



## **Mollie Tibbetts' death is being used to push debunked ideas about illegal immigration and violent crime**

Dave Mosher

August 22, 2018

- The body of Mollie Tibbetts, a 20-year-old sophomore at the University of Iowa who went missing in July, has reportedly been found.
- Cristhian Bahena Rivera, an immigrant to the US from Mexico, was arrested on charges of first-degree murder in connection to Tibbetts' death.
- Law-enforcement officials allegedly said Rivera is undocumented and in the country illegally, though the suspect's lawyer has disputed these claims.
- President Donald Trump and some right-leaning media outlets used the local news event to promote connections between illegal immigration and violent crime.
- However, statistics actually show illegal immigrants commit crimes at lower rates than native-born citizens.

Mollie Tibbetts, a 20-year-old sophomore at the University of Iowa, was last seen alive while jogging the evening of July 18.

This week, authorities said they believe she had been killed and her body dumped in a corn field.

On Tuesday, police arrested Cristhian Bahena Rivera as a suspect. Rivera, an immigrant from Mexico, allegedly confessed to police that he pursued Tibbetts and later concealed her body, according to a warrant filed by the Poweshiek County Sheriff's office.

Police also charged Rivera with first-degree murder, which in Iowa comes with a possible penalty of life in prison.

By Wednesday, law-enforcement officials claimed Rivera was an undocumented immigrant living in the US illegally, and that he'd somehow passed the government's E-Verify system as an eligible worker — allegedly because he used stolen identification, The Washington Post reported one law-enforcement official as saying.

The case is ongoing, and Rivera's lawyer reportedly disputed claims that his client is in the US illegally.

ABC News also reported that Rivera had worked for up to seven years at Yarrabee Farms, a company owned by Craig Lang, a former president of the Iowa Farm Bureau and "an active member" of the state's Republican Party.

At the same time, some right-leaning politicians, figureheads, and media outlets appeared eager to exploit the developments and push false narratives about illegal immigrants and violent crime.

How the right is trying to exploit Tibbetts' death

President Donald Trump — who in June 2015 falsely claimed that "many" immigrants from Mexico are rapists and drug-traffickers, and who recently approved policies that prompted the separation of thousands of migrant children — received extensive news coverage for weighing in on Tibbetts' death.

Trump on Wednesday evening posted a video saying Tibbetts was "permanently separated" from her family, using a phrase that has gained moment in right-leaning circles to describe American victims of crimes allegedly committed by undocumented immigrants.

"This is one instance of many," Trump claimed. "We have tremendous crime trying to come through the borders."

Fox News chose Tibbetts' death to dominate its news coverage on TV and online Tuesday and, in a post on Wednesday, claimed several major media outlets "ignored" the "bombshell development" regarding Rivera's alleged status.

The news broke shortly after two of Trump's closest associates were convicted of crimes, one of whom — Trump's former lawyer Michael Cohen — implicated the president in several felonies.

Meanwhile, Kris Kobach, the Secretary of State in Kansas and a Republican candidate for governor there, reportedly said of Tibbetts' death: "Every crime committed by an illegal alien is a crime that should never have occurred and would never have occurred if the illegal alien were not in our country."

What is implied in such statements is that fixing illegal immigration in the US will, by extension, effectively fix the country's violent crime rates.

This would be a compelling idea — if the best evidence available didn't show it to be very misleading, if not false.

What statistics actually show about crime and immigration

No set of data is perfect, and organizations that seek to restrict immigration have identified several issues with statistics regarding criminality and immigrant status.

However, multiple studies using federal and state data found no suggestion that rising immigration rates leads to more violent crime.

The charts below come from data in a December 2016 study published in the Journal of Ethnicity in Criminal Justice. They show that US saw a 118% increase in its overall immigrant population (documented and undocumented) from 1980 through 2016.

Yet during this same period, the rate of violent crimes — homicide, rape, robbery, and assault, according to the FBI — fell by 36% to about 386 incidents per 100,000 residents.

A study published in February by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, further rejects the idea that illegal immigration is tied to increases in rates of violent crime.

The study looked at conviction data in Texas — which has the second-largest population of foreign-born residents — for native-born, undocumented immigrant, and legal immigrant residents.

The research found that native-born residents were most likely to commit and be convicted of crimes, while illegal immigrants saw a conviction rate that was 56% lower. Legal immigrants appeared to be the most law-abiding, with 86% fewer convictions than native-born Texans.

There's also a Criminology journal study from March which examines states' reported rates of violent crime and undocumented immigration. From 1990 through 2014, those data found a negative correlation — meaning that the more a population is comprised of undocumented immigrants, the lower the violent crime rate seemed to be.

So while tragic stories of murder are worthy of public attention and the victims of justice, they are still single trees in a forest of data. These recent studies encompassing large data sets suggest that increased immigration — both legal and illegal — is not tied to higher rates of violent crime, and in fact appears correlated with its decrease.