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An Iowa student went missing. Now her death is at the center of the immigration debate.

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BROOKLYN, Iowa — Mollie Tibbetts went for a jog last month and never came home, setting off a search that ended in tragedy this week when authorities said they had recovered her body.

Officials said they charged Cristhian Bahena Rivera, a 24-year-old Mexican national and farmworker, with first-degree murder. They also identified River as an undocumented immigrant — something his lawyer disputes — thrusting the case into the center of the country's knotted debate over immigration.

President Trump and the White House quickly seized on the tragedy, which continues to shock and confound people in the community. Trump has falsely claimed that undocumented immigrants are more likely to commit crime. On Wednesday night, he posted a video saying that Tibbetts “is now permanently separated from her family,” language evoking the furor over his administration’s widely criticized policy of separating thousands of migrant children from their families.

At the case’s center is Tibbetts, a psychology student at the University of Iowa whose disappearance July 18 set off a weeks-long search. Investigators have not said how she was killed or what happened in the moments after she disappeared while jogging, but they say that after confessing to her killing Monday, Rivera led police to her body in a field.

Rivera’s immigration status became a focal point and helped draw a new surge of media attention to the story, which had been in the news as the search for Tibbetts grew. Law enforcement officials and his former employer said Rivera was in the country illegally and used a stolen identification to satisfy a federal background check at the farm where he worked.

His attorney, Allan M. Richards, said Wednesday in a motion asking for a gag order that Rivera was in the country legally, adding that his employer had verified Rivera’s status. Richards provided no evidence to back up the assertion in the motion and could not immediately be reached for comment.

Dane Lang — manager of Yarrabee Farms, where Rivera worked — said in a news conference that the 24-year-old had provided a state-issued photo identification and a Social Security card when he applied for a job nearly four years ago. Those documents were false, Lang said.

He said Yarrabee Farms did not use the government's E-Verify system to vet Rivera. Instead, the farm used a program connected to a Social Security Administration database, which didn't flag any problems. Lang would not disclose the name that Rivera used to get a job.

In an interview, Dane and Craig Lang said Rivera had worked at the farm for nearly four months. They said that Rivera has a young daughter and that his main job on the farm was cleaning the cattle stalls.

The Lang family has been getting threats, they said, something they attribute to "trolls" rather than "local people." Someone threatened to kill Dane Lang's dog, so he sent it away from the house to live with a family friend for "safe keeping."

He said employees didn't notice a difference in Rivera's behavior after Tibbetts went missing. "This guy stayed around for 35 days after he did this," he said. "Nobody noticed a difference."

So far, investigators have not found anything indicating that Tibbetts and Rivera knew each other before the attack, Mitch Mortvedt, assistant director of Iowa's Division of Criminal Investigation, said in an interview Wednesday.

The area where Tibbetts went running is a narrow farm road leading out of town, Mortvedt said, and investigators are looking at whether her killer noticed her by chance or had seen her there on previous occasions.

Rivera was taken into custody after agreeing to an interview with investigators, according to Mortvedt, who said state officials have been assisted by the FBI and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations division.

Still, some people in the city of Brooklyn — home to fewer than 1,400 people — were shocked to learn they were connected to both the woman who went missing and the man charged with killing her.

Chloe Reding, 19, was good friends with Tibbetts in junior high; they drifted apart in high school but became close since graduating.

"Brooklyn is so small, for fun we just go and drive around," said Reding, a nursing assistant. "Some of us would pack into a car and cruise around, and Mollie would go with us."

Tibbetts was active in a group chat with Reding and some of their friends, but she went quiet while she was missing, which began to cause concern. When Reding turned on the televised news conference, she was shocked to realize she recognized the man arrested for the crime.

"I was watching it with my mom and I kind of freaked out," Reding recalled of the moment she saw police identify the suspect as Rivera. "I was like, 'Oh my god, I know him. I'm pretty sure I'm friends with him on Facebook.'"

Reding said she "didn't personally know him" but added, "It's just small town Brooklyn, you know?"

In statements to investigators, Rivera said he spotted Tibbetts jogging and drove past her several times. The Chevrolet Malibu he was driving appeared in and out of surveillance footage from a camera aimed at the street.

“It seemed that he followed her and seemed to be drawn to her on that particular day,” Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation Agent Rick Rahn told reporters. “And for whatever reason, he chose to abduct her.”

What happened next, Rivera told authorities, is blocked from his memory, something he said happens when he gets upset or angry. The next thing he recalled, he told investigators, was being inside the car and finding a headphone earpiece in his lap that did not belong to him. That prompted him to open the trunk, where he saw Tibbetts bleeding from the head.

Rivera told authorities he carried Tibbetts’s body into an isolated cornfield, where he covered her with stalks and walked away.

An ICE representative said the agency lodged an immigration detainer on Rivera after his arrest, so if he is ever released, he would be deported to Mexico.

Trump referenced the case in a rally Tuesday, and in the video released Wednesday, he linked the tragedy to his desire for a border wall and tougher immigration policies. The message was all the more striking because it came just a day after police confirmed Tibbetts’s death and a day after last year’s massacres in Las Vegas and Sutherland Springs, Tex. At the time, Trump and his press secretary both responded to questions about the violence by saying it was too soon to discuss policy changes.

The day after 58 people were gunned down in Las Vegas, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said “it would be premature for us to discuss policy when we don’t know all the facts.” On Wednesday, Sanders said Tibbetts’s death was “an unfortunate reminder of why we need to strengthen our broken immigration laws.”

Republican pollster Chris Wilson, who is working on several battleground Senate races, said the case “gets to the basic point Republicans have been making” that the immigration system needs to get stricter, adding, “Immigration as an issue is a winner for Republicans when we make it about security and crime.”

Statistics show that immigrants do not commit violent crimes at a higher rate than people born in the United States. In a February study published by the libertarian Cato Institute and examining 2015 criminal data in Texas, people born here were much more likely to be convicted of a crime than immigrants in the country legally or illegally.

Many conservative news outlets and allies of the president similarly highlighted Tibbetts’s death rather than the other news that emerged Tuesday — the conviction of Trump’s former campaign chairman in one federal court and the guilty plea entered by his former attorney in another.

According to the news site Axios, former House speaker Newt Gingrich, a Trump ally, made the argument for focusing on Iowa explicit. Axios reported that he had emailed a journalist there to

ensure they were covering Tibbetts's death, saying, "If Mollie Tibbetts is a household name by October, Democrats will be in deep trouble."

Tibbetts's family released a statement after her death was confirmed, asking to be "allowed the time to process our devastating loss and share our grief in private."

"Please remember, Evil comes in EVERY color," Tibbetts's aunt Billie Jo Calderwood said in a statement.

Reding, Tibbetts's friend, said that she had seen outrage building online over claims that Rivera is undocumented, but that she didn't focus on it.

"For some people, they do view it as him being illegal," she said. "For me, I just see it any race, any sexuality, any person could have done this. It doesn't matter if he's illegal or black or white. A lot of people are saying 'Build the wall' and all that, but I don't believe that's the problem necessarily. Bad people are just bad people."