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Title
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Author
DeVita, Deborah A

Publication Date
2005

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Urban Day Laborers in San Francisco

by

Deborah A. DeVita

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Nursing

in the

GRADUATE DIVISION

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

San Francisco

Date   University Librarian

Abstract

Background. Little is known about the social circumstances facing day laborers in an urban setting.

Objectives. We sought to describe men looking for work as day laborers in San Francisco; characterize those who have financial obligations to family versus those who were on their own; and describe their success at getting work..

Methods. A cross-sectional survey was conducted in English or Spanish on a boulevard where men gather to look for work. Interviews included sociodemographic characteristics (date and country of birth, education), immigration and acculturation (ability to read and speak English), family and housing status, health status, access to health care and health insurance. Financial obligations were measured by questions about family size, money sent to family, amount of money made, and success in obtaining work. Logistic regression analyses were done to characterize those with and without family obligations.

Results. 81% reported financial obligations; factors associated with family responsibilities included stable housing (Odds Ratio [OR] 5.7, 95% Confidence Interval [CI] 1.75-18.78, p=0.004) and marital status (OR 4.2, 95% CI 1.04-17.04, p=0.044). On average, subjects were successful in obtaining work half the days they looked, and having stable housing predicted success (56% vs. 39%, p=.001). Mean hourly wages were $9-$14 and of the 82% who were responsible for family, on average they sent $243/month.

Discussion. Day laborers have heavy financial burdens to family, low socioeconomic status and limited success in obtaining work. Further work is needed to correlate these findings with health status.

Key words: day labor; social context of health; undocumented workers

Introduction and Review of Relevant Literature

Day labor is often the initial means for Latino immigrants coming to America to earn more money than they could in their country of origin. For the majority of immigrants, money earned in the United States (U.S.) is used to support families in their home country. Though not all day laborers reside in the country illegally, the vast majority are thought to be undocumented (Walter, Bourgois, & Schillinger, 2002). The number of illegal immigrants in the U.S. has grown to 10.3 million, largely because of a steady stream of unauthorized migrants from Mexico (Hendricks, 2005). It is estimated that as many as 7 million people are employed in the United States without legal authorization, roughly 5 percent of the workforce. California has by far the most illegal immigrants, 2.4 million (Passel, 2004).

Day labor in an urban setting is often characterized as men in groups standing on a designated street corner waiting to be hired for a day of manual labor by employers looking for cheap labor. Urban day laborers are restricted to a niche at the margin of society, finding employment only in the informal economy of jobs that are traditionally too 'dirty', too dangerous, and too poorly paid for domestic workers to accept (Walter et al., 2002). Over the years a casual hiring process has evolved between the worker hired on a street corner, with or without legal papers, and the employer willing to use them. Working day-to-day often means they lack protection from workplace exploitation including a lower than average wage, employer failure to provide Worker's Compensation for job-related injury, no health insurance benefits, and a safe work environment that provides protective equipment (Walter et al., 2002).

Whether they enter the U.S. legally or without authorization, urban day laborers are clearly understudied as compared with the Mexican agricultural workers of the past fifty years known as migrant farm workers. A literature search yields several articles written by social scientists about the acculturation process of these earlier immigrants and how it relates to their health and health care. In general, lower levels of acculturation are inversely related to good health, revealing a large population of migrant workers at great risk for health problems (Bollini & Siem, 1995; Chan, Krishel, Bramwell, & Clark, 1996; Farmer, 2004; Solis, Marks, Garcia, & Shelton, 1990). Several articles tangentially included day laborers in their studies of hospital emergency room use, health insurance, work injury, and immigration issues (Krieger & Higgins, 2002; Kushel, Perry, Bangsberg, Clark, & Moss, 2002; Prentice, Pebley, & Sastry, 2005; Schur, Bernstein, & Berk, 1987).

