



## **Navigating New Legal Norms: Recent Arrivals Face Unfamiliar Laws and Enforcement**

By Joy Brown

“Sticker shock” usually refers to outrageously high pricing, but on one recent day, Findlay Police Officer Brian White realized it can mean something very different.

“I tried to pass out some stickers to some of the kids,” kids who are from other countries and new residents to this region, said White. “They thought I was trying to arrest them.”

As an approach meant to instill greater trust in law enforcement officials and to fight crime more efficiently, community outreach has for years been one of the Findlay Police Department’s (FPD) priorities. Some of White’s efforts have included “coffee with a cop” and organizing the city’s popular annual Flag City Night Out at Riverside Park. Getting to know members of the populace that they’re charged with serving and protecting simply makes sense, officers here believe.

The influx of immigrants to the region in recent years hasn’t changed that conviction but has presented additional challenges when it comes to putting that principle into practice. Many newcomers don’t speak English, and all are coming from countries with strikingly different cultures and laws.

Further complicating matters is the fact that “there’s a general fear of police officers,” among some international newcomers, said White. Law enforcement in countries such as Haiti and Mexico can be notoriously corrupt. Some are run by cartels. Many migrants come to the United States because they are fleeing violence either wrought or ignored by the police in their home countries.

The mistrust hampers efforts by law enforcement here to help and interact with this particular population, including when crime does happen by and to newcomers.

### **Findlay Statistics**

The FPD does not keep track of crimes committed specifically by migrants, either authorized or unauthorized. However, the department has gathered location-centered statistics. In June 2024,

White and Lt. Andrew Welch examined the number of calls the department received from the Trenton Avenue area on the Northwest side of town, specifically bordered by Interstate Drive, West Melrose Avenue, Bolton Street, and Trenton Avenue. Some hotels located within that corridor are where many international newcomers live, in large part because of the region's extreme housing shortage.

Police, fire, and medical calls from the above location were counted monthly from January 2021 through July 2024. The data for the first three full years shows a steady increase in calls, from 2,962 in 2021 to 3,528 in 2022 to 6,497 in 2023. The first half of each year shows no significant change, with 1,928 calls in '21, 2,075 calls in '22, 1,992 calls in '23, and 2,025 calls this year. Call totals increased every year at predictable times, including in mid-summer and during the holiday season.

But the 2021 to 2023 call totals from that area reflect a 119% increase. What could account for the spike?

"I can't say conclusively what the increase was due to," White admitted, "but I can say that an increase through those years was anticipated on my end." The 6,497 calls in 2023 "is consistent with statistics I have prior to the pandemic," he said.

As was the case throughout the country, crime-related calls in Findlay drastically decreased in 2020 during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, said White. "This is partly due to people being inside, not seeing/reporting crime, and partly to a reduction in call services to limit exposure. This would have continued through 2021. Once we were progressing out of the pandemic, call volume increased and returned to more normal levels."

"There's nothing that is super obvious, that's hitting us in the face with statistics or anything" in terms of crime increases, including increases in crime that could directly be related to international newcomer population increases, said Welch.

"We haven't seen a large increase in crime," Welch said during a July interview. We're not being strained with just one certain call or one certain population."

In September 2024, the FPD reported a citywide crime wave wasn't happening, either.

One of the FPD's largest issues when it comes to international newcomers is traffic violations, White said. Different countries have different laws, standards, and cultures. Driver training has been offered at times for newcomers, and Findlay Municipal Court has adjusted to accommodate. The court has established specific times for non-English speaking individuals to attend hearings each week so that interpreters can be present. It has also posted signs explaining basic court rules and processes.

The Hancock County Sheriff's Office's interactions with migrants have also pertained to a lot of traffic violations, said Captain Mark Price. "We don't have the call load that the city does."

The sheriff's office recently reached full staff again, which means crime prevention efforts will resume, perhaps in a traffic-targeted way. "We've got to somehow teach basic driver's ed," he said, and, like the FPD, work on trust issues that many newcomers have of law enforcement. "They think we're corrupt," Price noted.

FPD has handled "60-70% of the county's immigrant-related criminal cases here in the city," said Welch. "We have more calls for service than the county does. Most of our interaction has been at the misdemeanor level and mostly it's domestic violence and assault." Trespass issues have also been prevalent, he said.

