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**Author**

Rosales, Rocio

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**Survival, Economic Mobility, and Community Among Los Angeles Fruit Vendors**  
Rocio Rosales

Rocio Rosales is a Doctoral Candidate in Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles.  
Correspondence to: Ms. R. Rosales, Dept of Sociology, UCLA, 264 Haines Hall, 375 Portola  
Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095-155, USA. E-mail: rosales@ucla.edu.

**Abstract**

How do undocumented immigrants survive in a punitive regulatory environment? Drawing upon four years of ethnographic research, this article examines how local repressive policies affect the economic mobility of immigrant fruit vendors in Los Angeles County. In the face of government enforcement, fruit vendors have implemented strategies that allow for short-term survival but fail to bolster long-term upward mobility. The four survival strategies that I analyze include: 1) reliance on kinship and *paisano* networks; 2) street patrols and alerts; 3) geographical positioning and alliance building; and 4) the performance and maintenance of personal, professional and symbolic hygiene. I argue that the limited gains and continuous losses experienced by fruit vendors following health and police department enforcement create a cycle of low income, high debt, and minimal to no mobility. Consequently, fruit vendors have fared much worse than their immigrant informal sector peers (i.e. gardeners, day labourers, and domestic workers). In the end, however, the local regulatory enforcement on fruit vending has not disrupted network-driven immigration nor displaced these informal workers because the survival strategies have fostered a sense of community and reciprocal relationships cemented by financial obligations among the fruit vendors.

**Keywords:**

Latino Immigrants, Informal Economy, Economic Mobility, Local Enforcement, USA

## Introduction

Since the 1970s, partly due to accelerated international migration and economic restructuring, informal economic activity in the United States has surged (Bromley 2000; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009; Sassen 1990; Sassen-Koob 1989). In Los Angeles, an important manifestation of the informal economy is the ubiquity of street vendors. In this city, rainbow-coloured umbrellas conspicuously dot the urban landscape and under them, toiling behind pushcarts loaded down with several pounds of peeled fruit, immigrant street vendors ply their trade. These fruit vendors sell made-to-order fruit salads served in a clear plastic bag and garnished with salt, chilli powder, and lime. Through the years, fruit vendors' (*fruteros*) collective experience has led to improved business tactics that contributed to the proliferation of vending. I estimate that over 1,000 fruit vendors operate within Los Angeles County.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, strict anti-vending ordinances and county-initiated crackdowns are a perpetual risk to vendors, whose right to livelihoods and public presence are continuously contested. Concomitant with fruit vendors' increased numbers is a pushback—or systematic resistance—on the part of local government (Light 2006). In this context, fruit vendors have implemented coping mechanisms that allow for short-term survival, and even sporadic seasons of plenty, but not long-term upward mobility. This article examines these survival strategies and the interrelated struggles to balance income generation and risk in light of street vendors' proscribed circumstances. I argue that, unlike for other immigrant informal workers, the regulatory backlash creates a pattern of financial vulnerability for fruit vendors. However, these crackdowns and the financial vulnerability that results, are not sufficient to deflect new immigrants within the fruit vendor network to other cities, nor do they divert struggling fruit vendors to other, safer,

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occupations. Within such a context, the survival strategies that allow vendors to operate additionally function to create community.

The presence of fruit vendors on street corners throughout Los Angeles represents a confluence of larger social and economic forces. The vendors are labour migrants who have crossed international borders in search of improved economic opportunities, but because they are undocumented, they confront exclusionary mechanisms that prevent them from legally participating in the formal economy. Not only are they relegated to the informal sector, but they also take part in labour migration operations that facilitate entry into the occupation, further provoking its expansion (Rosales Forthcoming). Within Los Angeles, Ivan Light (2006) has documented how local government has disrupted unwanted immigration by enforcing anti-poverty legislation. Enforcement targets activities that include 'sweatshops where low-paid work violates wages, health, and safety regulations and slums that violate municipal housing ordinances' (Light 2006: 10). Although Light focuses on immigrant workers operating in the wage economy, the local quality-of-life policies and enforcement activities that he investigates also heavily target street-based workers like fruit vendors. Included in these enforcement activities are crackdowns on fruit vendors carried out by the Los Angeles Health Department (LAHD) and Police Department (LAPD), which target vendors that operate in violation of city and county ordinances that regulate sidewalk activity as well as public health and safety.<sup>2</sup>

Light argues that this local political intolerance of immigrant poverty prompted crackdowns that in turn contributed to the deflection of immigrants to other US cities. But what about the immigrants who remained behind and those who continued to arrive? Many undocumented workers operating within the informal sector persisted in the midst of this local government assault, among them day labourers, gardeners, domestic workers, and fruit vendors.

These immigrant workers would be susceptible to local anti-poverty legislation. However, the experience for fruit vendors differs from these other informal workers. While Light argues that poverty intolerance provoked the crackdowns, I argue that the crackdowns themselves contributed to and perpetuated poverty and marginalisation among fruit vendors.

This article examines four survival strategies that vendors employ in response to these crackdowns. The first of these survival strategies functions as a safety net while the others are risk-averse, street-level practices that reduce but do not remove threat, and that often force a trade-off between risk and income generation. The term 'survival' takes on a multifaceted meaning that speaks to vendors' manoeuvring through the streets of Los Angeles, within the American informal labour sector, and inside a country where they lack both citizenship and viable paths to citizenship. I argue that fruit vending, with its inherent risks and corresponding limited-range survival strategies, creates a cycle of poverty marked by limited gains and periodic losses. Because risk cannot be eliminated due to the informal and illicit nature of the work, the crackdowns that do occur are devastating not only for the fruit vendor who experiences them, but also for the network to which he or she belongs. It is unknown whether these vendors ever amass the savings necessary to move into more traditional brick and mortar storefronts—this study is not longitudinal in nature, though this upward mobility is a distinct possibility. My sample includes vendors who are fairly recent arrivals, the majority of whom are undocumented and cannot establish a formal business legally. Low income, high debt, and minimal to non-existent upward mobility are common fare among fruit vendors. Despite this, fruit vendors remain on the job in part because the survival strategies that they employ help to create group cohesion and build community.