Two articles found relate directly to day laborers in San Francisco. Walter et al. have published two papers on urban day laborers who were sampled from hospital and clinic patients, a population enriched for health problems by definition. They characterized this group as a vulnerable population, focusing on how these workers' social context interfaces with their risk for work injury and experience with health care. Both papers come from a qualitative study involving ethnographic technique of participant-observation supplemented by in-depth interviews. The first paper explores five emerging themes that are commonly held among injured day laborers: border passage; local dynamics of life on the streets; features of the workplace; emotional stress and family dynamics; and injuries and experiences with health services (Walter et al., 2002). In the second paper the authors summarize the experiences with the data and

propose a theory that links masculine identity in this population to social suffering, concluding that undocumented status prevalent in day laborers leads to vulnerability, defined as uncertainty, unpredictability and insecurity (Walter et al., 2003).

While these two papers contribute to a small literature on this growing segment of the urban population, they are limited by the selection of subjects. Information was gathered from 38 day laborers who had established a personal rapport with the investigator who collected data. This convenience sample limits generalizabilty of any findings. Other information, in particular on issues of the context of workers' lives and health services experiences, was obtained from a subset of 11 injured workers from the cohort of 38 and supplemented with data from one author's clinical experience providing primary care for this group. The limits in sample selection and size, combined with the focus on the injured worker, leave important questions about healthy day laborers unanswered.

Day laborers are visible now in cities throughout the U.S., and a starting point in looking at this highly visible yet under-studied population is to examine their social circumstance, defined in this paper as their living and financial situation. Day labor is an occupation apart from any other conventional description of workers. Understanding family size and financial obligations is a starting point in exploring the complicated lives of persons who daily face an uncertain job market.

The aims of this study were first to describe a community-based sample of men looking for work as day laborers in San Francisco. Second, since it is known that the majority of these men have come here to earn money to support their families, we sought to characterize those who have financial obligations to family versus those who were on

their own, and to determine characteristics of those who regularly send funds to family who are living apart from them. And third, we examined their ability to support themselves and their families by day labor, by describing their salary range and success at getting work.

Methods

Design

The study design was a cross-sectional survey of urban day laborers in San Francisco. The data collected for this analysis was gathered under a broader study of occupational and safety issues facing day laborers that included questions on work preference, job training protective equipment provided by employers, history of accidents and their over-all work experience impressions, and questions about health status, health care and coverage history and drug and alcohol use.

Sample and Setting and Procedures

The target population was Latino men standing on street corners in a 12-block section of a major San Francisco boulevard (Cesar Chavez Street) known to be a staging area for the hiring of casual workers or "day laborers". A research assistant, fluent in English and Spanish, was hired and trained to approach men for interview. The boulevard was known to have certain areas where Latino men from different countries congregated together to be available for potential employers to drive by and offer work for the day. A systematic approach was designed to spend equal amounts of time at each of twelve corner locations, and to recruit at different times of the day and days of the week. The interviews took place over a four-month period from July to October 2004.

Men were approached, told about the survey and asked if they would be interested in participating. Those who agreed were reimbursed after the interview with coupons that could be exchanged for a meal. If they were approached for hire during the interview, the interview terminated and they were reimbursed regardless of completing the survey. The study protocol was approved by the Committee on Human Research, the institutional review board of the University of California, San Francisco.

Data

The interviews, conducted in Spanish, took approximately 10-15 minutes, and included sociodemographic characteristics (date and country of birth, education), immigration and acculturation (ability to read and speak English), family and housing status, health status, access to health care and health insurance. To understand financial obligations to family, we asked: Do you have family or children you are financially responsible for? Are they in the U.S.? Are you sending money to these people? In order to answer questions about ability to support self and family, we asked: What do you do with the money you earn working? How much money do you send each month?

Work- related questions focused on the salary range and the time effort expended in job search. We asked: What is the average amount of time you wait to get picked up for a job? What days do you look for work? How many hours do you work weekly on average? What types of work have you been hired to do, and the minimum and maximum salary you have earned? Success in obtaining work was calculated as the average number of days working per week divided by the number of days spent looking for work.