Living in close quarters in hotel rooms and small apartments can complicate matters, Findlay police say, because it's hard to keep those involved in suspected physical altercations separated. "Our hands are kind of tied, not just with that population but anybody here. Unless wounds are visible and one person was affected, it doesn't necessarily indicate who did it," Welch said. "If they're not indicating they were assaulted, if they're claiming they did it to themselves, it's hard. We try and identify the primary physical aggressor... but sometimes you can't determine the primary aggressor... or sometimes both people are the primary aggressors. It makes it hard for the prosecutor and a judge to determine who started it and who was that primary."

Welch said it's likely that only the most serious of offenses, such as murder or armed robbery, would draw the attention of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The FPD has handled no such crimes perpetrated by immigrants and therefore has not had to collaborate with ICE.

"I think the threshold of when (ICE) would want to get involved would be if someone did something very violent. I don't know exactly what their focus is right now" in terms of prioritizing immigrant-related criminal activity, Welch said.

"There's a lot of information that's being distributed to the public and it's just not true. There is criminal activity. There are traffic violations. But not to the extent of what you see on the news," said Welch. "There was one person in Cincinnati that got released and he murdered somebody. That's not happening in our community. We take great pride in our community to keep everybody safe and they're just another part of our community. We want to make sure that they're welcome. We also want to make sure that they understand and feel comfortable."

### **Newcomer Victims**

White and Welch pointed out that unreported criminal activity by and to immigrants is happening, but to what extent is difficult to determine. Language barriers, cultural differences, and the fear of deportation can hamper investigation and prosecution efforts.

Domestic violence, however, is a crime that police here are seeing, with U.S.-born citizens—some of them service providers—occasionally reporting on behalf of newcomers. Some newcomers

have emigrated from countries where gender equality is not recognized, and where patriarchal dominance, even in the form of physical violence, is not only socially acceptable but expected.

“One woman told me her boyfriend had hit her in the face. Her face was swollen. But when we got a translator on the line, she said no, he didn’t do it,” said McComb Police Chief Tammy Blunk.

Representatives from Open Arms in Findlay, which serves victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, say they have been assisting international newcomers.

“We have quarterly meetings with our domestic violence shelter,” said Welch. “We share information back and forth, so we kind of look for different trends. Domestic violence is usually one of the higher amounts of calls for service that we have, but I wouldn’t say that it’s been increased” because of additional migrants coming to Findlay, he said.

Hancock Public Health (HPH) officials say they’ve encountered instances in which they’ve suspected criminal activity and reported it.

Cheryl Miller, who worked at HPH as a public relations communications specialist but now serves as the inaugural director of the Great Lakes Guardianship Services Board, and Laura Reinhart, CNP, director of nursing at HPH, remember a particular home visit to a young woman who was “very pregnant and very likely could have serious complications during delivery because of her health issues.”

“We’ve got interpreters going with us, we’ve got Google Translate out, we’ve got all this stuff going” to facilitate communication,” said Miller, who holds licenses as a federal marketplace navigator and community health worker. The room was filled with people, but one woman insisted on staying with the patient and speaking for her.

Miller and Reinhart wondered: could this be a human trafficking situation? Miller asked the patient through Google Translate, “Are you safe? Do you feel safe here?” The patient was illiterate, but the woman glued to her side was not.

“That was like my aha moment,” said Miller. “Cultural sensitivity is something that we’ve had to feel our way through.”

Hospital physicians were able to isolate the patient and speak to her without the other woman present, but cultural differences predominated.

“We live in the United States, and we are very fortunate to be cognizant of our individual rights,” said Miller. “That is not always so in other countries. And when you are trying to explain to a woman that she has autonomy over her body and that she can say ‘no,’ that was foreign to her. We were explaining a lifestyle that she’d never experienced.”

Abusers can use immigrants’ status against them to maintain control.

“Many immigrant victims experience an increased risk of violence in the home and exploitation in the workplace,” states the National Network to End Domestic Violence. “Abusive partners or other abusers often exploit a victim’s lack of immigration status, or dependent immigration status, as a way to maintain power and control, and to keep victims silent. Immigrant victims are frequently threatened with deportation by their abusers, increasing their reluctance to seek help from the authorities or services.”

