

# [***UGA students describe anguish and anxiety over safety concerns after the grisly killing of a sorority member on campus***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BF0-21P1-DY7V-G001-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; The brutal killing of a [*beloved former student*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/25/us/uga-augusta-university-student-killing-monday) on the University of Georgia campus has enveloped many students with grief and a shattered sense of security - all while the suspect's immigration status has reignited border policy debates.

Laken Hope Riley, an Augusta University nursing student, was found dead Thursday after jogging near a lake at UGA, where she attended school until last year. Investigators said the 22-year-old was attacked and disfigured by the suspect, who allegedly dragged and hid her body in a secluded area.

The university's pain has only been deepened by the death of another student who was found dead in a UGA dormitory the night before Riley's killing.

"A lot of peoplehave gonehome this weekend just because it's been a lot," UGA student Kashanti Jones told CNN Monday. "It is very heavy being on campus. Classes are very empty."

Riley's suspected killer, Jose Antonio Ibarra, was arrested Friday and charged with felony murder, false imprisonment and kidnapping and concealing a death, jail records show. There are no signs that Ibarra knew Riley, police said.

Defense attorneys have met with Ibarra, public defender John W. Donnelly told CNN while declining to comment further.

Ibarra is accused of preventing Riley from calling 911 and "seriously disfiguring her body," particularly her skull, during the attack, according to arrest affidavits. Medical examiners determined she died from blunt force trauma.

The violent killing has heightened safety concerns across UGA's campus. The intramural field trails where Riley was attacked are a popular spot for running, jogging or just taking a stroll with friends, UGA student Chaston Atkins told CNN.

"This will definitely make a lot of people very wary to use those trails," Atkins said. "One of my friends who usually jogs them, I talked to her the other day and she said, 'I'm not going to be going up to those anytime soon, at least not alone.'"

Another student, Brenton Sykes, said many people are fearful of walking alone on campus and have been buddying up on walks. "It's a scary time."

The university on Tuesday [*announced plans for increased safety measures*](https://twitter.com/universityofga/status/1762579322236555541), including 20% more money for campus police to recruit and retain officers, more security cameras and blue light call boxes, lighting upgrades and license plate readers.

But Atkins and Sykes said the political attention Riley's case has attracted has been hard to ignore.

Ibarra's status as an [*undocumented Venezuelan migrant*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/25/us/uga-augusta-university-student-death-sunday/index.html) is now being highlighted by several state and national GOP leaders,including former president Donald Trump, to support their calls for tighter border security - though [*there is little evidence*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/15/us/border-migrants-crime-cec/index.html) indicating a connection between immigration and crime.

"I lament the idea that this whole thing is getting politicized and I really wish it didn't have to be like that," Sykes said.

Athens-Clarke County District Attorney Deborah Gonzalez said ***politics*** will not play a role in how her office handles the murder case.

"We will not allow this or any other case to be used for political gain," the county's top prosecutor said Monday. "Our top priority is the safety of every citizen, and we are fully committed to ensuring that justice is served for the loss of every life."

Gonzalez said her office is bringing in "top trial attorney" Sheila Ross from the Prosecuting Attorneys' Council to join the district attorney's task force in preparation for the murder case.

Sorority mourns devoted friend

Hundreds gathered for a vigil at UGA Monday afternoon to mourn the lives of both students who died on campus last week - many wearing green and red ribbons in their honor.

Though Riley had transferred to Augusta University last year, she was still active in her Alpha Chi Omega sorority at UGA, which co-hosted the vigil and whose members paid tribute to her as an attentive and irreplacable friend.

"She showed incredible wisdom throughout her friendships. Many sisters have shared that she was the best listener," Chloe Mullis, the sorority's chapter president, said at the vigil.

Mullis described Riley as a "devoted Christian, sister, student, daughter and friend," who "no doubt" would have been an incredible nurse.

"Whether it was nursing school, being Alpha Chi banner chair or the incredible runner that she was, Laken showed devotion throughout every avenue of her life. Doing something halfway was just never an option," Mullis said.

