

Opinion | My Son Was Killed by ICE. I Want Accountability.

Rachel Reyes



Credit...Harmon Li for The New York Times

My Son Was Killed by ICE. I Want Accountability.

Credit...Harmon Li for The New York Times

Listen · 6:01 min

By Rachel Reyes

Ms. Reyes is the mother of Ruben Ray Martinez, who was fatally shot by an ICE agent in March 2025.

July 18, 2026

This spring I watched Markwayne Mullin's confirmation hearing to become the homeland security secretary. It was most likely the first confirmation hearing I ever watched. I have never been a political person.

I tuned in because Mr. Mullin's words were of personal concern to me. In 2025 a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent killed my son, Ruben Ray Martinez, in Texas. He was 23 years old, a quiet, funny and gentle young man — and an unarmed United States citizen. He was shot nearly a year before federal agents killed two other Americans, Alex Pretti and Renee Good, in Minnesota and obviously well before the recent shootings of Lorenzo Salgado Araujo in Houston and Johan Guerrero in Maine. Yet many fewer people know Ruben's name. The Department of Homeland Security, then under Secretary Kristi Noem, withheld the full details of his shooting from me and from the public.

It was not made public that an ICE agent was the one who shot my son until federal officials were forced to disclose that information because of an unrelated lawsuit.

I wanted to see evidence at his hearing that Mr. Mullin's tenure would bring a more respectful, serious and transparent approach to America's immigration enforcement, after the previous period so damaged public confidence in those efforts. I was let down then, and I continue to be let down. Over three months into Mr. Mullin's tenure, there's zero indication that Ruben's death reverberated seriously within the Department of Homeland Security or that it would be treated as a serious test of departmental accountability. Mr. Mullin has not publicly acknowledged my son's killing, much less explained what, if anything, the department has learned from the tragedy.

Image



Rachel Reyes made a quilt from Ruben's favorite shirts and jerseys. Credit...Harmon Li for The New York Times

We should expect transparency and accountability from any administration — especially one that has claimed transparency as a governing principle. Like most other Americans, I believe immigration laws should be enforced. But we should not be asked to choose between enforcing the law and transparency when federal agents kill someone. The

public deserves reliable facts. Families deserve honest answers. And the government should not have to be pressured into providing them.

Here's what I know about what happened to my son: Ruben and his best friend, Joshua Orta, drove to South Padre Island to celebrate Ruben's birthday. It was Ruben's first trip away from San Antonio. He still lived at home while saving money from his job at an Amazon fulfillment warehouse. We were a close-knit family.

That weekend, Ruben and Josh did not tell me where they were going, probably because Ruben knew South Padre's reputation as a party town and did not want me to worry. That was consistent with who he was: considerate, conflict-averse and reluctant to make himself the center of attention.

On what became his last night, Ruben was driving his car, with Josh in the passenger's seat, when he approached the scene of a traffic accident at a busy intersection. For reasons that remain unclear, ICE agents were present and operating alongside local officers.

The video evidence, made public almost a year after Ruben's death, is consistent with what Josh told me and others: He was trying to comply with conflicting directions from law enforcement about what to do. He was driving slowly and braking repeatedly and was not a threat to the officers. His car was in park when they pulled him out. An ICE agent, Jack Stevens, shot him at point-blank range through the open driver's-side window multiple times. A toxicology report noted the presence of alcohol in Ruben's system — which is obviously no justification for his death.