### **Migrants in McComb**

While FPD officers continue their outreach to migrants and the Hancock County Sheriff’s Office hopes to do so, the McComb Police Department, on the other hand, doesn’t have the resources for proactive community policing in its Northwest Hancock County village of approximately 1,550 residents. Instead, it has been reactively contending with an increase in international newcomers whom its chief of police says aren’t all law-abiding. With resources stretched thinner, their outlook is different.

“We do have dealings with them over here, most definitely,” said Blunk, a McComb High School graduate who had worked at the Ottawa Police Department for 18 years before becoming police chief in June 2021.

Back when she started as police chief, Blunk said most McComb newcomers hailed from Mexico. She recalled the case of Sebastian Hernandez, whom the investigating Hancock County Sheriff’s Office referred to as a “Mexican international.” Hernandez was strangled to death in a house where other newcomers had lived, she said. The Lucas County Coroner’s Office ruled the death a homicide, but the case remains open and unsolved, Price said.

Many migrants work at the area’s largest employer, Hearthside Food Solutions, which is located on Rader Road just outside of McComb. The increase in manufacturing facility workers who are originally from other countries has resulted in traffic issues, Blunk said. She said she has had to tell drivers to not park on the road and has encountered some obstinance about it.

She has investigated instances of domestic violence, too, and observed questionable childcare practices, or lack thereof.

Within the past six months, McComb has seen an influx of newcomers from Haiti, Blunk said. “It’s like it happened overnight.”

“There’s the language barrier, but there’s nothing on our language app for Creole. That is a huge issue,” she noted.

“Yeah, they’re a problem. They are making it more difficult over here,” said Blunk of today’s international newcomer residents and workers in the village.

## National Trends

National crime statistics tell a story that's different from McComb's.

According to the National Institutes of Justice, a research, development, and evaluation agency of the U.S. Department of Justice, "recent research suggests that those who immigrate (legally or illegally) are not more likely, and may even be less likely to commit crime in the U.S."

One such study, conducted in 2023 by Stanford University economist Ran Abramitzky and co-authors, found that immigrants are 30% less likely to be incarcerated than U.S.-born individuals who are white. "When the analysis is expanded to include Black Americans—whose prison rates are higher than the general population—the likelihood of an immigrant being incarcerated is 60% lower than of the people born in the United States," the study found. The incarceration rate has been dropping steadily compared to U.S.-born males since 1960, but researchers could not find evidence that pinpointed why.

Released by the National Bureau of Economic Research, the study used U.S. Census Bureau data from 1850 to 2020 that focused on immigrants present in the census regardless of their legal status, and on men between the ages of 18 and 40.

"From Henry Cabot Lodge in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to Donald Trump, anti-immigration politicians have repeatedly tried to link immigrants to crime, but our research confirms that this is a myth and not based on fact," said Abramitzky in an article about the study that was published by the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research.

Because arrest records do not include immigration status or birthplace, Abramitzky and his colleagues chose to analyze incarceration rates, which they maintain are better indicators of serious crime because they usually require a conviction.

"Studies have also examined the impact of the concentration of immigrants in a community on crime patterns, finding that immigration is associated with lower crime rates and an increase in structural factors—such as social connection and economic opportunity—that are linked to neighborhood safety," reports the Brennan Center for Justice, an independent, nonpartisan advocacy and research organization. "Research examining crime rates in so-called sanctuary cities also found no discernable difference when compared to similarly situation cities without sanctuary policies," it states.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian public policy research organization, sought to find out if unauthorized immigrants are likely to commit more crimes. In 2015, it examined records from Texas, the state that historically sees the second-highest number of newcomers who first step foot in the U.S. Criminal conviction and arrest rates for undocumented immigrants in the Lone Star State were lower than those of native-born Americans for murder, sexual assault and larceny, the organization found.

The contention that immigrants are committing crime waves in the U.S. is nothing new. A 1931 report by the National Commission of Law Enforcement stated, "The theory that immigration is responsible for crime, that the most recent 'wave of immigration,' whatever the nationality, is less desirable than the old ones, that all newcomers should be regarded with an attitude of suspicion, is a theory that is almost as old as the colonies planted by Englishmen on the New England coast."