

THE SCARLET & BLACK

Staff Editorial: Death of Mollie Tibbetts Result of Violence Against Women, Not Immigration

August 30, 2018

The murder of Mollie Tibbetts, Poweshiek County native and University of Iowa student, has been used to spark an immigration debate fueled by white nationalist and white supremacist rhetoric. The S&B staff feels that the media and political focus on immigration in this case is independent of the events that occurred; rather, her death is emblematic of the prevalence of violence against women in the United States.

Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds said in a Twitter statement that, “As Iowans, ... we are angry that a broken immigration system allowed a predator to live in our community.” Donald Trump said at a West Virginia rally, “You heard about today, with the illegal alien coming in from, very sadly, from Mexico. And you saw what happened to that incredible, beautiful young woman.” While public figures’ statements further an anti-immigration agenda and obscure Tibbetts herself, the media coverage also unnecessarily highlights Rivera’s undocumented status.

The Des Moines Register, Iowa’s largest newspaper, published an article on the “facts regarding Cristhian Rivera’s immigration status.” Another headline reads, “Mollie Tibbetts’ death put a spotlight on undocumented immigrants. But can Iowa’s economy thrive without them?” While the second article expresses a pro-immigration sentiment, both focus primarily on Rivera’s immigration status. Immigration status, however, is not what makes a murderer.

A variety of studies show that immigration is not correlated with increases in violent crime. An April 2018 study by Alex Nowrasteh with the Cato Institute found that crime rates in Texas in 2015 were much higher for native-born citizens than for immigrants. The journal, *Criminology*, published a report by Michael Light and Ty Miller in March that looked at the effect of undocumented immigrants specifically on crime rates, and found that there was no correlation between large populations of undocumented immigrants and increases in violent crime.

As this research shows, the narrative encouraged by politicians such as Reynolds and Trump in which immigrants are depicted as predators lacks statistical evidence.

Sandi Tibbetts Murphy, Tibbetts’ cousin, challenged political narratives that made Tibbetts’ death about immigration. Tibbetts Murphy began in a public Facebook post, “Especially for those of you who did not know her in life, you do not get to usurp Mollie and her legacy for your racist, false narrative now that she is no longer with us. We hereby reclaim our Mollie.”

Tibbetts Murphy also wrote how she would like the national narrative to shift from “racist fear-mongering” to “toxic masculinity”: “Our national discussion needs to be about the violence committed in our society. ... We must be willing to address the way we raise our boys and young men, so that violence is not a part of their response to this world. ... Mollie’s death is further example of the toxic masculinity that exists in our society.”

Other members of Tibbetts' family have come out with similar statements, including her aunt, Billie Jo Calderwood, her father, Rob Tibbetts, and another cousin, Samantha Lucas, challenging racist sentiments, which Lucas refers to as "political propaganda."

However, local media coverage has not yet refocused. While the Register has published opinion pieces connecting Tibbetts' death to violence against women, there is only one news story that makes this connection with the headline reading, "Tibbetts relative decries 'racist, false narrative.'" The story is a 183 word piece almost exclusively consisting of quotes from Tibbetts Murphy's Facebook statement. Coverage has instead consistently pointed to Rivera's immigration status.

One way that the "toxic masculinity" that Tibbetts Murphy describes manifests itself is in violence against women. According to a report of findings from the National Violence Against Women survey, violence against women is predominantly perpetuated by men. Adult women in the United States are 10 times more likely than men to be raped. Roughly 92 percent of women who were physically assaulted after the age of 18 were assaulted by men.

The disproportionate number of women threatened with violence in American society is exemplified by Tibbetts' case. Rivera's arrest warrant shows that he told police he pursued a woman in his car and on foot, and that when she took out her phone, she said it was to call the police. Rivera then told police he "got mad" and "blocked his memory." He claims to remember disposing of her body in a cornfield.

This progression is representative of a common narrative in which a woman denies a man and is harmed as a consequence. Violence committed by men against women is what the public should be talking about, rather than "predatory" immigrants. This violence exists independent of one's immigration status.

While Tibbetts' death does contribute to a political discussion about violence against women, she needs to be remembered as more than a political figurehead. We must remember who Tibbetts was in life, and let her family and friends mourn in peace, instead of leaving them with the burden of engaging in the irrelevant debate concerning immigration.

The S&B calls for local and national media outlets to follow Tibbetts Murphy's request that we refocus on how toxic masculinity leads to violence in our society. Politicians' statements and media coverage has served to distance the debate from the real issue — the tragic consequences of this country's patriarchal imbalance of power. The misplaced immigration narrative uses her death as a political tool, and in the process Mollie Tibbetts is lost again.