As the environment on campus remains "really heavy," the sorority president encouraged students to check in on each other and take a page out of Riley's book.

"Tell your friends that you love them, and never miss an opportunity for a sweet treat - one of Laken's favorite pastimes," she said. "And scream the lyrics to your favorite song as loud as you can. Be kind. Catch up with your friends, and strive to be the type of person that Laken was."

Suspect's immigration status renews border policy debate

Confirmation from immigration officials that Ibarra is an undocumented Venezuelan migrant has sparked outcry from several Republican politicians demanding stricter immigration policies at the US-Mexico border.

Ibarra was arrested in 2022 after entering the US illegally and was "paroled and released for further processing," according to a statement from ICE.

Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp [*shared a letter*](https://twitter.com/GovKemp/status/1761470345674903780) addressed to President Joe Biden on Saturday slamming his immigration policies and "demanding information" related to Ibarra's immigration status.

"Laken Riley's tragic death struck the hearts of Georgians everywhere and has sparked national outrage," Kemp said in a post on X. "Joe Biden's failed policies have turned every state into a border state, and I'm demanding information from him so we can protect our people when the federal government won't!"

In October 2023, the suspect and his brother, Diego Ibarra, also received misdemeanor citations for shoplifting just over $200 of clothes and food in Athens, Georgia, according to a police report. The pair was advised about a pre-arrest diversion program, the report said, but CNN could not yet determine whetherthey pursued it.

Diego Ibarra, who is also undocumented, was also arrested Friday and faces a federal charge of possessing a fraudulent green card and up to a decade in prison, according to the US Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Georgia.

An Athens-Clarke County police officer stopped Diego Ibarra on Friday because he matched the description of his brother, according to court documents.

During the stop, Diego Ibarra gave the officer a fraudulent permanent resident card, a criminal complaint states. Federal authorities were then notified.

The brother first encountered US Border Patrol agents in April 2023, and he was processed for immediate removal, according to court documents.

Diego Ibarra "claimed a fear of return to Venezuela," and due to a finding of credible fear, he was released, pending adjudication of his claim for asylum, according to court documents.

"(Diego) Ibarra has not applied for or lawfully obtained a permanent resident card."

Diego Ibarra is scheduled to appear before a federal magistrate judge in Macon, Georgia, at 2:30 p.m. Monday, according to the Department of Justice. No attorney of record is listed on court documents for Diego.

Governors near and far from the US southern border have been [*grappling with an influx of migrants*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/25/politics/migrant-governors-gathering-white-house/index.html), partly as a result of Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott [*busing migrants to Democratic-led cities*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/22/politics/greg-abbott-democrats-border-immigration/index.html) in protest of the Biden administration's immigration policies.

Former President Donald Trump also referenced Ibarra in a social media post Monday as he pushed for his hardline immigration and border policies. In recent rallies, Trump has been arguing there is a new kind of crime called "migrant crime" and has vowed to conduct a large-scale deportation of undocumented migrants in the US should he win the 2024 election.

But many researchers have [*found no such connection*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/15/us/border-migrants-crime-cec/index.html) between immigration and crime levels, with some finding immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than people born in the US.

In the wake of Ibarra's arrest, two of UGA's Latino student organizations said they have received "hate comments" and condemned the speech.

"In light of recent events, we find ourselves confronted with the painful reality of hatred and bigotry that has no place within our campus community," UGA's Hispanic Student Association and campus Latino mentoring organization LISTo said in a joint statement [*posted on Instagram*](https://www.instagram.com/hsaatuga/p/C3vbYSTLnrk/).

"The hurtful and discriminatory comments made following the tragic loss of one of our own have deeply shaken us all. Such grief should not be made use for racism, hatred or xenophobia."

CNN's Rebekah Riess, Kate Sullivan, Maxime Tamsett, Alta Spells, Raja Razek, Catherine E. Shoichet, Priscilla Alvarez, Camila DeChalus and Alison Main contributed to this report.

By Elizabeth Wolfe, Jaide Timm-Garcia, Ryan Young, Holly Yan and Devon M. Sayers, CNN

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