#### **Latino Immigrants and Mobility in the Informal Sector**

By definition, activities in the informal sector escape regulation and therefore measured observation. And though Saskia Sassen stated that 'the expansion of informalization does not, in principle, depend on the existence of an immigrant labour force,' it nevertheless consists of a large documented and undocumented immigrant population within Los Angeles (1998: 158). Researchers have examined various populations of immigrant workers operating within the informal sector such as the social and economic worlds of suburban maintenance gardeners (Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009), day labourers (Malpica 2002; Valenzuela Jr. 2003), and domestic workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Romero 1992). Fruit vendors are demographically similar to these other populations of workers: most are first-generation Latino undocumented immigrants with low levels of schooling, limited occupational skills, limited to no English fluency, and little economic capital. But unlike these other immigrant informal workers, who may experience weak but noticeable upward economic mobility, fruit vendors' trajectories are far bleaker.

Among the scholars who offer optimistic outlooks for immigrant informal workers are Hernan Ramirez and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo who classified suburban maintenance gardeners as 'worker-entrepreneurs' (2009: 74). For these worker-entrepreneurs the occupation of suburban maintenance gardening offers mobility and, for a select few, financial solvency. While the authors recognise that upward mobility in an occupation that employs workers with primary school educations and limited English fluency is uncommon, they note 'there is occupational differentiation and mobility within the occupation, and this mobility track leads towards economic formality and higher earnings' including the rare but documented possibility of six figure incomes (Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009: 85). Other scholars studying gardeners in Los Angeles (Huerta 2008) and South Texas (Pisani and Yoskowitz 2006) made

similar claims about upward mobility within this informal sector occupation. Pisani and Yoskowitz state that self-employed gardeners in South Texas 'improved their life chances' and could earn 1.7 times the legal minimum wage (2006: 59).

Abel Valenzuela also challenges popular perceptions of day labour work by arguing that it is more than 'a desperate attempt at securing employment in a public setting' (2001: 336). Valenzuela provides an alternative perspective in which day labour work offers autonomy, choice, and improved wages for a largely undocumented population operating in an exclusionary labour market. For the day labourers of Valenzuela's study, day labour is work unlike that found in the wage economy, which is largely characterised as low-wage and dead-end. Day labour not only provides comparable or better wages, but also offers autonomy and the possibility for upward mobility. Daniel Malpica (2002), who also studied day labourers, offers a more tempered argument with regard to mobility. He notes that day labour provides some undocumented immigrants their first job in the country and gives them a foothold in the urban economy; for others, day labour work provides income while temporarily unemployed from a regular job elsewhere. Day labour is therefore a transitional occupation, offering little stability and mobility. The economic risks for day labourers, in this instance, are due to employers' refusal to pay a labourer at the end of the workday or to the labourer's inability to find gainful employment.

Domestic work is an informal activity that includes many Latina immigrants; among Salvadoran and Guatemalan women in the Los Angeles area, domestic service and childcare are the major sources of employment (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Lopez et al. 1996). In her study of paid domestic workers, Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) suggests that mobility within the occupation exists and is governed by networks. As experience and informational resources expand, the opportunity for more employment presents itself; more house-cleaning work

generates more income. Writing about Chicana domestics, Mary Romero (1987) observed that limited job skills constrained these women's job prospects, funnelling them into this occupation. For Romero's population, the occupation of domestic work provides autonomy and stability but not upward mobility. Within the job, 'the experience did not improve their life chances in the labour market or qualify them for better jobs...the interaction [between employees and employers] never resulted in the inclusion of the domestic into another or broader social network that might have provided new job opportunities' (Romero 1987: 217).

These studies of informal immigrant workers showcase two important patterns that apply to fruit vendors as well. First, these workers are constrained by some social characteristic (e.g. legal status, education, experience, language) that pushes or pulls them towards informal work. Second, these workers come to believe, appropriately or not, that their informal work is different *and* preferable to formal wage economy labour. For gardeners, co-workers or bosses earning six-figure salaries function as proof—even though such income may be the exception rather than the rule. For other workers, the idea of economic improvement through informal self-employment is an iteration of the American dream. Immigrants may be more inclined to hold this belief because their very migration is contingent on the idea that jobs and incomes are plentiful in the United States. As Chavez (1992) has noted, viable economic links to American society are key considerations for coming to and remaining in the United States. And while none of these studies present an uncritical celebration of informality, these scholars are overwhelmingly positive in their assessments of immigrants and their informal work. As Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo write, '[the gardening occupation] offers otherwise disadvantaged immigrant workers the possibility to use their ingenuity and hard work to innovate opportunity' (2009: 86).

*Fruter*os operate in a space created by economic restructuring and globalization effects (Massey et al. 2002; Sassen 1990; Sassen 1993), ethnic entrepreneurship (Light and Rosenstein 1995; Zhou 2004), and immigrant strategies imported from sending countries (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). Vendors attribute the origins of fruit vending to a migrant who worked as a fruit vendor in the Mexican state of Puebla before working as a fruit vendor in Los Angeles. This Mexican entrepreneur immigrated to the United States sometime in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> While he employed only his family in the business, his fellow *paisanos* [hometown associates] emulated the business model. In the hands of these *paisanos*, fruit vending became an 'immigrant niche' occupation filled largely by *Poblanos*—individuals from the Mexican state of Puebla (Waldinger 1994: 3). The same kinship and *paisano* networks that facilitated entry also created 'social closure' contributing to a more concentrated immigrant niche (Waldinger and Lichter 2003: 87). However, no other ethnic or native populations were displaced in this process because fruit vending, as it was practiced, did not exist previously. The Mexican immigrant enclave economy found in the Los Angeles wholesale produce market may also have helped bolster this fruit vending immigrant niche (Alvarez Jr. 1990).

Meanwhile, economic restructuring reconfigured income distribution in the United States so that an increasing population of low-income customers began seeking cheaper goods from the informal sector (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Sassen 1990). Fruit vendors were able to provide a cheap product by decreasing the distance between wholesale retailers and customers and by minimizing overhead costs. Because the product (fruit salads) had widespread appeal and because fruit vendors were easily accessible working on public sidewalks, the customer base quickly expanded beyond the initial 'captive market' found in the low-income, immigrant community (Rath and Kloosterman 2000: 660). Even without this expanded customer base,

'immigrant replenishment' might have provided ample customers for fruit vendors (Jimenez 2008: 1533). As Alvarez noted, 'the continuing growth of the Mexican population [increases]...the 'built-in' market for Mexican commodities' (Alvarez Jr. 1990: 107).

