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Increasing Equity in LA's New Street Vending Permit Program to Increase Quality of Life for Vendors

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POLICY BRIEF

Increasing Equity in Los Angeles’ New Street Vending Program: Best Practices for Implementing the City’s Sidewalk Vending Ordinance

2019 | Nichole Heil MURP '19

ISSUE

Street vending has been a part of the economic and social fabric of Los Angeles since the 19th century. However, it remained in the shadows until the City Council decriminalized it in 2017, reducing the penalty for street vending from a misdemeanor criminal offense to an administrative fine. This was the culmination of a street vendor organizing effort which started due to the burden of fines on vendors and the heightened risk of deportation faced by vendors with criminal records. Since then, groups continued organizing to push for a fully legalized vending permit system which would allow vendors to operate “above ground.”

This organizing effort paid off in 2018 when the California Legislature passed the Safe Sidewalk Vending Act (SB 946), which legalizes street vending statewide, prohibits criminal penalties for sidewalk vending, and provides a framework to recognize vendors. Under this law, local jurisdictions can establish regulations to protect valid health, safety, and welfare concerns, but they cannot outright ban vending or otherwise enact burdensome place restrictions. Shortly following the signing of

SB 946, the LA City Council worked to pass a local ordinance (Ordinance 185900) to provide rules and regulations for vendors within city limits.

APPROACH

In order to understand how the rules and regulations of the Los Angeles ordinance affect current street vendors, three methods were deployed: participant observation, mapping, and comparative study. The researcher observed street vendors in the field to classify different types of vendors and understand how they use space and interact with pedestrians. This was followed by mapping the legal “vendable” areas to gauge how the specific spatial restrictions outlined in the rules and regulations affect the number of vendors allowed to sell their products on the ground. Finally, the researcher compared the Bureau of Street Services rules and regulations to other plans with the city’s departments, including Transportation’s Great Streets Strategic Plan, City Planning’s Complete Streets Design Guide, and the Bureau of Engineering’s R-permit rules to compare the rules affecting street vendor sidewalk usage to other private businesses.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- While SB 946 protects street vendors’ ability to work, the Los Angeles ordinance seems to regulate street vendors as if they were obstructions on the sidewalk.
- The city’s sidewalk ordinance fails to recognize the complex social, economic, and community aspects of street vending.
- There is now an opportunity, because of legalization, to work with vendors to measure their contributions to the local economy and create narratives around vendor experiences.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Three key findings emerged from this research. First, there are various types of vending which are impacted differently by state and city regulations. Second, under the current rules and regulations, many vending operations are still illegal and are vulnerable to fines, citations, and the loss of economic opportunity. Third, the city's regulations are inconsistent with other municipal documents designating the acceptable use of sidewalks.

CONCLUSIONS

- The Los Angeles Bureau of Street Services (BSS) should run an education-first type of enforcement to help vendors adapt and learn about new restrictions.
- BSS should study pedestrian patterns in no-vending zones and other restricted areas to revise cumbersome restrictions. This would allow for the economic inclusion of street vendors into Los Angeles' economy.
- BSS should create maps of “vendable” areas along corridors in popular community market vending areas to show “slots” where vendors can set up to reduce confusion over what is and is not acceptable.
- Space restrictions related to accessibility should adhere more strictly to ADA definitions and objective safety concerns.
- The city should facilitate regular working groups with vendors, create an autonomous vendor-led representation organization, and invest money in grants and workshops to help vendors.
- BSS should work with other city departments (i.e., planning, transportation, community development) to create a robust vending economy.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Heil, N. (2019). *Increasing equity in Los Angeles' new street vending program: Best practices for implementing the city's sidewalk vending ordinance*. (Master's capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: https://www.lewis.ucla.edu/2019-capstone_heil_la-street-vending/