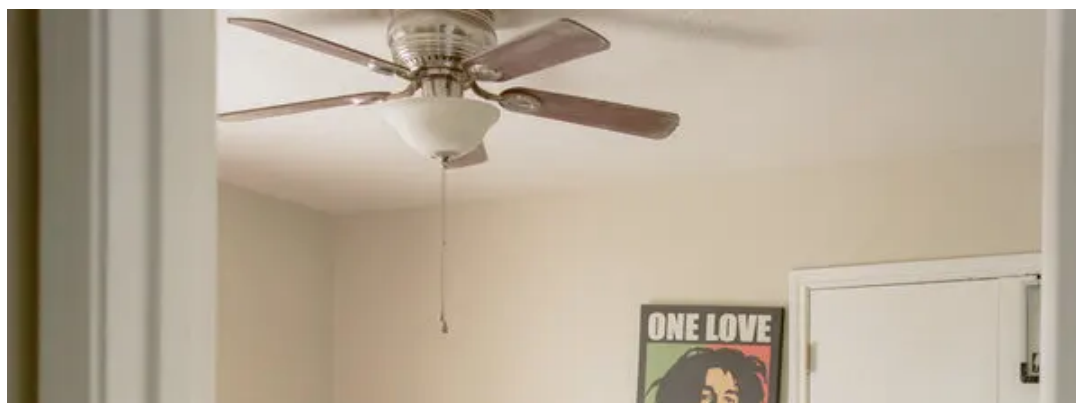
Josh said Ruben's last words were "I'm sorry."

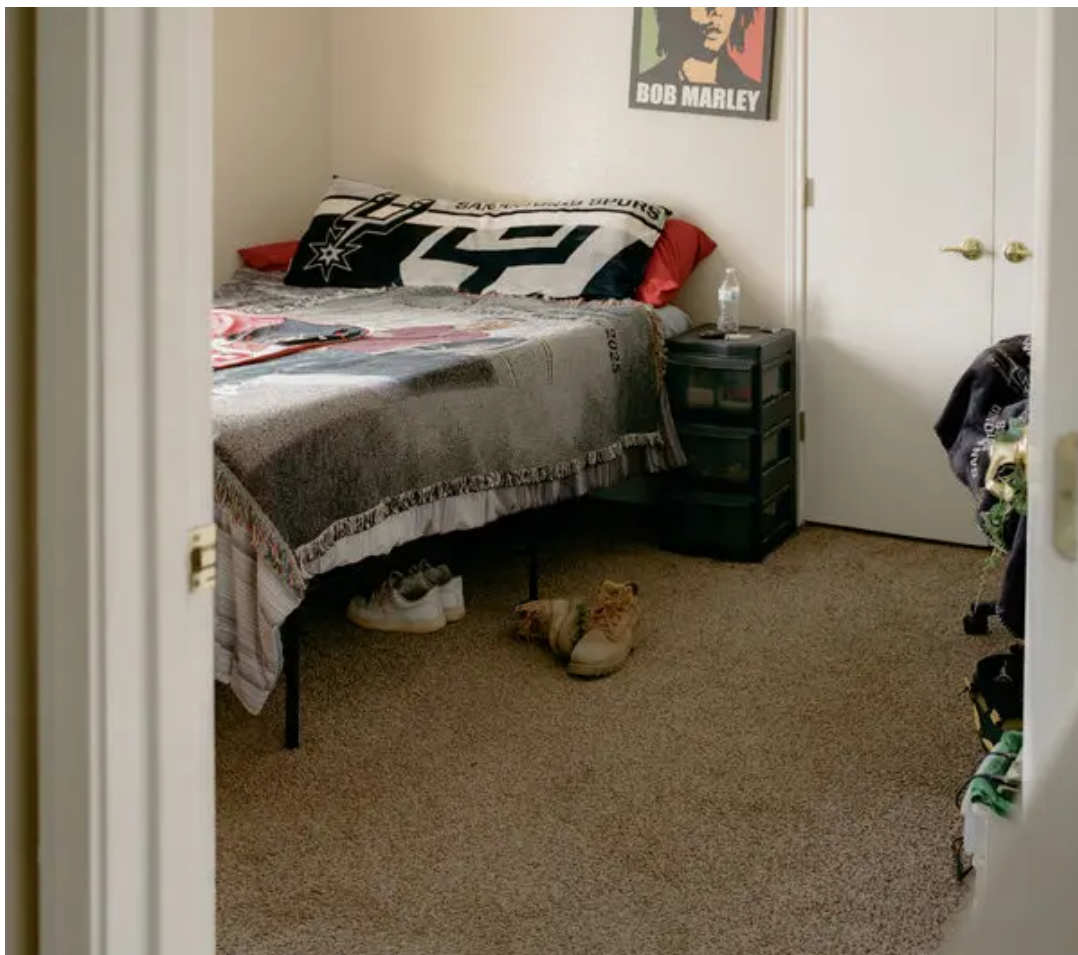
The Texas Rangers investigated the shooting, and a grand jury [declined to indict](#) Mr. Stevens in February. We do not know what evidence the jury — which was closed to the public — did or did not see. A spokesperson from ICE told The Times that Ruben hit an agent with his car and that Mr. Stevens "fired defensive shots to protect himself" and his fellow agents. The spokesperson said that the shooting has been "investigated from every possible angle by an independent body, and it cleared our officer."

