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### **Author**

Frumin, Zoe

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# Designing for Street Vendors: The Importance of Equitable and Accessible Parks

Zoe Frumin, MURP • 2023

## Issue

Parks are a fundamental part of the urban landscape, providing dedicated space for recreation, connection with nature, and community cohesion. In many cities, parks are one of the few spaces where all are welcome and entrance is free. There are also significant and proven health benefits associated with living close to parks, but not all communities have equal access to such benefits. The public realm is not a universally safe space, and members of marginalized communities often face danger, harassment, and assault when spending time in parks and public spaces. For some park users, their presence within these spaces is even criminalized.

Street vendors are one of the groups who are often routinely excluded and criminalized for existing in the public realm. As a group of individuals who are primarily elderly, undocumented, female, disabled, and immigrants, vendors withstand hardship and discrimination on compounding scales. Many states have anti-vending laws and regulations that limit vendor behavior, but this tide is changing. Following decades of advocacy work, U.S. street vending laws are being updated to decriminalize vending. Still, more can be done to support these vendors and ensure their safety in the public realm.

This toolkit is meant to outline specific design and policy recommendations for urban designers, planners, and park advocates to better support the vendor community and their continued presence in public spaces. The following recommendations can be applied to a broad geographic boundary, but to root the recommendations in real-world examples, Los Angeles street vendors are used as a case study.

## Policy Recommendations

**Create a loan program for accessing safe and approved equipment.** The cost of code-compliant food carts is the first and most pressing hurdle that vendors face when trying to obtain a permit for vending in the state of California. The health department puts equipment regulations and design standards into place to ensure that food sold in the public right of way is safe for consumption. Interviews with local vendor advocates suggested that municipalities can make health code standards more achievable by:

- » Working with design organizations and manufacturers to develop an affordable mobile food cart that meets both health and safety regulations.
- » Establishing or supporting existing banks, credit unions, or other financial institutions in creating a loan program to make the acquisition of these carts accessible to local vendors.

**Continue to ease permitting processes.** Complicated and expensive permitting processes create significant barriers for vendors aiming to operate compliant businesses. Through easing restrictions and providing straightforward permitting processes that are food cart-specific, agencies can help foster a more equitable and inclusive vending regulation environment.

**Create partnerships with commercial kitchens near popular vending zones.** Vendors need a reliable and clean space to prepare food and store their carts during off hours. Underutilized industrial kitchen spaces could be made available to vendors for this purpose. This is particularly applicable to places of worship, community centers, schools, and restaurants that only use their kitchen space and storage during specific times.



Figure 1.

Illustration of vendors serving customers at their sidewalk booth

**Delegate a trusted organization to run outreach and education around regulations.** The lack of trust between vendors and the regulatory bodies who enforce anti-vending laws and issue permits is an ongoing challenge in Los Angeles and beyond. To ensure that rules, regulations, and rights are well understood amongst the vendor community, they should be involved in making the rules and have access to a reliable and trusted organization that is responsible for communicating those rules through a variety of accessible outreach methods.

## Design Recommendations

**Do Away with “No Vending Zones” and Other Policies that Intentionally Restrict Vendor Mobility.** Central to a street vendors’ economic success is their ability to move around a city and follow foot traffic. Historically, state authorities have tried policies such as “no vending zones” to maintain control over when and where vendors can operate. This tactic of confining vendors to certain spaces undermines their right to mobility and the essential logic of vending.

**Support the Creation of Special Vending Zones.** An alternative to “no vending zones” are “special vending districts” that are built to accommodate vendors with clear safety and accessibility considerations. Such zones would have dedicated spaces for vendors and vending amenities that foster connections between vendors and residents. To be successful, special vending zones should be created in existing vending hubs, or areas with high potential to become hubs.

**Provide Vending Amenities.** In public spaces, the co-location of the following amenities could make vending more accessible and safe for many local vendors:

- » Trash cans and clean-up services.
- » Connection to the power grid.
- » Access to reliable and clean water for both drinking and cleaning.
- » Accessible pathways.
- » Shelter from the elements.
- » Toilets.
- » Outdoor furniture for customers.

**Allocate Space.** Vendors locate themselves in areas where they can capitalize on heavy and consistent foot traffic. Allocating space for vending in high-traffic areas, while also maintaining ADA access to the public right of way, is necessary to keep the public realm open and safe for all users.

## Conclusion

The recommendations provided within this toolkit are meant to serve as a starting point. Due to time and resource limitations, the researcher did not work directly with vendors to develop these recommendations. This limits findings to initial ideas that need to be further reviewed, edited, and approved by vendors and park users in the design and co-creation of a place-based public space. The ultimate goal of this work is to create a framework and foundation for designing parks and public spaces that are safe, livable and inclusive of the vendor community.

## For More Information

Frumin, Z. (2023). Equitable park design toolkit (vendors) (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/438566cc>

Bennett, C., Philipson, J., Cummings, S., McKeon, K., & B. Payette. (2021). Unfinished business: How food regulations starve sidewalk vendors of opportunity and what can be done to finish the legalization of street food. <https://publiccounsel.org/new-report-exposes-how-flawed-food-laws-fail-street-vendors/>