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# *Killing of Mollie Tibbetts in Iowa Inflames Immigration Debate*

**By Ann Klein and Mitch Smith**

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BROOKLYN, Iowa — Television cameras had for weeks swarmed this small town in Iowa farm country as the police looked for Mollie Tibbetts, the college student who went for a jog last month and never returned home.

After hundreds of tips and interviews, and after countless prayer vigils and donations to a reward fund, investigators got a tragic break in their case on Tuesday. A body believed to be Ms. Tibbetts's was found buried beneath cornstalks on a farm outside town. The authorities charged Cristhian Rivera, who they said is an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, with first-degree murder in her death.

President Trump and other conservatives quickly cited the arrest of Mr. Rivera, who worked on a farm owned by a prominent Republican family, as proof of the flawed immigration system and lax border security the president has long warned about.

Iowa's Republican governor, Kim Reynolds, released a statement saying she was "angry that a broken immigration system allowed a predator like this to live in our community." And the White House Twitter account posted a video with the emotional accounts of people whose family members had been killed by immigrants who entered the country illegally.

"Mollie Tibbetts, an incredible young woman, is now permanently separated from her family," Mr. Trump said Wednesday evening in a Twitter message, a clear reference to his much criticized policy that tried to deter illegal border crossings by separating migrant

families.

“A person came in from Mexico illegally and killed her. We need the wall, we need our immigration laws changed, we need our border laws changed, we need Republicans to do it because the Democrats aren’t going to do it,” he said.



Mr. Rivera’s lawyer, Allan M. Richards, disputed the government’s claims that his client was in the country illegally and said Mr. Trump’s comments highlighting his immigration status could prejudice future jurors. Mr. Richards said his client, who was ordered held on \$5 million cash bond during a brief court appearance on Wednesday, came to the United States at age 17, had the equivalent of a middle school education and had worked for years tending to dairy cows.

“For sad and sorry Trump to say that they’re illegal without even giving them a hearing is totally wrong,” Mr. Richards said in an interview after the court hearing.

Mr. Rivera’s arrest was a lead story for much of Tuesday evening and Wednesday on several conservative-leaning news websites, and was touted as a boost to the Trump administration’s argument for a more hard-line stance on immigration. The arrest came in the same week that an undocumented immigrant from Mexico was charged with second-degree murder in a Minnesota case.

Mr. Trump is expected to continue to push immigration as a signature issue in courting voters ahead of November’s midterm elections. In Iowa, Republicans are defending two congressional seats that Democrats have high hopes of winning, and Governor Reynolds is seeking a full term in her post.

The discovery of Ms. Tibbetts’s body devastated her hometown, Brooklyn, where she had returned for the summer after studying psychology at the University of Iowa. After weeks of anxiously awaiting news, some residents said Wednesday that they were frustrated to learn that the suspect in her death was in the country illegally.

“Mollie would still be alive today if we would just enforce the laws we already have in place,” said Kerry Traver, 73, who lives in nearby Marengo. “Here illegally and nobody’s doing anything about it.”

Rusty Clayton, owner of True Value Hardware in Brooklyn, said customers in the small town — where doors are seldom locked — have been coming in to have house keys made ever since news broke that Ms. Tibbetts was missing. But he said the town views its Hispanic residents not as outsiders, but as members of the community.

“Their kids go to our school,” Mr. Clayton said. “One was homecoming king, and another of the students has been valedictorian of the class. The kids here well respect them and interact with them.”

Immigration has long been a divisive issue in Iowa, where farmers depend on foreign-born laborers to tend their crops and livestock, but where an influx of Hispanic residents has exposed tensions in some cities. While Iowa politicians from both major parties offered condolences to the Tibbetts family, Republicans were more likely to note Mr. Rivera's immigration status in their statements.



Cristhian Bahena Rivera  
Iowa Department of Public Safety, via  
Associated Press

Outside the state, advocates for immigrants lamented that Ms. Tibbetts's death was being used for political gains.

“It is unfortunate that lawmakers are politicizing this absolutely awful tragedy,” said Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, an advocacy organization. “One would wish that cooler heads would prevail and that we could have a rational, humane conversation about immigration policy.”

Though statistics show that native-born Americans commit crimes at higher rates than immigrants, Mr. Trump has long pushed a narrative that suggests otherwise.

The White House regularly sends out emails reporting the latest crimes committed by undocumented immigrants. “Ethiopian human rights abuser arrested for fraudulently obtaining U.S. citizenship,” one such missive announced last week.

In June, Mr. Trump gathered at the White House a group of so-called “angel families” who had lost loved ones in crimes committed by “criminal illegal aliens” — victims of Salvadoran gangs, heroin overdoses, robbers, convicts released from prison but not deported.

“These are the stories that Democrats and people that are weak on immigration, they don’t want to discuss, they don’t want to hear, they don’t want to see, they don’t want to talk about,” Mr. Trump said in greeting the families.

In recent campaign rallies, like one Tuesday night in which he alluded to Ms. Tibbetts, Mr. Trump has riled up crowds by disparaging immigrants and stoking fear about them, saying that he would send them “the hell back” to their countries of origin. And he has constantly reiterated his belief that a vote for a Democratic candidate in the midterms would be a vote for open borders. (Legislation shows that Democrats support border security measures, but not the wall that Mr. Trump has promised his supporters.)

Mr. Rivera’s arrest also raised questions about the process companies use to check whether job applicants are allowed to work in the United States. Mr. Rivera’s employer, Yarrabee Farms, said initially that the federal government had cleared Mr. Rivera for work through its well-known E-Verify system. But on Wednesday evening, Yarrabee corrected itself and said he had been checked through a different Social Security Administration database.

Both systems are vulnerable to fraud when applicants present valid documents that belong to someone else, experts said.

“If I’m using your number and your name, that’s going to get through,” said Julie Myers Wood, who led Immigration and Customs Enforcement during George W. Bush’s presidency. She said unauthorized job seekers were using stolen documents to thwart E-Verify even during her tenure.

But Ms. Myers Wood said the Social Security database was not intended to check employment eligibility, and that the farm was “not in as strong a position” as it would have been had it used E-Verify.

Federal officials appeared to have reviewed Mr. Rivera’s immigration status and said they had placed an immigration hold on him, requiring him to be turned over to immigration authorities should he clear state criminal proceedings. He is “an illegal alien from Mexico,” said Shawn Neudauer, a spokesman for ICE.

A senior homeland security official, who spoke anonymously because he was not authorized to discuss the case, said Mr. Rivera appears to have used stolen documentation in order to pass the federal government identity check at the farm where he had worked for the past several years.

Dane Lang, a spokesman for Yarrabee Farms, said Mr. Rivera provided a state-issued photo identification card and a social security card. “Our practice is to take a second, enhanced step to verify the identification,” he said in a statement, screening employees through the Social Security Administration.

“We ran that information through the verification service, and it came back ‘verified,’” he said. “That means that the exact name, birthdate and exact social security number were all cross referenced and corroborated.”

Over the last 24 hours, Mr. Lang added, company officials learned that their verification had not been adequate. “Our employee was not who he said he was.”

Ann Klein reported from Brooklyn, and Mitch Smith from Chicago. Ron Nixon and Katie Rogers contributed reporting from Washington, and Miriam Jordan from Los Angeles. Susan C. Beachy contributed research.

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