Statistical Analysis

In order to describe the sample, means, medians, and proportions were calculated as determined by the variables measured. Second, in order to answer the questions about financial obligations to family, bivariate analysis compared sociodemographic characteristics of the laborers with and without financial obligations. Variables found to be statistically significant at alpha=0.10 were entered into a logistic regression to characterize those with obligations. And third, in order to describe salary and success at getting work, the sample's average salary was generated and the sample was described in terms of success in obtaining work. Those with and without financial obligations to family were compared on success in obtaining work using the t-test. Variables such as years of education and time since immigration were examined against success in obtaining work using Pearson's correlations.

All analysis were conducted using with SPSS (SPSS Inc., version 11.5, Chicago, Illinois, 2002), with final determination of statistical significance set at alpha= 0.05 and calculation of 95% confidence intervals for odds ratios.

Results

Between July and October 2004, we approached 139 men; 37 refused to be interviewed and one man was excluded. The excluded man was non-Latino, born in Algeria, a naturalized U.S. citizen who came to the U.S. to attend school, the only respondent who gave education as his reason for immigration and the only college graduate among the respondents. The sample size for analysis, therefore, was 101 Latino men.

Eighty-one percent reported financial responsibility for family. Table 1 describes the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample, by financial obligations. All reported good or excellent health status (97 %) but fewer (80%) reported knowledge of health care access. Eighty-two percent were undocumented, most were from Mexico or Central America, and 86% did not speak English.

We realized that many men were responsible for families outside the U.S., in addition to themselves and/or families in the U.S. These men lived with other workers in similar circumstances, crowding together to pool resources and lived near the work staging areas. In an effort to send money earned, they lived separately from their families. The top three answers to the question "what do you do with the money you earn " were: send to family, pay rent and buy food. We compared the characteristics of laborers who had no family responsibilities to those with family responsibilities either in the U.S. and/or outside the U.S.

In bivariate analysis we observed that men having family to support were younger, had resided for a shorter time in the U.S. and the Bay Area, lived with others, were less likely to speak or read English, had less education, were slightly more successful in getting work, worked more hours per week, and sent more money to their family. Factors significantly (alpha=0.10) associated with family responsibilities included time in the U.S., stable housing and marital status. When entered in a logistic regression, only marital status remained statistically significant, controlling for time lived in the U.S. and stable housing (Table 2). Those who were partnered were 6.8 times as likely as those unpartnered to have financial obligations (95% Confidence Interval [CI] 1.84-25.21, p=0.002).

Success in obtaining work, the third aim of this study, was poor; while they made efforts to find work nearly every day, they were only successful half of the time (mean proportion 0.5023, standard deviation 0.2336). Success in finding work was not significantly different for those with financial obligations to family as compared to those without. Variables significantly associated with success in obtaining work included time since immigration to the San Francisco Bay Area: the longer they lived in the area, the more successful they were (Pearson's correlation coefficient 0.220, p=0.028). Those speaking English were more successful as well, obtaining work 64% of the time versus 48% (p=0.021) with a distinct trend in ability to read English being associated with increasing success (42% for those with no reading ability to 81% for those with good reading ability, p=0.002). Those who were in stable housing were more likely to be successful (56% of the time) as compared to those without (39%, p=0.001). In linear regression, only stable housing remained significantly associated with success in obtaining work (p=0.001) (Table 3).

Mean hourly wages were $9-$14 and of the 82% who were responsible for family, on average they sent $243/month. Jobs worked, in the order of most frequently hired to do, were: painting, construction, moving, scraping paint, landscaping, carpentry, janitorial, asbestos removal, roofing, hauling and plumbing.

Discussion

This is one of the first published studies of urban day laborers, and provides contextual information for the further study of health and work in this largely invisible population. Systematic efforts to obtain a representative sample of this population,

similar to those undertaken in large studies of the homeless (Zolopa, et al., 1994), lend

strength to these findings. The study is limited by relatively small sample size. Cross-

sectional methodology and self-reported data may limit the validity of data obtained in a

sample with such a high proportion of undocumented persons (Gelberg & Siecke, 1997;

Valenzuela, 1999).