Throughout the period of its growth, opposition to this highly visible informal sector business has been present and growing as well. As Light (2006) has noted, concentrations of undocumented immigrants in particular occupations ignites reactionary measures or increased enforcement of restrictive measures that are poverty-intolerant and disproportionately affect urban poor immigrants. Since 1926, Los Angeles County has had one of the most restrictive anti-street vending ordinances in the country (Fujimoto and Janis 1990; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). While attempts were made in the early 1990s to ease this ordinance, it remains largely unchanged and is continuously enforced by officials in the LAHD and LAPD. Some scholars have even noted that following the legislation meant to ease vending restrictions, crackdowns actually increased. Hamilton and Chinchilla (2001) noted that in 1993 there were 952 citations issued during the entire year, whereas in a five-month period in 1994 over 800 citations had already been issued.

The punitive measures fruit vendors face vary, in increasing severity they may: 1) receive a warning and be told to leave an area; 2) be issued a ticket by the LAPD and/or LAHD; 3) have their fruit, cutting boards and knives destroyed/confiscated; 4) have their pushcart impounded and issued a citation; 5) have their product and pushcart destroyed on site with a roving trash compactor; 6) have their product and pushcart impounded or destroyed, issued a citation, and be arrested. All of the vendors in my study have experienced at least one of these measures. This case study casts a dark shadow on the nature of immigrant informal sector work. Anti-vending

ordinances and their prolonged enforcement undermine vendors' attempts to advance financially and establish a stable economic presence in the United States.

Stagnant wages and downward mobility are common among fruit vendors. Why is this so? Fruit vendors occupy the same precarious position, both within the United States and its labour market, as the other informal workers described above. Their presence in the United States as undocumented immigrants, or 'illegal aliens' as the state defines them, 'affirms their status as outside the "legal" system that constitutes society [while] "alien" affirms their status as outsiders' (Chavez 1990: 32). Their participation in the informal sector, which encapsulates the 'production and sale of goods and services that are licit but produced and sold outside the regulatory apparatus,' further augments their outsider status (Sassen-Koob 1989: 1006). Both of these markers, undocumented and informal, open the possibility for state-sponsored retribution in the form of deportation, arrest, confiscation of vending materials, and citation. The fact that street vending is an illicit activity in Los Angeles creates another layer of vulnerability. Not only is street vending prohibited, but two bureaucratic agencies—the Los Angeles Health Department (LAHD) and Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD)—are charged with continuously and effectively enforcing the prohibition. It is important to note that fruit vendors engage in prohibited activity, but it is a 'soft' illegality that falls within the misdemeanour realm, punishable by fines and minimal jail time.<sup>4</sup> Thus, LAHD sweeps are more commonplace than joint LAHD and LAPD sweeps, but joint sweeps can include more severe punishment (e.g. arrest). Fruit vendors' illicit work and the constant threat of LAHD and LAPD crackdowns co-exist with their occupation-driven need to maintain a public presence.

Vendors working on street corners *magnify* their outsider markers (undocumented and informal) because they are highly visible in the urban landscape. Their public space positioning

is unlike that of day labourers' whose right to seek work at informal, street-corner, hiring sites is protected by the First Amendment (Campbell 2009). Meanwhile, domestic workers and gardeners are hidden in private sphere locations where their presence is not as conspicuous or where it is 'institutionally incorporated' into mainstream suburban society (Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009: 75). Gardeners, domestic workers, and day labourers also tend to service more affluent populations. Law enforcement is less likely to target the locations where these workers are employed due to the power and influence that the employers may yield. Fruit vendors working on street corners in low and middle class neighbourhoods do not operate under the auspices of any vigilant employer and often service less affluent customers. This article thus addresses the distinct obstacles that fruit vendors confront on the streets of Los Angeles and within the informal labour sector and the consequences and benefits linked to those obstacles.

#### **Methods**

This study is based on in-depth formal interviews, street-based informal interviews, participant observation, and over four years of ethnographic field research. I visited multiple vendors in locations in west, central and south Los Angeles, as well as in the city of Santa Monica and the neighbourhood of Venice. I worked as a fruit vendor in two locations: in an affluent mid-city neighbourhood and in a working-class neighbourhood closer to downtown Los Angeles. I spent a significant amount of time before and after normal working hours in two private residences of fruit vendors. The residential locations were important meeting points; one functioned as a preparation location (cutting fruit, loading carts) in the early mornings and the other as an after-work social gathering location. Every visit to a field site resulted in several pages of field notes; the nearly four years of research have resulted in hundreds of pages of field notes.

I conducted 22 informal and formal interviews with Mexican and Guatemalan fruit vendors working within Los Angeles County. All except one of these vendors were undocumented; the only vendor with citizenship was born in the United States but spent his formative years in Puebla and thus had very limited English language fluency. For the formally interviewed vendors (N=17), I designed a semi-structured interview guide that asked open-ended questions about occupational experiences (e.g. job entry, typical day, wages, expenses, relations with customers, business owners, other street-based workers). Formal interviews took place after work hours in pick-up trucks, living rooms, and restaurants, were audio recorded and lasted between 38 minutes to two hours. Informal interviews were conducted while prepping carts in the morning or on street corners during the vendors' workday. Informal interviews were not audio recorded but generally covered the same themes found on the interview guide. Direct quotes are used from the formal interviews and paraphrasing is used from the informal interviews and conversations. All of the interviews were conducted in Spanish by the author.

All formal interviews were transcribed and translated verbatim by the author or a research assistant. Formally interviewed participants were monetarily compensated for their time. Informal interviews were reconstructed from memory and notes taken on site. Informally interviewed vendors were not monetarily compensated. When possible, data collected through informal interviews was presented to the interviewee for confirmation and correction of sentiments expressed and documented. In no case was data modified after this verification process took place. Field notes and interviews were coded into themes for analysis. Coding, organizing, and analyzing of data was based on grounded theory methods.

