

Georgia student's death emerges as touchstone in immigration battle

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The death of a Georgia student has taken center stage in Washington's battles over immigration, as former President Trump and his allies lean into the issue to attack President Biden and Democrats over the border.

Trump, whose signature issue is border security, has repeatedly criticized Biden's policies over the death of 22-year-old Laken Riley.

Riley, a nursing student at Augusta University's Athens campus, was found dead last Thursday after her roommate reported that she did not return from a run in the wooded area of the University of Georgia campus. A 26-year-old Venezuelan citizen named Jose Ibarra was arrested in connection to her death and charged with murder.

U.S. Customs and Border Enforcement has said Ibarra entered the country illegally in September 2022 near El Paso, Texas, from Mexico and was released for further processing after being detained.

"We have a new category of migrant crime, and it's going to be more severe than violent crime and crime as we know it," Trump said during his speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference last week.

Democrats have criticized Republicans for linking Riley's death to Biden's handling of the border, arguing that the issues of immigration and crime should not be conflated.

A [series of Cato Institute papers](#) have found that immigrants – including undocumented immigrants – commit murders at a lower rate than native-born Americans.

Rep. [Katie Porter](#) (D-Calif.) said a "sense of outrage" is normal following violent crime, but it shouldn't change broader policy.

"I think the important thing to focus on is any one instance shouldn't shape our overall immigration policy, which has so many different facets, including economic choices about what workers to allow and how to create prosperity in America," she said during an interview on CNN's "Erin Burnett OutFront" on Monday.

The White House and Democrats also have been blistering in criticizing Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) and other Republicans for rejecting a bipartisan Senate bill aimed at tightening border security.

Republicans opposed to that compromise argued it didn't go far enough, but the White House is leaning into the argument that Trump and the GOP, by politicizing the border bill, have actually prevented the government from taking steps to tighten security at the border.

Trump and Republicans see a political advantage in highlighting Riley's death as emblematic of what they see as chaos at the border.

Both Trump and Biden visited spots on the border on Thursday, but the former president noted that he called Riley's parents the day before and directly blamed Biden for Ibarra entering the country.

"I spoke to her parents yesterday. They're incredible people that are devastated beyond belief," he said.

Numerous GOP officials, from allies of Trump such as Sen. Tim Scott (R-S.C.) to GOP officials who have clashed with the former president, such as Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, have linked the student's death to immigration policies they say are too lenient.

Kemp, who had a falling out with Trump over the governor's opposition to overturning the results of the 2020 election in the state, argued that the country has a "nightmare" with "mass migration."

"That is inexcusable in any absence of any real effort by the Biden administration to step up and address this crisis, as they continue to ignore the calls for meaningful policy change that governors like me had made for well over two years," he said.

The Georgia case gives Trump a dramatic story to point to, even as the investigation into exactly what happened continues.

"Any time that you can put a face, especially a child or a young person's face, and attach it to a policy, whether it's good or bad, it's going to have a much more outsized impact," said Georgia-based Republican strategist Jay Williams. "And the more personal you can make it, the more effective it becomes."

GOP strategist Brady Smith said the incident will make for an "extremely effective" attack for Republicans.

"It's going to be that inflection point where this is going to be the one that especially stands out, and everything else is going to harken back to Laken Riley," he said.

Polls have shown immigration overtaking the economy as the top issue on voters' minds. A Gallup poll released Tuesday showed it ranked as most important for the first time since 2019.

Biden is seeking to go on offense himself on the border. It's one reason he went to the border on Thursday, and it's reflected in the White House attacks on Johnson over the border bill.

A senior Democratic operative argued that the assertion Biden is to blame for the killing is an “absurdity.” This operative said Kemp is more responsible for the incident as the governor overseeing the people of the state.

“I didn’t know Joe Biden was a beat cop in Athens, Ga.,” the operative said. “Why is it that anytime anything happens with illegal immigrants that they have no responsibility? Why is it that they have no responsibility for crime?”

Republicans have often argued that allowing migrants to continue across the border only increases the chances of crime or potentially an attack on U.S. soil.

However, several studies have found those who enter the country illegally are not more likely to commit other crimes than U.S. citizens.

Cato analyzed Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) figures because that agency keeps track of immigration status for people arrested and convicted of crimes in the state. DPS’s figures from 2015 to 2019 consistently show a lower murder rate among undocumented immigrants.

“Few people are murderers, and illegal immigrants are statistically less likely to be murderers. Still, some illegal immigrants do commit homicide, and that statistical fact is no comfort to victims and their families. More importantly, nobody should expect the statistics to comfort individuals affected by violent crime,” wrote Alex Nowrasteh, author of the Cato papers.

Williams, the GOP strategist, said the specific details of the case further add to Republicans’ argument, given that Ibarra was previously arrested in New York City a few months ago.

ICE has said Ibarra was charged with acting in a manner to injure a child less than 17 and a motor vehicle license violation, but New York officials released him before immigration officials could detain him.

Democrats have pointed to Rep. Tom Suozzi’s victory in the special election for New York’s 3rd congressional district last month as an example of how they can still win races that are tied to the issue of immigration.

Suozzi flipped a seat for Democrats this month following a successful campaign in which he made his position on immigration clear and challenged his Republican opponent for her opposition to the bipartisan Senate border bill that Trump also opposed.

“We need to do what Tom Suozzi did, which is to address the issue head on,” the operative said.