As discussed in papers by Valenzuela and Walter, day laborers are, in general,

suspicious people unlikely to respond candidly to a formal survey (Valenzuela, 1999;

Walter et al., 2002). They have become wary of outsiders after experiencing many

instances of employer abuse, police harassment, merchant and public complaints and

other travails suffered from seeking employment in this manner (Valenzuela, 1999). For

the illegal laborer, the threat of deportation is always present. The truth is yet another

luxury they cannot afford if they want to remain in the U.S., and so many have learned to

avoid the truth and instead give answers that may be socially acceptable to any type of

authority figure. For example, there is anecdotal evidence that illegal immigrants may

typically answer that they come from a Mexican border town in order to decrease the

distance needed to return to the U.S., should they be deported (personal communication,

E. Menendez, 2005).

This sample reported good to excellent health, and the same cautions about data

validity may hold in the interpretation of this finding. In order to be competitive in a

crowded worker market, a man may claim good to excellent health, as 97% of our sample

did, even though his health may have been compromised by an untreated work injury or

the ravages of years of poor health maintenance secondary to low socioeconomic living

conditions. Walter et al. discuss this phenomenon in their study of masculinity and

undocumented Latino laborers. An injured Latino worker may see himself in terms of a failed provider for his family and feel shame for being weak, thus collapsing his worthwhile masculine identity (Walter, Bourgois, & Loinaz, 2004). Daily street encounters with unpredictability, violence, competition and social isolation could lead to substance abuse and emotional distress (Walter et al., 2002), yet few respondents in our study admitted to substance abuse problems and none reported a need to access mental health care.

Results from this study differ from those of Walter et al., 2002, whose sample was not likely representative of day laborers. The heightened risk of work injury may exist, but are they really a vulnerable population as suggested by several authors (Gelberg, Andersen, & Leake, 2000; Kushel et al., 2002; Walter et al., 2004; Walter et al., 2002)? Many may have experienced much worse economic situations in their county of origin. Many may have also suffered the physical and mental anguish of being a witness to war and arrived here with unresolved grief associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. Are the men who have escaped these severe homeland hardships survivors willing to work hard towards a better future for themselves and their families, or a damaged population, vulnerable to only worse aspects of our affluent society? The true picture of this population is likely in-between, and confounded by cultural attributes and practical issues that prevent acknowledgement of any vulnerabilities. The need for work and the Latino masculine identity lead to men overstating their good health and fortune; by comparison, those seeking care may at last be acknowledging their vulnerabilities.

Implications and Further Research

This study provides a firm base from which to conduct further research to answer

questions more specifically. "Do you have family or children you are financially

responsible for?" was not adequate to capture responsibilities to different generations of

family. From a cultural standpoint, these men may feel responsible for their mothers and

siblings as well as their partner, children and the extended family of their partner. Further

research on the definition of family in this population may distinguish between complete

financial responsibility, such as being the sole earner responsible for children, versus

partial responsibility, such as sending money to parents or siblings to help out. Questions

about money earned and living expenses could be expanded in order to capture

information on discretionary income available to these laborers after supporting family.

Additional questions are raised by this first look at the social context of day

laborers. Understanding how the day labor market is organized and functions on a day-to-

day basis would inform persons responsible for programs and policies to better address

many of the complex issues surrounding immigration and work. Planning and instituting

policies on behalf of different segments of a populace requires an accurate portrayal of

the population that would benefit from such policies and resulting programs. Other

questions include: why is there this informal system of day labor, and what does it serve;

why have these workers not been absorbed into the mainstream labor market? Why have

immigrant Latino workers predominantly undertaken this type of employment?

(Valenzuela, 1999).