I found initial participants by approaching vendors in distinct neighbourhoods throughout west and central Los Angeles. The vendors approached were neither randomly selected nor

representative. A few of these vendors declined to participate in the research. Other visits resulted in several different snowball samples. The majority of the study participants hail from the Mexican state of Puebla. I may have oversampled *Poblanos*, but all information gathered (including that from non-*Poblanos*) pointed to their overrepresentation in the fruit vending business. Three key informants from a central Los Angeles location proved to be instrumental in providing introductions to different networks of fruit vendors. These informants—regarded as my main informants—were also instrumental in providing access to social events where other vendors gathered (e.g. baptisms, house parties, birthday celebrations). IRB-approved information sheets were distributed to all formally interviewed and audio-recorded participants. Verbal consent was sought and received from all informants regardless of whether they were formally interviewed and audio recorded.

The two neighbourhoods that served as my participant observation vending sites are distinct. The mid-city vending site is located along a major thoroughfare in front of a bank in the shadow of a well-known education and philanthropic women's organization. Mid-rise office buildings line this major boulevard and large, beautifully manicured homes are located in the adjacent residential areas—including the Getty House, the official residence of the mayor of Los Angeles. There are few pedestrians, though an occasional jogger sporting an iPod, pushing a jogging stroller, or both, will sometimes pass by this space. The majority of the customers are headed to or returning from bank-related visits, while other customers include office workers from the adjacent buildings or blue-collar workers who pulled off the main thoroughfare for fruit. Customers here were of mixed racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds but the majority were Latino professionals.



The second vending site closer to downtown Los Angeles is located in a large gas station lot. Four fruit vendors occupy this space, each about 30 feet from the other. Other street vendors work adjacent corners, including a roasted corn vendor and a hot dog vendor. This location is in the shadow of a large commercial centre catering to Latino customers (through Spanish language advertising). It is not uncommon to see ambulances or police cars blaze by with their sirens blaring. Every time I visited this site helicopters thundered overhead. This location is a busy public transportation node and as a result many pedestrians can be observed hurrying to or from buses and metro links. In the late afternoon, Latino families descend from their apartment buildings for neighbourhood strolls. The majority of customers were working-class Latinos buying fruit on their way to or from the public transportation nodes.

#### ***Pushcarts, Profit, and Storage***

*Fruteros* work out of metal pushcarts that contain a variety of peeled and unpeeled fruits layered on top of several pounds of crushed ice. The pushcart has a collapsible metal tray table that locks in place to create a workspace. The top of the pushcart is encased in clear plexiglass through which customers can see and pick the fruit they want. A typical pushcart will be stocked with watermelon, honeydew, cantaloupe, jicama, orange, pineapple, papaya, cucumber, coconut, mango, and lime. Vendors use a peeler, a sharp knife, and a citrus squeezer to prepare the fruit salads, which are made according to the customer's wishes and sell for \$3, \$4 and \$5.

Most vendors keep a bucket of water by their side to soak their washcloths and cutting boards periodically. They use a cardboard box lined with a black trash bag to discard fruit peels, seeds, and pits. Some vendors also have a broom to sweep up their trash at the end of the workday. Vendors use a large colourful umbrella to provide cover from the sun and to advertise their location to passing customers.

Vendors typically spend \$60 to \$140 at the wholesale fruit market to stock a single pushcart. Profits vary on a daily basis. Summer months are more profitable for vendors; during these months they may make between \$50 and \$200 in profit. Winter months see a slowing of sales and it is not uncommon for vendors to lose money during this season. Depending on the neighbourhood, vendors may also have to pay local gangs a fee (referred to as "tax" or "rent") to work on that street corner. Vendors who do not own their own pushcart and work for another vendor are paid a set amount that ranges from \$40 to \$60. The price of a pushcart varies as well; *carros piratas* (lower quality pushcarts) with no drainage system can cost \$800 to \$1,000. Pushcarts with drainage systems can cost between \$1,500 and \$2,000. Only pushcarts with a drainage system are eligible for public warehouse storage—which costs \$100 to \$150 a month. LAHD grants permits only to pushcarts that are stored in warehouses (as opposed to private residences). However, while pushcarts may be certified by the LAHD, street vending remains illegal in Los Angeles.<sup>5</sup> An LAHD certified cart may not be destroyed on site, but it may still be impounded and a vendor can be issued a warning or citation.

#### **Findings**

*Fruteros* are liminally suspended in a space where they can neither formalise their business nor their presence but must continue to practice their trade publicly to subsist. The social mechanisms that create this liminality are also responsible for the effects it generates. As Gross noted, '[social mechanisms] are best thought of as chains or aggregations of problem situations and the effects that ensue as a result of the habits actors use to resolve them' (2009: 375). In this instance, the habits used to resolve problem situations are the survival strategies implemented by vendors seeking to recover from a financially devastating local government crackdown or to increase sales and decrease risk. Unfortunately, the survival strategies employed, while they

represent a response to the crackdowns, also contribute to the continuation of crackdowns.

Successful strategies that allow vendors to operate and profit are often accompanied by crackdowns meant to limit their operations and minimise profitability. Evasion tactics on the part of vendors also serve to justify the furtive methods employed by the LAHD and LAPD to apprehend them.

The most important survival strategy *fruteros* employ is a dependence on the human and capital resources found in kinship and *paisano* networks. These networks function as safety nets for vendors, but as I will show they are often limited and overburdened. In an effort to ease the burden imposed on these social networks, fruit vendors also employ street-level, risk-averse survival strategies meant to aid in evasion and/or increase income generation. These strategies emerge in response to vendors' liminal position and include: street patrols and alerts; geographical positioning and alliance building; and the performance and maintenance of personal, professional, and symbolic hygiene. Often these street-level survival strategies mimic characteristics of the formal, regulated economy in order to increase profit and/or minimise risk, although often a trade-off must be made between the two. These three survival strategies have limited range and do not diminish the larger systemic problem related to street vendor criminalization. If, and mostly likely when, these street-level strategies fail, vendors revert to a reliance on kinship and *paisano* networks. In the end, all four strategies promote short-term survival but fail to bolster long-term upward mobility. However, these survival strategies unite vendors in a common struggle. The strategies and their effectiveness are transmitted from vendor to vendor to both inform and create community.

#### ***Kinship and Paisano Networks***

Vendors rely on kinship and *paisano* networks for many reasons. These networks facilitate entry into the business, provide loans to buy pushcarts, create distribution channels between the wholesale fruit market and preparation sites, allow for collective drop-offs and pick-ups, and provide money to bail vendors out from jail, pay citation fines, or fund re-entry after deportation. The most important purpose they serve is to provide a safety net for vendors experiencing financial hardship following a crackdown.

