



Mollie Tibbetts Killing: Immigrants And The Making Of Boogeymen

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Only hours after authorities announced the arrest of 24-year-old Cristhian Bahena Rivera in the killing of University of Iowa student Mollie Tibbetts, President Trump turned the tragedy into a rallying cry for one of his core policies. He has ramped up calls for hardline immigration reform, citing the 20-year-old's death as emblematic of dangers immigrants pose to the country.

Rivera is from Mexico. He has been in the country for four, maybe seven years. Department of Homeland Security officials say he is here illegally.

"You heard about today with the illegal alien coming in, very sadly, from Mexico and you saw what happened to that incredible, beautiful young woman?" Trump said at a rally in West Virginia Tuesday. "Should have never happened. Illegally in our country."

Iowa's governor chimed in, calling Rivera "a predator" and blaming Tibbetts' killing on a "broken immigration system." The governor of Texas tweeted Tibbetts' death is "why so many Americans are angry about sanctuary cities" and why his state banned them.

Together with other Republicans, the effort is on to make Rivera the Willie Horton of the 2018 midterms.

BUT DO IMMIGRANTS COMMIT MORE CRIMES?

Real life, of course, is far more complex. Study after study shows immigrants are not only less likely to commit crimes than their U.S.-born peers, they contribute vitally to state economies.

One study by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, found that even when people detained for nonviolent immigration violations were included, people in the United States illegally were still 44 percent less likely to be incarcerated than U.S. born residents.

In politics, immigration hardliners cherry-pick statistics from a vast number of databases to justify harsh enforcement policies and crackdowns, according to Alex Nowrasteh, the immigration policy analyst at Cato's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity and one of the authors of the study.

"But before America goes down this draconian path, it is vital that it gets the facts straight, he wrote in a piece on the Cato site. "Taking amateur analyses or government spin at face value will hurt peaceful and hardworking immigrants without making Americans safer."

IOWA, AMERICA, AND THE NEED FOR IMMIGRANT LABOR

Republicans couldn't have orchestrated a more perfect tableau of campaign optics to illustrate their claim of widespread crime by people living in the country illegally.

Tibbetts was a quintessential "Iowa girl" with wholesome good looks. Her friends and family call her smart and hard-working, kind, loving and authentic. Even her hometown is part of it. Known as the "Community of Flags," Brooklyn flies oversized flags of all 50 states so high in the sky they can be seen from Interstate 80 about halfway between Des Moines and Iowa City.

For the president, the Tibbetts case comes at a particularly opportune time, at least momentarily pivoting attention away from two bombshells — the conviction of his ex-campaign manager on eight felony counts and the guilty plea by his former personal attorney Michael Cohen to eight felony counts, including two campaign-finance violations that directly implicate Trump in a felony conspiracy.

Still, the president's fiery rhetoric around the topic ignores how desperately Iowa and the rest of America need immigrant labor.

In Iowa, immigrants contributed more than \$1 billion a year in local, state and federal taxes in 2014, including \$36.7 million million in state and local taxes paid by undocumented immigrants. And despite Trump's characterization of immigrants as "thugs" and "not the best," demographic studies show the opposite. In Iowa, where more than 25,000 legal residents live with at least one undocumented family member, immigrants are slightly more likely than U.S.-born residents to have a college or advanced degree, 27 percent versus 26.8 percent as a share of the population.

The labor shortage is especially acute in Iowa, where a 2.7 percent unemployment rate makes it harder now for employers to fill jobs than it has been in nearly two decades. The state is in the midst of what the Wall Street Journal calls a "labor plight" — too many jobs and too few people — and the only way to address it is by attracting people from elsewhere, Iowa State University economist David Swenson told the Des Moines Register.

Moreover, U.S. Department of Labor data shows that even if every unemployed person in a 12-state Midwest region took a job, employers would still be unable to fill 180,000 positions.

In the agricultural sector especially, the owners of Iowa's pig, dairy and poultry factory farms are turning more and more to immigrant labor.

"We're the No. 1 egg-producing state, and I can't talk to the egg producers without this being a problem," Iowa Sen. Chuck Grassley, a Republican, told the Associated Press. "With big dairy farms — and they're getting bigger all the time in Iowa — but even in smaller dairy farms, you hear it. You hear it in the industrial hog production that we have, and then you also hear it from the processing of our agricultural products."

Fellow Republican Sen. Joni Ernst noted, "A lot of our agricultural industry does rely on many laborers, and we just don't have enough of that labor pool in the state of Iowa."

State Sen. David Johnson, who worked on an Iowa dairy farm for 20 years, told the AP Iowa's dairy and meatpacking industries could not survive without immigrant labor. He said improvements must be made in worker vetting to ensure that documents and identities are not faked or stolen.

"It's got to be a comprehensive approach that takes as much of these things in as possible," he said. "Set something up so everybody understands what the rules are because we have to maintain ourselves as a nation of laws."

He said he's known many hardworking Hispanic employees at dairies seeking only a better life for their families.

According to the Labor Department's most recent National Agriculture Workers Survey, about 47 percent of hired crop farm workers in the U.S. lack proper authorization to work here. The most recent data available was released in December 2016 based on surveys from 2013 to 2014. The survey showed that 68 percent of hired farmer workers were born in Mexico.

IS RIVERA LEGALLY IN U.S. AFTER ALL?

In an ironic twist, the dairy farm where Rivera earned his living, co-owned by prominent Iowa Republican Craig Lang, didn't check his legal status with the federal E-Verify database of I-9 forms and tax records of employees across the country.

An active member of the Republican Party, Lang for many years headed the Iowa Farm Bureau, a farm policy lobbying group that wields tremendous power at the Republican-controlled statehouse. Lang also served two years as president of the Iowa Board of Regents, which oversees the state's public universities, and in June narrowly lost the Republican primary for state agriculture secretary.

Yarrabee Farms officials on Wednesday walked back an earlier statement that said Rivera was an employee in good standing who passed the federal background check, saying they hadn't used E-Verify and Rivera had given a false name. The Des Moines Register reported the E-Verify government archive shows no record of a participating farm in Brooklyn, Iowa

Rivera's attorney says he was legally working in Iowa, despite assertions to the contrary by the government. Tama attorney Allen Richards claimed in court documents filed Wednesday that Lang "supports Cristhian's right to be in this jurisdiction and for the government to support any other idea of status publicly flies in the face of such statement."

Rivera has been charged with one count of first-degree murder in Tibbetts' death. In Iowa, the charge carries a mandatory life sentence without the possibility of parole. A judge on Wednesday set his bond at \$5 million.

"LOST AMONGST POLITICS"

The discovery of Tibbetts' body came during the week she was to have started her junior year as a psychology major at the University of Iowa. Her family asked for the privacy to grieve and process her death.

In a statement, they expressed gratitude to people from around the world for "the outpouring of love and support that has been shared in Mollie's name" and said "we know many of you will join us as we continue to carry Mollie in our hearts forever."

What they didn't say in the statement was anything about immigration.

However, Tibbetts' aunt Billie Jo Calderwood told CNN it's wrong to use her death for political leverage and she doesn't want "Mollie's memory to get lost amongst politics."

"It's not about race," Calderwood said. "It's about people joining together to do good."

A second cousin, Samantha Lucas, told CNN she didn't know Tibbetts well, but what she does know is that "she would not want this to be used as fuel against undocumented immigrants."

The network reached out to Lucas after she tweeted that her "whole family is hurting right now," responding to tweet framing the tragedy around immigration politics.

"You're not helping," Lucas tweeted. "You're despicable and this is so far from the loving and kind soul that Mollie was."