Day laborers are now part of the social and economic fabric of every urban

American city. The heavy financial burdens and low socioeconomic status of these

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Appendix: Development of the "Cesar Project" and participation by Deborah DeVita leading to the Master's Thesis

In Spring 2000, Enrique Menendez, M. D., approached Mary C. White, Ph.D., with a proposal for pilot study involving urban day laborers. The idea was to collect socio-demographic information from a large sample of Latino men known to be seeking jobs by standing on street corners along Cesar Chavez Boulevard in San Francisco. The study aim was to determine the accessibility and use of medical care by the day laborers, with a focus on occupational issues. Dr. Menendez was interested in investigating how the work these men were hired to do was affecting their health: specifically, how many of these men were in the United States illegally and were these day laborers subject to unsafe working conditions because of their undocumented status. He hoped to discover something about their health in general, both before they immigrated and in the present after working as a day laborer for a while, and was interested in if they had access to healthcare with or without insurance.

The Committee on Human Research approved the pilot study in Fall 2000 with Dr. White as the Principal Investigator and Dr. Menendez as the Co-principal Investigator. Subsequent to the approval, the study was set aside due to time and resource restraints.

In Spring 2004 Drs. White and Menendez decided to revive the project. I was enrolled in a Research Residency with Dr. White at that time and was invited to attend a meeting to discuss revising the interview instrument that Dr. Menendez had created a few years earlier. I was attracted to the ideas and questions generated by the interview. Dr.

White proposed that I participate in the project as the focus of my Research Residency. I conducted a literature search to add to the articles that were initially collected for the CHR application in 2000, took the lead in revising the interview, and participated in the renewal of the CHR application that included the revised interview.

After the project received renewed CHR approval, Dr. White hired a Research Assistant (RA) who was fluent in Spanish to conduct the interviews. I helped train the RA in asking the interview questions and monitored his data collection. I set up the SPSS file and did all the data entry. Supervised and advised by Dr. White, I conducted the data analysis in Winter 2005. The analysis yielded some interesting findings beyond the original idea of health and occupational hazards, and led us to discuss the possibility of writing a paper for publication with a focus on family and the financial burden of the day laborers. At Dr. White's suggestion and with a future paper in mind, I wrote an abstract on the preliminary analyses and submitted it as a poster presentation for the School of Nursing Community of Scholars Day on April 5, 2005.

The combination of the journal articles I found for the literature review and the unexpected family financial findings of the analyses cemented my commitment to writing a paper for publication. I was very impressed with three papers: an unpublished study of preliminary findings of a day labor survey done by the UCLA Center for the Study of Urban Poverty (Valenzeula) and two journal articles written by physicians at UCSF (Walter, et al.). The UCLA paper examined data from a survey done using standard sampling techniques but using the unique approach of hiring former day laborers to be part of their interview team. As a student in the UCSF School of Nursing Doctorate program I have taken several courses that prepare students to perform survey studies, but

the UCLA study caused me to expand my research horizons and see the possibilities beyond traditionally taught methodology. The two UCSF papers had a similar intensifying effect on my knowledge of research up to this point in my education. Walter et al. combined qualitative ethnographic techniques on a small sample of day laborers with observations from clinical practice at San Francisco General Hospital, resulting in the only two papers I found specifically about my population of interest. These papers presented me with ideas and concepts far beyond anything I had imagined when analyzing the socio-demographic and health-related data collected for the Cesar Project.

My intent is to take the Cesar Project further, using known techniques to obtain a larger, representative sample and using an interview instrument that asks questions specifically related to the family responsibility and financial data that has become the focus of my interest in this project. In the meantime, as I entered the Ph. D program as a Bachelor's prepared student, the Cesar Project was presented to and accepted by my Graduate Division – approved Committee as a thesis for a Master of Science degree. This thesis, submitted as a publishable paper, uses the conventions of "we" in presenting methods and findings. The work, however, is mine, under the supervision and advice of my thesis Chair, Dr. Mary White, and thesis Committee, Dr. Catherine Waters and Dr. Brad Aouizerat.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of 101 male day laborers in