Kinship and *paisano* networks are often the only financial safety net that vendors have at their disposal. Ricardo was able to secure a loan of \$1,000 from his cousins to buy a new cart after the health department confiscated his old cart. Fifteen days later, when it was confiscated again, he asked for another loan and bought yet another cart. When this cart was also confiscated, Ricardo's cousin hired him to work using a borrowed cart. Ricardo did not want to accumulate any more debt and worked on paying off the two loans instead of asking for more money. During this time, Ricardo was living with several cousins who helped him with his day-to-day expenses while he regained his footing. Financial problems brought on by crackdowns were not uncommon for Ricardo's cousins. Ten of them lived together and were witness to each others' ups and downs. Financial strain was dealt with as a group within this household of vendors.

Jesús' cousin, who was also his first boss, bailed him out of jail the second time he was arrested—a \$200 expense. The first time he was arrested, however, the network of vendors he belonged to was undergoing financial hardship and could not afford to bail him out. At the time Jesús had been in the United States for only two months. He recalled the time he served as one of the most difficult periods of his life; he neither slept nor ate the two nights he spent in jail. The evening he was released, he was unable to recover his belongings, including his wallet. He

recalled with much chagrin the irony of coming to this country to work and make money only to end up in jail and later on the streets begging for change:

We [Jesús and other vendors] were released [from jail] at 6:30 in the evening. I wasn't able to collect my personal belongings because it was late... I half remembered the telephone number for the house. So I went out and, being new to LA, I didn't even know which bus I could take to bring me here, I didn't know what to do. I began asking for money on the street so that I could call the house. They [other vendors] were embarrassed to ask girls [for money]. I would ask guys and they'd be rude in responding: "How about you get a job?! You lazy shit, asking for money on the street!" And I'd ask the women, but nothing... I spent an hour trying to get fifty cents.

Other vendors had similar confrontations with unfortunate circumstances. Maria Leticia had plenty of family members, some with legal residency, living in Los Angeles. When she lost her job as a garment worker she got a job from her sister as a fruit vendor. 'I started vending because, well [chuckles] I think we all began out of necessity, out of wanting to make some bucks.' Following a dispute with her husband and the loss of the apartment they shared, Maria Leticia lost custody of her eight children who all went to live with different family members. Maria Leticia went to live with her fruit vendor cousin, Carmen, and three other *fruteros*. During this time, Maria Leticia slept on the living room floor and largely depended on Carmen and the other vendors to cover her meals and personal expenses while she saved money. The other vendors were able to take turns shuttling Maria Leticia to and from work. However, after a few months and following a crackdown in which Carmen's cart was taken away, Maria Leticia moved in with another vendor—a man she had begun dating. After Maria Leticia's departure, Carmen admitted to me that having her cousin live with her was a financial burden. As Carmen stated, 'You can't kick family out into the street. You just stand it.' While Maria Leticia was glad to have the job and the ability to save some money, she did not want to be a fruit vendor because of the risks:

I want to start a restaurant or, if they take me, cleaning houses. That's what I want to do. Because, well, with the pushcart they'll move you, or the city busts you, or they throw out your fruit, take away your cart. It's very risky. What's more, sometimes it happens that they just throw away the fruit, but sometimes they also take *you* away [speaker's emphasis].

While Maria Leticia wished for a different type of job, a saturated labour market prevented her from securing it. She was unable to keep her garment factory job and did not belong to any network of domestic workers. Instead, her familial network was firmly rooted in the fruit vending business and she was able to exploit these connections for income and assistance in times of need.

The dependence on peers helps to counteract the negative effects of crackdowns and financial hardship. The risks tied to fruit vending are greatly diminished because of kinship and *paisano* networks; in fact, some vendors argue that this occupation could not be performed successfully were it not for a heavy reliance on social networks. Financial bailouts offered by social network peers allow vendors to get back to work but vendors' reappearance often prompts the LAHD and LAPD to renew its efforts and conduct crackdowns again.

The bounded nature of kinship and *paisano* networks means that if one vendor suffers financial hardship it will weigh heavily on all the vendors in the network; this is the trap of social networks (Stack 1974). Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) offered a similar argument about the enabling and constraining effects of social networks in her study of paid domestic workers. While social networks may ease financial hardship by distributing it over many shoulders, the web of reciprocal obligations impedes individual and collective upward economic mobility. However the ability to offer help, as well as to seek it, strengthens the ties between network members.

In an effort to ease the burden on these networks, fruit vendors also engage in daily, street-level, risk reduction strategies. These strategies are meant to aid in evasion and/or to improve income generation, though these two goals are often at odds with one another.

#### ***Street Patrols and Alerts***

Vendors use informal patrol and alert systems on the streets in order to relay information about ongoing crackdowns. This information is diffused through the use of cell phones or in drive-by warning shouts or whistles. These warnings provide real-time information about the location and route health inspectors and police are taking during crackdowns. On one occasion, as I chatted with a vendor, a man in a black pick-up truck drove by and whistled to him. Manuel, the vendor, immediately shoved his box of trash behind a shrub, took down his umbrella and pushed the cart into an alleyway behind a dumpster. After this, we sat on a bus stop bench chatting until the man with the pick-up truck drove by again signalling that the coast was clear. The driver in the pick-up truck was the vendor's brother-in-law and the owner of the cart he was using. He had been following the health inspectors at a distance, tracking their movements and giving warnings to fruit vendors in the area.

Accurate information about ongoing crackdowns can maximise the amount of time a vendor stays on the streets, which increases profitability. It is not enough to know that crackdowns are occurring; often this general information will lead to the hiding of pushcarts and product for an extended period of time provoking a loss of sales and customer contempt. Vendors must carefully balance how much they are willing to vend within the window of time they are given before health inspectors arrive. When information is accurate vendors can finish ongoing transactions while allowing enough time to hide the pushcart or, in less ideal instances, walk away from the pushcart.

