

# Richmond Times-Dispatch

## **Marsha Mercer column: Brutal murder tells us nothing about immigrants**

Marsha Mercer

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We shouldn't even know her name.

Mollie Tibbetts should be one of millions of promising young women back in college this month, far from the media glare.

But hers is a household name and her picture as familiar as a film star's — for the most awful of reasons.

On July 18, Mollie went out for a run in Brooklyn, Iowa, population 1,400, and vanished.

She was 20 years old, 5-feet-2 and 120 pounds, a psychology major at the University of Iowa. Friends said she had no enemies.

For more than a month, the FBI, state and local police searched intensively. A reward of nearly \$400,000 was offered. Finally, security camera videos given to authorities captured a black Chevy Malibu driving up and down the street while Mollie jogged.

Her body was found last week in a cornfield outside Brooklyn. A farmworker named Cristhian Rivera, 24, confessed to kidnapping her and led authorities to the body, which was covered with cornstalks, police said. Charged with kidnapping and first degree murder, he is being held in jail on \$5 million cash bond.

Something else about Rivera led most of the news coverage: He's a Mexican in the country illegally.

President Donald Trump, who seizes every opportunity to link undocumented immigrants and criminal behavior, said the crime "should've never happened." On that, we all can agree.

Predictably, Trump blamed "the illegal alien" from Mexico and called U.S. immigration laws "such a disgrace."

He urged voters to elect more Republicans who will help him tighten immigration laws and stop the flow of criminals illegally entering the country.

Democrats want “open borders,” he said. It’s a familiar Trump refrain — and simply untrue.

Many Democrats oppose Trump’s border wall as ineffective, but they favor bipartisan legislation that would strengthen border security with technology and collaboration between local law enforcement and Border Patrol as well as increase the efficiency of immigration courts.

No matter, the monstrous killing was turned into a political talking point.

“As Iowans, we are heartbroken, and we are angry. We are angry that a broken immigration system allowed a predator like this to live in our community, and we will do all we can to bring justice to Mollie’s killer,” Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, a Republican in a tough re-election contest, said in a statement.

Rivera’s employers at Yarrabee Farms say they thought he was in the country legally and were shocked by his involvement.

When Rivera started work at the dairy operation four years ago, he presented an out-of-state ID and Social Security number which checked out through the Social Security Administration. It’s now known the ID was not in his real name.

The farm is partly owned by Craig Lang, a prominent Republican who ran unsuccessfully in the GOP primary in June for Iowa secretary of agriculture.

As sad and heartbreaking as the tragedy is, the emphasis on Rivera’s immigration status is unfortunate, said Mark Stringer, a Unitarian Universalist minister who is executive director of the ACLU of Iowa.

“It’s important to remind ourselves that, sadly, people of all races and levels of citizenship commit crimes,” he said in a statement.

Trump often claims illegal immigrants commit more crime than native-born Americans, but no nationwide statistics back him up.

Many studies of smaller samples find undocumented immigrants have lower rates of crime than native-born Americans.

Immigration policy analyst Alex Nowrasteh of the libertarian Cato Institute analyzed 2015 Texas data and found the rate of convictions per 100,000 illegal immigrants was 16 percent lower than that of native-born Americans.

He suggests that trend likely holds nationwide.

More than a century of social science research shows immigrants are less likely to commit serious crimes or be incarcerated than the native-born, says Walter Ewing of the American Immigration Council, a nonprofit that advocates for immigrants.

Research won't stop Trump or other politicians from using fear of crime and immigrants on the campaign trail. But we all should listen to Mollie Tibbetts' aunt Billie Jo Calderwood, who wrote on Facebook:

“Please remember, Evil comes in EVERY color.”