San Francisco, CA, 2004

Characteristic	Financial obligation to send money earned to family			
	Yes n(%)n=82	No n(%)n=19	Total n(%)	P value
Age (n=99)				.388
range	17.9-62.7	24.2-56.2	1.79-62.7	
mean	35.9	38.3	36.4	
median	33.8	33.9	33.9	
Martial status				.004
Married or living with someone	46 (56)	3 (16)	49 (49)	
Single	33 (40)	14 (74)	47 (47)	
Divorced	3 (4)	2 (11)	5 (5)	
Country of origin				.480
Mexico	59 (72)	14 (73)	73 (72)	
El Salvador	7 (8)	2 (11)	9 (9)	
Guatemala	6 (7)	1 (5)	7 (7)	
Honduras	5 (6)	0 (0)	5 (5)	
Nicaragua	3 (4)	1 (5)	4 (4)	
Other	2 (2)	1 (5)	3 (3)	
Education				.584
0 to 6 years	39 (48)	9 (48)	48 (47)	
7 to 11 years	29 (35)	5 (26)	34 (34)	
12 or more years	14 (17)	5 (26)	19 (19)	
Ability to speak English				.294
Yes	10 (12)	4 (21)	14 (14)	
No	72 (88)	15 (79)	87 (86)	
Documentation				.578
Undocumented	67 (82)	14 (74)	81 (80)	
Permanent visa	5 (6)	3 (16)	8 (8)	
Temporary visa	7 (8)	1 (5)	8 (8)	
US citizen by birth (n=1) or naturalized (n=3)	3 (4)	1 (5)	4 (4)	
Time (years) in the US				.021
range	.02-34.7	.27-37.6	.02-37.6	
mean	5.8	10.6		
median	2.9	6.7		

Table 1. (continued) Sociodemographic characteristics of 101 male day laborers in
San Francisco, CA, 2004