For Jesús, the useful nature of warning systems was made apparent not in its use but in its absence:

The cops were following this man with a cart selling ice cream. I would see the man regularly; he would head up towards a school [to sell]...He'd always walk by, he'd greet me and I'd greet him, and I saw him walking up. He would come back around 5 in the afternoon, heading home. That day I saw him—I saw that he was running, pushing his cart, running as fast as he could! So I ask him, "What happened? Why you running?" He said to me, "I just forgot something at home, so I'm headed home." But he'd already seen the police coming. He didn't warn me because he knew that if he warned me, I was going to hide. So then they'd catch him. And since they were close behind, what he did was just to run straight [past me]... so the police arrived and saw *me* there!

The man with the ice cream cart had no kinship or *paisano* link to Jesús and therefore no obligation to keep him safe. Instead of warning Jesús, he lied to him so that he could have time to escape. As Jesús explained, had the ice cream vendor been kith or kin, this interaction would have been very different. These warning systems allow vendors, who typically work alone on street corners, to feel the safety and protection of a group. Information about ongoing crackdowns serves in the short-term to finalise or maximise sales, and in the long-term to evade LAHD and LAPD officers in order to vend another day.

#### ***Safety in Geography and Alliances***

The positioning of fruit vendors throughout Los Angeles County is anything but random. Vendors seek sidewalk spaces that offer access to customers, protection, a useful infrastructure, and potential allies. Geographical location is often a trade off, as safer locations are less profitable than high-risk locations. *Fruteros* must know how to carefully balance these risks and benefits when deciding where to vend.

The first criterion when scouting a new location is the presence and even abundance of Latinos. While hitching a ride from Domingo, a middle-aged cart owner always on the hunt for new opportunities, I was asked about the neighbourhood in West Los Angeles where a university

is located (Westwood Village). Were there vendors working in the area? Were there Latinos in the area? Although new to the area at the time, I had noticed plenty of Latinos—most often working in the service-oriented businesses of the neighbourhood. A few weeks later Domingo dropped one of his workers near the southern part of campus and tested the Westwood Village location; the vendor was soon cited by police and told to move. Domingo explained to me that a 'Latino area' to him was measured more by the number of Latino residents than by the actual number of Latinos in public spaces.

When discussing this issue with two other vendors, Carmen and Cristian, they explained that Latino neighbourhoods provided a sense of security because it was a known population. Cristian further explained that, to his knowledge, Latinos had more 'experience' buying from street vendors. Though fruit vending caters to a wide range of people and thrives in areas not considered to have high concentrations of Latino residents, some cart owners like Domingo use this information as a preliminary test to measure a neighbourhood's tolerance for their presence and to roughly calculate their potential for sales. This process is representative of immigrant entrepreneurship where businesses cater to a captive market of co-ethnics before catering to a broader clientele (Rath and Kloosterman 2000).

The first set of vendors that I met was well established in west Los Angeles County including the city of Santa Monica and the district of Venice. For these vendors, the farther west they ventured—into less Latino-dominated and more affluent neighbourhoods—the less severe police officers were, the more scarce gang members became, and the less frequently health inspectors appeared. Some of these characteristics might seem unexpected, but one reason vendors in these areas are not as severely regulated is that there are fewer of them. Areas like the Fashion District and MacArthur Park closer to downtown Los Angeles have many more street

vendors; as a result, crackdowns initiated by the Health Department have the capacity to be more successful if they focus on areas with many clusters of potential offenders. But while vending farther west carries less risk, it is also less profitable. West Los Angeles vendors see fewer pedestrians than their downtown counterparts. In these cases, a vendor must make a choice between lower risk and lower sales or higher risk and higher sales.

In an effort to seek out pedestrians in a city dominated by cars, vendors gravitate towards businesses that generate pedestrians. Banks, grocery stores, carwash lots, gas stations, and public transportation nodes are popular locations. The most popular location is near or in front of a bank. Vendor transactions are in cash and ATMs provide would-be customers with a ready supply of it. Among the vendors I visited and interviewed, all were working or had worked in front of a bank.

Banks also often employ street-based service workers, like parking attendants, with whom fruit vendors can create an alliance. These attendants may not be able to help when police or health inspectors arrive, but they can help to hide a vendor, convince a bank manager that a vendor does not pose a threat to the business, act as mediators when disputes between fruit vendors and customers arise, and relay information to cart owners if and when a vendor is arrested. All the vendors who worked in front of banks with parking attendants befriended them as soon as they could. Often times this was done by giving away free fruit salads. In the months that I worked with Carmen we saw four different parking lot attendants cycle in and out of the location and she made a special attempt to befriend each of them. Beyond the potential for strategic friendship, parking lot attendants are often co-ethnics who speak Spanish and can help vendors pass the time on slow days.

José, who worked in the parking lot of a large chain grocery store, also befriended the Latino store manager by offering free fruit. Conversations between the two often revealed very useful information for José. The parking lot where José worked additionally functioned as an informal mechanic's shop. When the mechanic's customers were dissatisfied with the service they received, they would sometimes complain to the grocery store manager. The manager, angry about their misplaced complaints, would often call the police. The police would do nothing on the grounds that this was private and not public property, and that fixing cars was not a crime. This information was transmitted to José by the manager:

I sometimes ask the manager of the grocery store "Hey and what if the cops come?" and he tells me not to worry about it and says, "He [the cop] has no reason to bother you cause when I call him they tell me they can't do anything because it's private property" and so we [fruit vendors] don't have to leave. The manager calls the cops on [the mechanic] but the cops don't do anything 'cause "it's private property."

While the information given to José by the store manager was not entirely accurate—vendors are in violation of ordinances that *could* prompt police officers to issue a citation or arrest—it nevertheless showcases the alliance between the two men. The store manager felt comfortable enough to share his job-related frustrations with the vendor who in turn felt safer on the street corner as a result of this friendship.

The sites where vendors decide to set up shop and the alliances they create at these locations do not limit or prevent LAHD/LAPD crackdowns. However, they do much to set a fruit vendor's mind at ease and may even facilitate evasion tactics down the line. These features of a street corner location can significantly reduce the level of stress a fruit vendor feels while on the job. And stress of the job was a recurring motif in all my conversations with vendors. Vendors who feel safer in their locations are likely to be more efficient workers and therefore more profitable and less likely to lean on their social networks for resources. It is for this reason that

street corners with positive geographic and alliance-building qualities are guarded ferociously and not easily ceded to other vendors (within and outside their vending networks). Vendors often know what street corners are taken in a given neighbourhood and will not violate this tenancy even when no fruit vendor is present.

