

# Los Angeles Times

## Newman officer's killing stirs a familiar fear: 'I hope to God the suspect isn't Latino'

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January 11, 2019

The procession of police cars worked its way through the Central Valley, escorting the body of Ronil Singh for his final watch in this small town.

The silver hearse swept past ads for farm equipment, campaign signs for a Republican congressman who narrowly lost his reelection bid and cows on vast dairy farms.

Word of the death of Newman police Cpl. Singh had spread quickly through Newman, population about 11,000. Many in town personally knew and grieved for the officer who, like a large number of the people he protected, was an immigrant.

The suspect in his death is also an immigrant, a Latino man living in the country illegally.

Stanislaus County Sheriff Adam Christianson, who retired this week, called the suspect a "criminal illegal alien" who didn't belong here. Soon, President Trump weighed in, declaring it was time to get tough on border security — and build the wall. Days after Singh's funeral, and amid a partial government shutdown over his efforts to obtain funding for a border wall, Trump addressed a prime-time audience from the Oval Office.

Casting immigrants in the country illegally as exporters of crime and American heartache, he cited the tragedy in Newman.

"America's heart broke the day after Christmas, when a young police officer in California was savagely murdered in cold blood by an illegal alien," Trump said. "The life of an American hero was stolen by someone who had no right to be in our country."

People in the majority-Latino town have found themselves thrust into a familiar ritual of recrimination by officials that feels at once specific and unsettlingly broad.

Mayolo Lopez, a Newman business owner who helps immigrants send money to family in their homelands, said customers repeated a refrain: "*Por causa de él, vamos a pagar nosotros.*"

Because of him, they said, we're all going to pay.

"The negative focus centers on Hispanics, on immigrants," said Lopez, a longtime Newman resident who immigrated from the Mexican state of Zacatecas. "I don't think one person should represent thousands."

The city of Newman is 68% Latino and located in Stanislaus County, which is evenly split between Republican and Democratic registered voters.

In the 10th congressional district, which encompasses all of Stanislaus County and the southern portion of San Joaquin County, Republican Rep. Jeff Denham narrowly lost his reelection bid to Democrat Josh Harder after vocally supporting Dreamers, young immigrants brought to the country illegally as children, while voting for hard-line immigration policies.

This is a part of California that rarely gets sustained attention: the mostly rural and, very often, conservative part.

The Tuesday night address was vintage Trump, who has made illegal immigration — and even the legal kind — a centerpiece of how he has sold himself as a candidate and as president. The fact that an overwhelming correlation exists between immigrants and low crime rates has not mattered.

Repeatedly, over the last few years, he has zeroed in on crimes by those in the country illegally and their victims. Kathryn Steinle in San Francisco. Mollie Tibbetts in Iowa. And now, Ronil Singh.

“Over the last several years,” Trump said, “I’ve met with dozens of families whose loved ones were stolen by illegal immigration.”

Singh was a familiar face in the city he’d patrolled since 2011. He was working an overnight shift on Christmas when someone tipped him off about an intoxicated man in a silver pickup.

About 1 a.m. on Dec. 26, he pulled over the man driving the pickup. Minutes later, Singh called out “shots fired” over the radio. The driver, later identified as Gustavo Perez Arriaga, fled the scene and Singh was taken to a hospital, where he died.

Last Friday, his wife watched in silence as an honor guard carried Singh’s flag-draped casket into the West Side Theatre in Newman.

Hundreds of residents, many wrapped in blankets, crowded onto Main Street that morning for the honor guard viewing. Blue bows decorated every tree and lamppost along the street, and flags with a thin blue line hung in the windows.

The theater marquee read: “Ronil Singh Forever Remembered.”

Yaneli Ledezma kept a close eye on her three kids, who were holding miniature American flags. Ledezma has lived in Newman for 30 years, since her father brought the family over from Mexico City.

Her family immigrated legally, she clarified, but she came that day because she wanted the community to support one another regardless of legal status.

“It was brought up that all illegal aliens were criminals – but I just want the community to know that it’s not about race,” Ledezma said. “I just want them to realize we’re all in this together.”

When Esteban Lopez heard that Singh had been shot, he called his son, who has been a Newman police officer for 10 years. Lopez had gotten to know Singh through his son, and the corporal would greet him whenever they came across each other in town.

Singh was someone who would buy food for homeless people in Newman, Lopez said, and who made it a point to get to know everyone who lived in the city.

When details surfaced about Arriaga, Lopez got a bad feeling.

“For someone from your own race to do that — it makes you feel bad,” he said. “What happened was not just.”

But Lopez, who had a blue-line flag tucked into his jacket, made it clear that the fact that Arriaga did not have papers was irrelevant to him. Arriaga was an individual, and the terrible crime he was accused of committing was not something that other Latinos, regardless of their legal status, should have to shoulder.

“We all crossed the border ... the president, the government started focusing on that, but that’s not the point,” said Lopez, who has lived in Newman for 24 years after immigrating from the Mexican state of Jalisco.

Trump has frequently tied illegal immigration to crime, drugs and terrorism. He has described the caravan of Central American immigrants that arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border as an “invasion.”

When Trump took office, a 2017 executive order called for weekly “declined detainer” reports, whose purpose was to publicize criminal actions committed by immigrants in the country illegally and focus attention on jurisdictions that were releasing immigrants from jail or after arrest. (The reports were suspended after two weeks due to errors.)

The order also led to the creation of the Victims of Immigration Crime Engagement Office, which supports victims of crimes committed by immigrants in the country illegally.

Crime data do not support Trump. A study released last year by the Cato Institute, a libertarian public policy research organization, examined 2015 data from the Texas Department of Public Safety and found that homicide conviction rates for illegal and legal immigrants were 16% and 67% below those of native-born residents, respectively.

But regardless of data, when non-Hispanic whites, both Republican and Democrat, learn an immigrant has committed a crime, they tend to assume that that person is undocumented, according to a recently published article in the American Sociological Review.

“There’s this really strong perception that undocumented immigrants are criminals,” said Ariela Schachter, an assistant professor of sociology at Washington University in St. Louis. “Each time we have one of these isolated incidents, we have lots of news coverage of it, politicians pick up on it, and it feeds further into this narrative.”

It’s similar to when violent Islamic extremists commit attacks, and Muslims — and even people mistaken for them, such as Sikhs — find themselves targeted and made into scapegoats.

“The reality is,” Schachter said, “there are small numbers of people who are members of every group in society who commit crimes, and none of us want to be judged based on their behavior.”

Last summer, college student Mollie Tibbetts was killed while jogging in her small Iowa hometown. Then authorities arrested a suspect, Cristhian Bahena Rivera, a Mexican national in the country illegally.

“We knew we were going to have a really hard time when we learned it was a Latino,” said Manny Galvez, organizer of the Iowa City Latino Festival. “Immediately, we were so scared, because we knew that many media, many politicians in Iowa were going to say, ‘Do you see? This is because of illegal immigration.’ ”

Soon after the suspect’s arrest, Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds blamed a broken immigration system that “allowed a predator like this to live in our community.”

The Latino Festival, held in the same city where Tibbetts attended college, was postponed for a month for fear that people would be targeted out of anger. Other festivals in the state were canceled altogether.

Galvez, who is originally from the Mexican state of Michoacán, recalled incidents throughout the state after Tibbetts’ death: paint on the road that read, “Deport Illegals,” robocalls paid for by a neo-Nazi podcast that declared “kill them all”; and cases of Latino students being bullied.

It is enough, Galvez said, for him to make a special prayer after any notorious crime happens:

“I hope to God the suspect isn’t Latino.”