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District Program

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STREET VENDING

# A RISKY BUSINESS



MICHAEL OWEN BAKER — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Street vendor Jose Flores makes a sale at his snack cart at a playground at Van Nuys Sherman Oaks War Memorial Park recently.

**Squeezed:** Illegal hawkers of food, sodas, other goods face gang extortion and arrest. Would legalization help?

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Fruit vendor Mariposa Gonzalez remembers the advice given by her mother, also a street vendor. Talk back to the gang members who demand money. Say you don't have any cash. Throw a pineapple if need be.

"They're all tattooed up," Gonzalez said of the gang members who hassle her. "You're scared. But you have to stand up for yourself."

Street vending is prohibited in Los Angeles,

but that doesn't stop an estimated 50,000 vendors from hawking sodas, sausages and handmade goods in neighborhoods such as Westlake, Pacoima and Boyle Heights. Working from pushcarts and food trucks, vendors generate \$504 million in annual sales, a recent report found.

But the illegal nature of their work makes vendors easy prey for extortion and robberies. As Los Angeles considers allowing street vending, advocates argue legalization will encourage more crime reporting and reduce violence

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## 50,000

Estimated number of vendors working in the Los Angeles area

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— City Councilman Gil Cedillo

Los Angeles would follow cities like New York and Seattle, which allow vending.

Advocates point to vending's economic benefits: A December report by the nonprofit group Economic Roundtable projects that legalization could bring in \$43 million in state and local taxes.

### Selling on gang turf

Around the MacArthur Park neighborhood on a recent night, vendors crowded the sidewalk, selling grilled sausages, wallets and bottled water. One man called out, "Licenses, passports." The area has long had a reputation for both illegal vending and gang activity.

Vendors such as Claudia Lopez, who sells hot dogs at Vermont Avenue and 12th Street, stays away from sidewalks known to be controlled by gangs, citing the "rent" they can charge.

"It happens to everyone," Lopez said of being approached by gangs.

In the mid-1990s, the city tested a temporary pilot vending program in this neighborhood, allowing tamale vendors in MacArthur Park. Rocio Ramirez, owner of Mama's Hot Tamales restaurant, took part in the program, which was deemed a success.

The vendors had the blessing of the city and weren't hassled by gangs, Ramirez said.

But asked if she believes legalization will deter the extortion around the park, Ramirez shook her head. "Not necessarily," she said in Spanish. Gang activity is too widespread, she said.

City Councilman Gil Cedillo, whose district includes MacArthur Park, supports legalization, saying that the city's policy toward street vendors has been "uneven."

Cedillo said legalization could help vendors feel less vulnerable.

"You have a micro-industry that doesn't have standing," Cedillo said. "The first thing we have to do is give them standing so they can address crime."

Others believe legalization will decrease neighborhood crime.

"More eyes and feet on the street will strengthen commercial areas," said Isela Gracian, vice president of operations at the advocacy group East L.A. Community Corp.

"And that will improve the overall safety of the neighborhood."

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*Michael Owen Baker contributed to this report.*



## Vendors

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against workers. Vendors are in a vulnerable position, said Mark Vallianatos, an adjunct professor at Occidental College, who serves on the steering committee of the Los Angeles Street Vendor Campaign. They believe reporting the crime is riskier than the benefits of going to the police, Vallianatos said.

"Businesses fear police will say, 'Why were you vending in the first place?'" he said. Gonzalez, 31, has been robbed five times, she said. In Boyle Heights, a gang member pulled out a gun. She said she can't remember if she filled out a police report.

### Police dilemma

Los Angeles Police Department Detective Peter Barba has worked on both sides of the issue. He oversees the Van Nuys Gang Unit and served on the LAPD's street vending task force, which cracks down on vendors.

"It's sometimes just easier for the victims to pay (the gangs)," Barba said. Vendors risk robbery or payment of a weekly tax or "rent" — typically \$25 to \$100 — to work



Leon Javier reads a paper by his hot dog cart at Van Nuys Sherman Oaks War Memorial Park recently.

MICHAEL OWEN  
BAKER — STAFF  
PHOTOGRAPHER

in gang territory.

Barba took part in an undercover operation in Van Nuys after an elderly vendor was threatened by a member of the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, gang.

MS-13 gang member Mardoqueo Guevara demanded the vendor pay \$25 in protection money "or risk being killed or having his taco stand burned down" by Guevara and his companions, court documents state.

Guevara was charged with extortion, robbery and carrying a loaded, unregistered firearm. He was sentenced to 17 years.

In another case, two members of a South L.A. gang were charged with attempting to extort \$50 a week in

rent from food truck vendors. One victim had a rock thrown through the front windshield of his truck, officials said.

Many vendors are not U.S. citizens, advocates say.

"I'm doing this because I can't do regular work," said Carlos, who sells chips and ice cream sandwiches in Van Nuys Sherman Oaks War Memorial Park.

In one instance, Carlos said two men put a gun to his head on Vanowen Boulevard and forced him to strip. They discovered the \$300 he'd hidden in his underwear.

### Threat of arrest

Vendors face not only the threat of violence by gangs,

but potential arrest. Police made more than 1,200 vendor arrests last year, while hundreds of citations were issued, a city report states. In some cases, vendors' food or goods are confiscated by police.

The LAPD was unable to provide the annual cost to the city of enforcing vending laws.

Los Angeles is in a bind, Barba believes. Police issue tickets to vendors but also want them to report crime.

"It's backwards," Barba said of the city's approach to gangs. "There has to be a better way."

A City Council committee is expected to take up the street vending proposal later this year. If approved,