### ***Personal, Professional, and Symbolic Hygiene***

Though fruit vendors operate in violation of health code regulations, they still attempt to create a hygienic establishment for their customers. Fruit vendors cannot certify their carts and operations completely because of their public space positioning and the lack of necessary infrastructure (e.g. running water and restroom facilities). The hygienic standards that fruit vendors do maintain function as buffers to compensate for this lack of official certification but, as I will show, these can sometimes backfire. The performance of hygienic practices among vendors—who lack any other visible certification—allows customers to engage in acts of scrutiny before commissioning their services. Performing hygiene serves as a survival strategy because it can attract and maintain regular customers. These customers, in turn, keep fruit vendors open for business. However, some of the markers used in the performance of hygiene also identify vendors to passing LAHD inspectors and LAPD officers.

I identify three categories of hygienic practices among vendors: personal, professional, and symbolic. They are not mutually exclusive, but capture different types of hygiene, some more viable than others. Personal hygiene encompasses those activities in which vendors engage to cleanse themselves or prevent contamination, such as washing their hands and wearing gloves. Professional hygiene is meant to improve the presentation and appearance of fruit vendors; the use of aprons is one example. Symbolic hygiene includes all the markers and objects that vendors use when setting up on street corners. These objects may or may not be used but their

very presence serves an important purpose. The presence of brooms and hand sanitizing lotion or the application of informative stickers on pushcarts are some examples of symbolic hygiene. All three types of hygienic practices lend some form of legitimacy to an otherwise illegitimate operation. These practices are also transmitted from vendor to vendor during training sessions.

Vendors know that they must perform personal, professional, and symbolic hygiene if they hope to acquire and maintain customers. Personal inspection by discerning customers can lead to or destroy a regular customer base. Vendors often keep cleaning supplies in view to broadcast their hygiene; they also spend time between customers cleaning their cart. Carmen and Cristian each kept a large hand sanitation bottle on top of their carts and a Windex spray bottle on the ground next to their cart. On one occasion when Carmen and Cristian were working together, a little boy with filthy hands ordered a bag of fruit. Carmen took the hand sanitation bottle, leaned over the boy, and asked him to stretch his hands out. In front of another waiting customer Carmen made the boy scrub his hands three times handing him napkins after each time. Cristian who was preparing the fruit salad as this happened asked the boy casually, 'Were you working?' to which the boy shyly and silently nodded. The middle-aged Latina customer waiting to be served stood back and nodded approvingly of the interaction between the vendors and the child.

On another occasion as I helped Carmen vend, an Orthodox Jewish man approached and asked Carmen about her knives. Carmen, who does not speak English, asked me to translate. The man asked Carmen if she used the knives for cutting anything besides fruit. Carmen looked puzzled as she shook her head and said, 'only fruit, only fruit, clean, I wash' in her broken English. The man nodded and ordered a \$4 bag of fruit. Though the man asked about the knife cleanliness for religious purposes, Carmen interpreted the man's questions through a health code

lens. Because most customers who express hesitation must be won over by the vendor's hygienic practices, Carmen immediately made an appeal to the man by saying her utensils were sanitarily clean even though his questions were about kosher cleanliness.

Attempts to broadcast hygienic practices can also have negative consequences when they help to identify vendors during crackdowns. The day Jesús was arrested he had seen the police and health inspectors closing in and had begun to walk away from his pushcart but had forgotten to remove his apron. Police officers were able to easily identify and catch him before he travelled too far. Nevertheless, vendors continue to wear aprons because this practice visually communicates professional and symbolic hygiene. Because most vendors wear jeans and hooded sweatshirts to work, the apron becomes a type of uniform in the most minimalist sense. Aprons also allow vendors easy access to the large number of bills they handle throughout the day. In the end, the practical and symbolic purposes of the apron outweigh the risk associated with donning it.

Although much effort is placed into the street-corner presentation of pushcarts and the performance of hygiene among vendors, less effort is shown in the backstage preparation of the cart. In such backstage preparation spaces, efficiency takes precedence over hygienic—both symbolic and actual—practices. This contradiction is an intrinsic part of 'backstage' place behaviour 'where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course' (Goffman 1959: 112). I often helped vendors prepare pushcarts in the early morning hours. The staging locations were often not commissaries (i.e. storage warehouses that offer preparation space, trash bins, and running water) but backyards where dogs were running around and roosters heard crowing from adjacent yards. Gloves were rarely used while fruit was handled and day-old fruit was often washed and re-peeled in an effort to make it appear fresh.

The use of the backyard space was an informal and unregulated substitute for the regulated space provided by commissaries. Despite the fact that both Ismael and Carmen's carts had commissary information on them, they did not and had not belonged to one in years—prohibitively high rental rates prevented them from being regular and consistent users of these commissary spaces. The lack of gloves in this backyard space also augmented the symbolic nature of their use in the public, street corner setting.

While hygienic practices serve a purpose on the street corner, both in presentation and in preparation, the vendors' activity in the backyard space falls outside the purview of discerning customers. Early morning pushcart preparation work is characterised by quick, efficient actions. On a daily basis vendors must purchase fruit from the wholesale market, drive it to the preparation location, unload several pounds of fruit and ice, peel several pounds of fruit, prepare carts, and load the heavy carts onto trucks so that they may be dropped off at their designated vending corners. And all this occurs in the morning hours before the street corner workday begins officially.

Performing hygiene on the street corner serves the purpose of attracting customers and generating income, but LAHD and LAPD officers know that this performance by vendors does not replace actual certification. This performance does not correct the problems related to airborne contaminants or refrigeration. Moreover, constant regulation and inspection by health department officials (of both informal and formal businesses) is an indication that, left to their own devices, many would fall short of the established standards. Vendors are unable to seek normal routes to health certification and therefore engage in informal sanitation and hygienic practices, but these can have both positive and negative consequences. If vendors do not perform hygiene adequately they may lose customers and income, but when they perform hygiene too

well they become more conspicuous to passing LAHD and LAPD officers. Still, like other survival strategies, the performance of hygiene is a short-term cure for a larger problem rooted in suspended informality.

