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Title

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In the spring of 2021, IGS launched a two-year Diversity and Entrepreneurship Fellowship Program. Cal-in-Sac Fellows conducted original research focused on the challenges and opportunities facing women- and POC-owned small businesses and diverse entrepreneurs in California. This series includes Op-Eds, blogs, policy briefs and other research products that capture key findings of the students' research. Learn more at <https://igs.berkeley.edu/matsui-center/fellowships/cal-in-sacramento>.

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SWAP MEET VENDORS: AN EXPLORATION OF NEGLECTED VOICES

COVID-19 has undoubtedly impacted small businesses and businesses owned by members of marginalized communities in unparalleled ways. Swap meet vendors throughout Southern California have particularly had to bear much of this financial burden as their businesses closed at the start of the pandemic. These vendors were still expected to pay rent, were largely unable to access their merchandise, and received little to no tangible help from the state to stabilize their businesses.

OVERVIEW

By conducting interviews with seven swap meet vendors, I learned more about their personal backgrounds, how they got involved with swap meets, what their experiences have been like being small business owners during a pandemic, and what their biggest struggles have been in light of closures. For the most part, the vendors I spoke with were Latinx-identifying and they had anywhere from seven to twenty-five years working in swap meets. Most got involved either as a personal choice or because one of their family members was involved beforehand. One vendor shared that they started selling since it was one of the few jobs where they could make a living despite their inability to communicate in English.

FROM OPERATING AT FULL CAPACITY TO A FULL CLOSURE

Vendors expressed that when the pandemic broke out property owners closed swap meets to abide with nation-wide closures. From this point onward, vendors were unable to access their merchandise for two months until they were given the option to sell their merchandise outside in parking lots. Vendors explained that in some rare instances their rent payments dropped about 15% to 35% for the two initial months of closure; yet, others shared that their rent was not decreased or readjusted and post-closure rents have actually increased and accumulated. A vendor who sells baptism clothes explained that even though they were allowed to sell merchandise outside in parking lots, churches remained closed, so the need for their products was nonexistent so long as churches did not reopen. This was a recurring trend amongst all vendors, with all of them detailing how their supply chains were hit hard as a result of the pandemic. In essence, even though swap meets were slowly reopening, this did not mean warehouses reopened or that

swap meets were operating at their same capacity. The experiences of vendors exemplify how swap meet closures not only had a direct financial and emotional impact on those who work there, but also those who supply the goods, those who buy the goods, and those who run these facilities.

PRIMARY CHALLENGES

The distress of vendors was evident as they explained that despite having the state open up again, they are still not selling the same quantities that they were pre-pandemic. On average, pre-pandemic, vendors would make anywhere from \$0 to \$300 daily depending on the time of year and demand for their products. This amount is low given that many vendors have informal businesses where they lack access to benefits that other more established small businesses may have access to. However, vendors mentioned that in the aftermath of closures, rents have increased, sales have dropped, and their need to survive has heightened. Many vendors are also parents or primary providers, so operating their small businesses in conjunction with having their children at home has proven to be challenging. Some vendors expressed their gratitude for the LA Food Bank as a support system supplying their kids with food in light of school closures. Most, if not all vendors stated that having sufficient money to feed their families has been one of the biggest challenges given that their source of income was paused. Stimulus checks were also out of the picture for most, since vendors come from mixed status families, which limited their ability to get help.

Another vendor noted how pre-pandemic, they were working at a swap meet in South Central Los Angeles that has permanently closed as a result of the pandemic. This vendor was subsequently forced to relocate with the added stress of not knowing where they could continue their small business. The gradual reopening of swap meets has also not been what vendors anticipated with many explaining that sales are just not the same as before. There are less and less people visiting swap meets, which has been detrimental given that the vendor's source of income is depleting. There was one success story, however, with a vendor explaining how many of their customers come from abroad, so closure actually propelled them to upload their products to an online platform, where they are able to include merchandise images for clients. As a result, clients no longer need to fly to Los Angeles with the convenience of being able to view products virtually. This case is unique given that most vendors were primarily Spanish-speaking and

they explained how their inability to speak, read, or understand English has critically hindered their ability to apply for state help or find an alternate means to continue their businesses online.

CONCLUSION

As to what the future holds? Vendors explained that they are taking things day by day and gradually trying to get back on their feet as they continue to navigate the aftermath of the pandemic. Moving forward, vendors are optimistic that sales will increase and they will retain their ability to be small business owners.