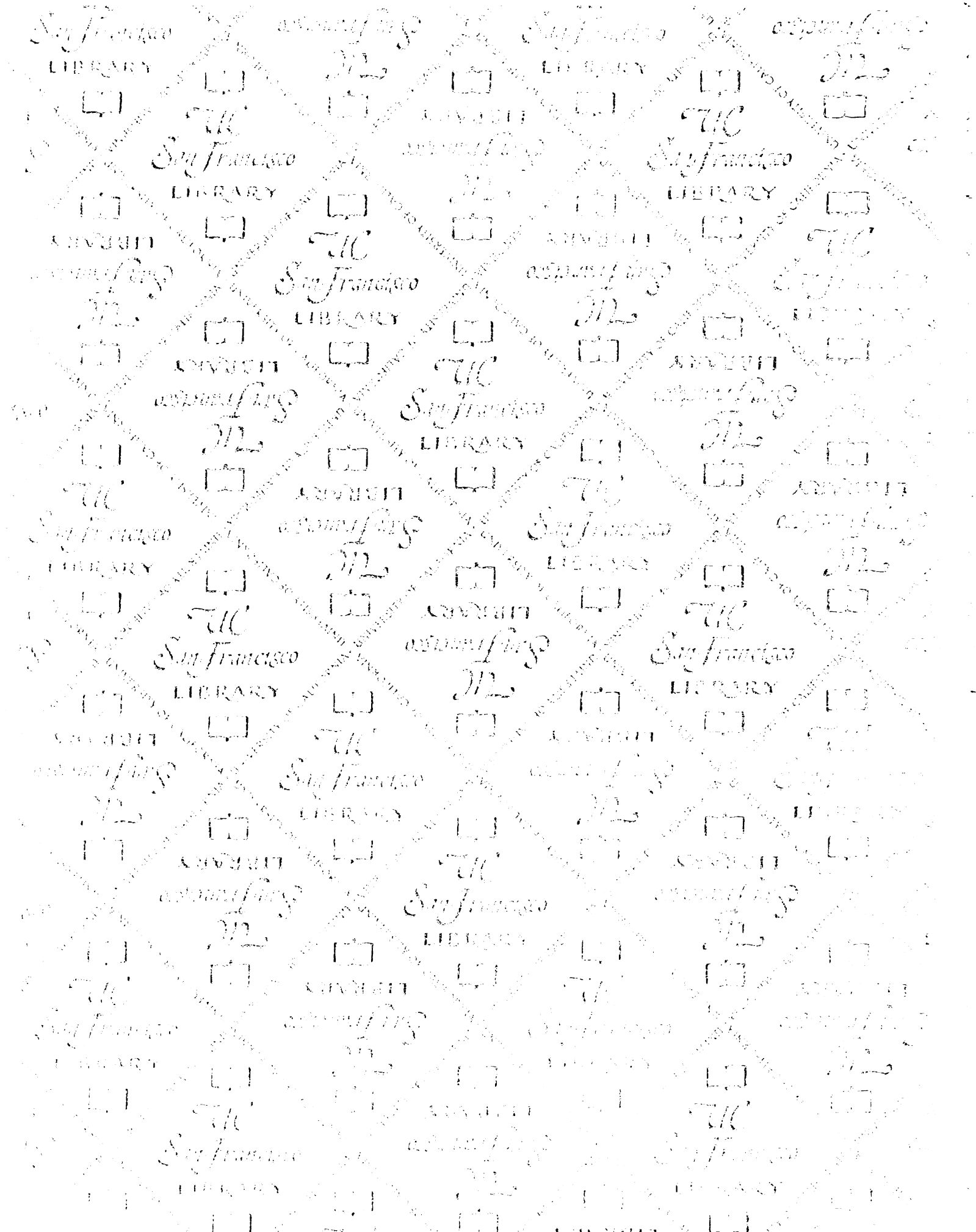| Characteristic	Financial obligation to send money earned to family			
	Yes n(%)n=82	No n(%)n=19	Total n(%)	P value
Time (years) in the Bay Area				.105
range	.02-24.7	.27-25.7	.02-25.7	
mean	4.1	6.5		
median	1.7	5.1		
Health Insurance				.037
Yes	0 (0)	1 (5)	1 (5)	
No	82 (100)	18 (95)	100 (99)	
Health Status				.937
Poor	2 (2)	1 (5)	3 (3)	
Fair	26 (32)	6 (32)	32 (32)	
Good	48 (58)	10 (53)	58 (57)	
Very Good	4 (5)	1 (5)	5 (5)	
Excellent	2 (2)	1 (5)	3 (3)	
Self-perceived substance abuse problem				.282
Yes	7 (9)	3 (16)	10 (10)	
No	75 (91)	16 (84)	91 (90)	
Proportion of time getting work (days got work/days looked for work)				
range	.00-1.00	.14-1.00	.00-1.00	
mean (SD)	.52 (.22)	.44 (.28)		
median	.50	.41		
Time spent looking for work				.110
range	0-50	4-40	0-50	
mean (SD)	22 (11.5)	17 (11.5)		
median	20	13		
Salaries earned (in dollars)				
range	$3- $40	$5- $40		
mean minimum-maximum(SD)	$9- $14 (3-5))	$9- $14 (3-5)		
median minimum-maximum	$9-$12	$9-$12		

Table 2. Results of the logistic regression of characteristics associated with financial obligation among a sample of day laborers

Characteristic	Adjusted Odds Ratio	95% Confidence Interval	P value
Time in the U.S.	0.9	0.88-1.01	.085
Stable Housing	5.7	1.75-18.78	.004
Partnered (marital status)	4.2	1.04-17.04	.044

Table 3. Results of the linear regression of characteristics associated with proportion of time getting work (days work/days looked for day) among a sample of urban day laborers

Characteristic	Beta	95% Confidence Interval	P value
Years since immigrated to the SF Bay Area	.007	-.004-.013	.087
Speak English	-.100	-.236-.036	.149
Stable Housing	.164	.072-.256	.001