### **Conclusion**

Compared to their immigrant informal worker peers, fruit vendors are at a considerable disadvantage. Unlike them, fruit vendors engage in an informal occupation that is explicitly forbidden in Los Angeles by city and county laws. The Los Angeles Health and Police Departments continuously monitor the streets of this city and enforce these laws. Crackdowns that result in the confiscation of goods, citations, and even arrest can be financially devastating for fruit vendors. This enforcement undermines fruit vendors' best efforts to operate and generate profit. In response, vendors implement survival strategies to remedy problem situations arising from their precarious positioning. These survival strategies include: a reliance on kinship and *paisano* networks; street patrols and alerts; geographic positioning and alliance building; and the performance and maintenance of personal, professional, and symbolic hygiene. The first strategy provides a safety net for vendors; distributing the hardship over many shoulders diminishes the economic vulnerability of a single vendor. The other three strategies serve to decrease vulnerability on the street and/or to increase income generation. In the end, survival strategies offer short-term remedies but do not resolve larger issues rooted in the regulatory structure of the Los Angeles local government.

The main and most reliable survival strategy is the financial dependence on kinship and *paisano* networks. When other survival strategies fail—that is, when crackdowns occur and financial hardship arises—vendors lean on the social networks of which they are a part to survive. Unfortunately, one vendor's hardship adversely impacts all of the members of the



network because it depletes the limited resources of the group. And because large-scale crackdowns typically target and apprehend many vendors at a time, it is likely that one social network will absorb the hardship of many fruit vendors at a time. This collective hardship and web of obligations makes it difficult for individual members of the group to save capital and pull forward. Fred Krissman notes that 'networks are critical to those living close to the economic margin and/or lacking access to the services often provided by formal institutions' (2005: 5). Unfortunately for fruit vendors, networks may also contribute to the perpetuation of that economic marginality. Street vendors also deploy other street-level, risk-averse strategies meant to diminish everyday vulnerabilities in an effort to avoid leaning on social networks. In many instances, these strategies force vendors to make tradeoffs between income generation and risk.

Survival strategies allow vendors to operate in the gap between codified law and enforcement, but do not dislodge them from their informal liminality. Unfortunately for *fruteros*, the trap of informality, the limited benefits offered by survival strategies, and the continuous enforcement of anti-vending regulations contribute to limited upward mobility, economic stagnation, and poverty.

Accounts provided by fruit vendors continuously point to the ways in which the poverty of their condition—fear of arrest, begging on street corners, recurrent fines and confiscations, economic hardship, and increased vulnerability—arises from their liminal positioning. This type of liminality and subsequent poverty might be expected from an immigrant group whose demographic characteristics include undocumented status, limited education and capital, and little to no English language proficiency. Yet, fruit vendors' immigrant peers in other informal occupations fare much better and are even upwardly mobile within the first generation. Fruit vendors are subjected to crackdowns that enforce what some scholars have called immigrant

poverty intolerant legislation (Light 2006). These crackdowns have accentuated and even perpetuated poverty among immigrant fruit vendors. The regulatory backlash encumbers *fruteros*' potential to thrive. Without the criminalization by the state, vendors would be able to accumulate profit instead of merely conserving for hardship. Profitability would lead to upward mobility and, in some instances, return migration. Instead, fruit vendors are trapped and marginalised in an occupation that diminishes the effort and hard work that they put forth.

Given these risks, why do vendors stay in this line of work? Several reasons exist. While the availability of fruit vending positions pull these individuals to Los Angeles, other undocumented workers vying for jobs saturate the labour market accessible to them outside of fruit vending (Light and Roach 1996). Some fruit vendors also believe that the freedom associated with fruit vending is preferable to wage labour in highly supervised settings; others believe that fruit vending, while inconsistent, pays better than wage labour. Emir Estrada and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo have also noted how new moral constructions are created among the Latino immigrant youth of their study to infuse dignity into the occupation of street vending (2010). Finally, the struggle associated with the occupation also helps to create community among fruit vendors. Narratives of struggle are often shared during social gatherings or during cell phone conversations throughout the day and allow the group to bond. During social gatherings, vendors take turns sharing stories of cunning or of particularly severe crackdowns. These narratives reify and enhance group membership. Familial obligations, offered and accepted, also root vendors to the occupation. Thus, many vendors opt to continue working as fruit vendors despite the increased difficulty of the job. And as Garni and Miller have noted: 'Restrictive policies frequently fail to dissuade migrants from attempting to secure livelihoods in the U.S., and instead force them to modify their behaviours, potentially suffer physical and

mental strain, economic hardship and social isolation' (2008: 448). Fruit vendors may be able to earn enough income to subsist, but mounting debt sometimes undermines their best efforts. *Fruteros* engage in an occupation with limited viable opportunities for upward mobility and many risks of downward mobility or economic stagnation. In the end, this occupation creates a cycle of poverty for this population of disadvantaged immigrant workers and fails to fulfil the promise of economic improvement through hard work and ingenuity.

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#### **Notes**

[1] The author and two fruit vendors made informal counts. These included street-based observation down major Los Angeles thoroughfares as well as commissary (i.e. pushcart storage locations) counts.

[2] Los Angeles County Code Section 7.62.020, prohibits vending food from commercial vehicles or pushcarts without a valid County Business License. Section 7.62.030, prohibits all vending from public sidewalks and allows vending on the public highways only from a motorised vehicle. All pushcarts or non-motorised vehicles are prohibited from vending upon any public thoroughfare. The City of Los Angeles Municipal Code, Section 42.00 prohibits all vending from public sidewalks.

[3] Many of the vendors in my study mentioned him by name but I was unable to interview him personally because he was serving time in prison for a domestic violence incident.

[4] 'Soft illegality' also alludes to the unwillingness of the LAPD to strictly enforce the rule of law in contexts where the rule breaker is perceived (by LAPD officers and the public in general) to be hard working and not a hardened criminal.

[5] While street vending is prohibited in the city of Los Angeles, there are special areas where vending is permissible. The Venice Beach Boardwalk is one such area; street vendors here are permitted to vend in designated areas along the boardwalk and are overseen by the LAPD and the LA Department of Parks and Recreation. Additionally, street vendors hawking printed matter are protected under the First Amendment. Other vendors operating from street-based motorized vehicles (e.g. hot dog street carts and taco trucks) are more commonly issued traffic citations for parking in one location for long periods of time.

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