

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT TO GO ON TRIAL FOR MURDER IN CASE CITED BY DONALD TRUMP

Juan Francisco Lopez-Sanchez is accused in the killing of Kate Steinle, which has become a flashpoint in the immigration debate

By Zusha Elinson
July 26, 2017

SAN FRANCISCO – During his campaign, President Donald Trump [repeatedly pointed](#) to the wrenching story of Kate Steinle – a young woman [allegedly murdered](#) by an undocumented Mexican – as a prime example of violent crimes committed by illegal immigrants.

Now, the man accused of killing Ms. Steinle, Juan Francisco Lopez-Sanchez, will soon be on trial, refocusing attention on an issue that Mr. Trump has continued to emphasize as president.

A hearing is scheduled for Friday that may determine whether the owner of the stolen gun used in the killing will testify.

The defendant, a repeat felon who was deported five times, has pleaded not guilty to a second-degree murder of Ms. Steinle, 32, while she walked on pier with her father on July 1, 2015. The single bullet that killed Ms. Steinle ricocheted off the ground before hitting her, ballistics experts have testified.

Prosecutors often face skeptical juries in liberal-leaning San Francisco and anti-Trump sentiment won't help, legal experts said. At the same time, the population's aversion to firearms could benefit the prosecution, they added.

Mr. Trump and Attorney General Jeff Sessions frequently cited the case as an example of crimes committed by illegal immigrants as they seek to crack down on sanctuary cities like San Francisco and tighten the country's borders.

The case inspired legislation that is making its way through Congress called "Kate's Law" that would increase penalties for criminal aliens caught re-entering the country.

Overall, illegal immigrants are incarcerated at a lower rate than native-born Americans, according to [research by the Cato Institute](#), a libertarian think tank.

Immigration in general either has no effect on crime or is linked to a decrease in crime, according to [a recent analysis of 51 studies on the topic](#) conducted by Charis Kubrin, a criminology professor at University of California, Irvine.

Mr. Lopez-Sanchez had been freed from San Francisco County jail on an old drug charge months before the shooting, despite a request from Immigration and Customs Enforcement to the city's sheriff's department that would have enabled the federal agency to take him into custody. The city doesn't honor these requests from ICE.

Mr. Lopez-Sanchez's public defender, Matt Gonzalez, said in an interview that the shooting was an accident.

Mr. Gonzalez said that his client found the gun after it had been stolen from a U.S. Bureau of Land Management ranger's parked vehicle.

"I'm unaware of a ricochet ever being charged as a murder in San Francisco," said Mr. Gonzalez. "If he didn't fit into the immigrant crime narrative I doubt this case would've been charged."

A spokesman for San Francisco District Attorney George Gascón declined to comment. An attorney for Ms. Steinle's family didn't return requests for comment.

Mr. Trump's frequent commentary on the case may actually help in Mr. Lopez-Sanchez's defense, said Anthony Brass, a former San Francisco prosecutor who now works as a criminal defense attorney.

"That favors the defense because people find Trump's views distasteful" in the city, said Mr. Brass. "San Francisco is about as anti-Trump as you get."

Mr. Brass said the jury pool in liberal San Francisco is often skeptical of prosecutors and police. But in this case, one factor may work in the prosecution: the gunplay. "Politically left jurors despise firearms and their negligent use," he added.