the United States without authorization," Scholten said in an interview. "That's an important fact; we can talk about that fact, but let's have some respect for Ruby Garcia and her family."

Republicans have hit Scholten for voting against the Secure the Border Act, which would require the Biden administration to resume construction of the border wall Trump used to get elected in 2016.

"I think we can have additional barricades," Scholten said. "But putting all of our energy and effort into constructing a wall right now is absolutely the wrong direction. ... There are all kinds of logistical barriers to getting a wall built. ... If Trump had wanted to do it, he would have done it — and I think there's a reason it didn't happen."

Scholten said she favors "practical solutions" in Senate-crafted legislation to beef up staffing at the beleaguered U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency and improve technology to help the agency detect illegal border crossings, such as the deployment of drones and filling telecommunications gaps along the southern border. She signed a discharge petition to try to get the legislation on the House floor before Republican leaders adjourned for spring break.

"(Republicans) prefer grandstanding as opposed to actually getting anything done on the border, and it's a tragedy because things like what happened here in Grand Rapids will continue to happen if we don't take action," Scholten said.

'Call attention to policy failure'

One Republican running in the 3rd District GOP primary with hopes of facing Scholten this fall contended Democrats are holding out votes over Trump's long-desired border wall, essentially scuttling any progress on adding border patrol agents in an effort to deny Trump a political victory.

"That's part of being a congressman," said Paul Hudson, an attorney seeking the Republican nomination. "You recognize you can't let the perfect be the enemy of the good."

The other Republican hopefuls in the 3rd District GOP primary include attorney entrepreneur Michael Markey Jr., attorney J. Allen Fiorletta and Army veteran Jason Ickes.

Hudson tried to take a more measured approach to the death of Garcia than some of his fellow Republicans around Michigan.

Paul Hudson, who is seeking the Republican nomination in the 3rd Congressional District to run against Rep. Hillary Scholten, D-Grand Rapids, said a high-profile crime like Ruby Garcia's death "illuminates" the failings of security at the southern border. *Sarah Rypma*

He argued a high-profile crime like Garcia's death "illuminates" the failings of security at the southern border.

"It's not politicizing or exploiting a situation by highlighting a specific incident to call attention to policy failure," Hudson said. "Is it catastrophizing or politicizing a police shooting to call for reform? Another example from this week is highlighting a freighter crashing into a bridge to see if there are things we can do differently from a safety standpoint."

Indeed, the public doesn't always understand an issue until disaster strikes. And there's evidence that public perception of immigrant crime is shifting. A new nationwide poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found the share of Americans who said there's a major risk that legal immigrants will commit crimes in the U.S. has increased to 32%, from 19% in a 2017 survey. The March 21-25 poll of 1,282 adults has a margin of error of plus-minus 3.8 percentage points.

This comes as many Republicans are actively trying to whip up illegal immigration hysteria amid a well-documented surge in U.S. Border Patrol encounters with migrants trying to get into the country.

This came to a boiling point this past week when state Rep. Matt Maddock, R-Milford, posted an image on social media of three buses at Detroit Metro Airport and claimed it was a caravan of "illegal invaders."

It turned out to be college basketball teams arriving in Detroit for the NCAA tournament's Sweet 16 games at Little Caesars Arena. Maddock, a Milford Republican who has a track record of making dubious claims, didn't back down or even admit he was wrong.

But Maddock's search for invaders in a random caravan of tour buses at the airport underscores an ongoing attempt on the right to create a narrative of an actual invasion of brown people from Central and South America.

Since Biden took office, border patrol agents have recorded 7.4 million encounters with individuals trying to illegally cross the southern border, according to U.S. Customs and Border Patrol data. This figure is not the total number of migrants who have attempted to cross the border; it's the total number of instances, meaning some individuals may have attempted to cross more than once.

The Biden-run Department of Homeland Security has been removing or deporting 3.5 times as many illegal immigrants as the Trump administration did, according to a recent Cato Institute study.

Hudson acknowledged there's always a risk in how political leaders respond to the emotionally charged issues of immigration.

But the circumstances of Ortiz-Vite being arrested in 2020, deported back to Mexico, getting back into the country and then, according to the Kent County prosecutor, confessing to the murder of his girlfriend underscores a broken immigration system, said Hudson, who is a lawyer.

"My perspective is this is not something that's rooted in xenophobia or nativism or anything else — this is a serious issue," Hudson said of the slaying of Ruby Garcia.

Politically, though, Republicans contend they have a winning issue.

Whereas abortion rights galvanized soccer moms in 2022 to vote for Democrats, Republicans are banking on immigrant crime as the issue that will motivate so-called security moms this fall to come back to the GOP.

"Moderate female voters who in the recent past have chosen to lean Democrat will now be voting in the Republican column because they care more about their communities being safe than they do any other issue," Yob said in an interview.

"The issue of community safety is far more important than it has been in any other election cycle in my lifetime," he added.