What happened to Ruben deserves a more transparent response. The Department of Homeland Security should address the video evidence that raises questions about its public account, and implement safeguards to reduce the risk of another avoidable death.

These are basic expectations for any agency that sends armed officers into public spaces. ICE should have stronger rules about the use of body cameras and strict boundaries for when its agents become involved in local law-enforcement matters. It should more rigorously enforce its use-of-force standards. When a federal officer shoots and kills someone, there should be public reporting of what happened and temporary removal from field duty for the agent involved while the facts are examined. Those safeguards are not anti-law enforcement. They protect the public, responsible officers and the credibility of the agency itself.

Image

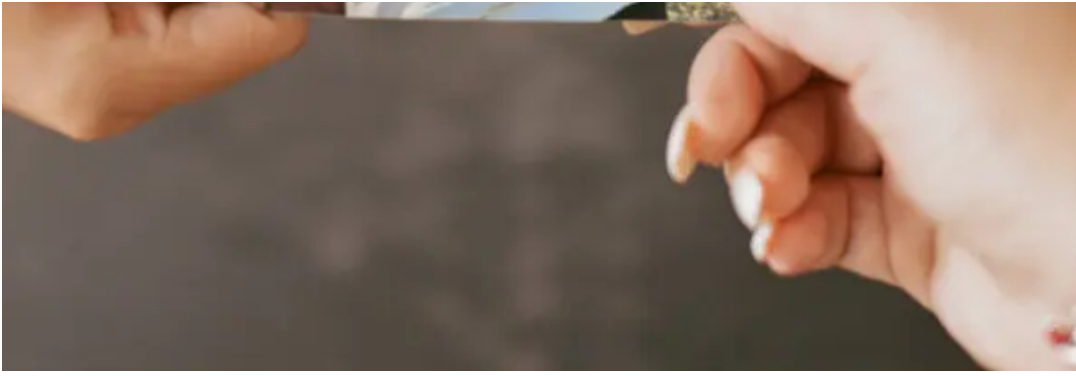




Ruben's room sits empty room. Credit...Harmon Li for The New York Times

Image





Ruben holds his young niece. Credit...Harmon Li for The New York Times

No Americans who have experienced a tragedy like the one I have should struggle to obtain answers from their own government. The government's dismissal and lack of accountability should concern everyone, regardless of political party.

Perhaps the Department of Homeland Security believes a lack of transparency is institutionally safer than candor. But secrecy does not strengthen law enforcement; secrecy weakens it. A government agency that will not fully explain a fatal shooting should not be surprised when citizens question its judgment.

Mr. Mullin may prefer to treat Ruben's death as part of the department's past. But when the government kills an unarmed citizen and then refuses to give a full public accounting, the matter is not past. It remains unresolved for my family and for any American who believes the government must be accountable when it takes a life.

A version of this article appears in print on July 19, 2026, Section SR, Page 7 of the New York edition with the headline: ICE Killed My Son. I Want Answers.. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

Advertisement

[SKIP ADVERTISEMENT](#)