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Urban governance and health conditions of street vendors in Mexico City

As in many other Latin American cities, street vending has been rife in Mexico City since colonial times. Despite being a century-old trade, vendors' working and living conditions are not optimal due to intense persecution and harassment from local authorities. For two months in summer of 2021, I interviewed street vendors, leaders of street vending associations, and governmental officials. I interviewed vendors located outside of subways stations and within neighborhoods, finding a wide range of socioeconomic heterogeneity among vendors. By understanding how street vendors are organized, this research explores how informal employment impacts the health of vendors.

Most of the street vendors I interviewed belong to a membership-based street vending organization that emits licenses for vendors to legally work in public space. Despite their legality, some street vendors are more protected than others. In some locations of the city, street vendors have greater social cohesion since many of them are neighbors and they have a closer relationship with the leader of the vendor organization. While more homogeneous groups of vendors have tighter social networks that allow them to remain in place and have better working conditions, their impermanence in public space is a constant in their lives, living them at risk of being relocated or evicted from their physical locations. Urban renewal projects and shifts in government lead to constant re-negotiations with local authorities, leaving vendors under conditions of uncertainty and distrust of the authorities. The image below shows an example of this, with the construction of a commercial mall that will eventually function as a multi-modal transportation hub (on the right) and the bustle of vendors outside a highly trafficked subway station (on the far left), a location where the majority of vendors have been working for the last forty years. As it has happened in other subway stations in the city, there is an intense tension between modernizing transportation and the displacement of street vendors, making vendors uneasy for their future livelihoods.



Construction site for a modern transportation hub and commercial mall outside a subway station: a menace for the permanence of street vendors. Photo credit: Irene Farah



Mobile vendor approaching tenured street vendors outside subway station with the Basilica of Guadalupe in the background. Photo credit: Irene Farah

Most prominent health determinants

As I asked vendors for the dangers of vending, many complained about the vulnerability of selling in public space, being exposed to inclement weather conditions such as heavy rainfall, cold air, extreme heat, or strong winds due to limited workplace infrastructural conditions that do not safeguard them from such hazards. Rain has the largest impact on vendors' financial insecurity since it hinders traffic of customers walking on the streets, forcing many vendors to suspend their

operations, impact the quality of their goods and merchandise, and affect their health directly by becoming susceptible to illnesses. While the image below does not depict the recurrent flooding of streets, it does show a vendor taking shelter from the rain in a neighborhood *tianguis* (itinerant market).

Throughout the interviews, the promise of social mobility also became a constant topic, with vendors simultaneously being proud of their trade and striving to provide their children with greater educational mobility to achieve a higher occupational status. However, the lack of social networks connected to white-collar jobs, a highly competitive labor market, and racial barriers leave them within the same social status, causing frustration and toxic stress which impact their health.



Street vendor taking shelter from the rain in a neighborhood tianguis. Photo credit: Irene Farah

Formal and informal politics

Street vendors have been historically viewed by government authorities and urban elites as representations of underdevelopment, chaos, congestion, crime, and drivers of disease. While there is improvisation in their infrastructure (see image of electric post below), street vendors' political structure is extremely organized, with clear hierarchies within the vendor organizations. This organizational structure is in strong contrast to formal politics in which mayors change every three years, constantly revamping and rearranging administrative and power structures. The disorganization of formal politics forces street vendors and their organizations to readapt and renegotiate with local authorities every three years, leaving them under conditions of incessant political and legal uncertainties.



Improvised electric sockets hooked to public electricity in a neighborhood tianguis. Photo credit:

Irene Farah

Although there is a dearth amount of statistical data on street vendors, there is even less data on vendors' health outcomes despite knowing that most workers are at a unique intersection of exposure to poor working and housing health conditions. Thus, it becomes difficult to target public policies that improves their health and livelihoods. It is clear that in different parts of the city, residents have to organize to provide safety and wellbeing to their families due to a lack of state provision of services and security. The image below shows how residents signal to outsiders that there is enough social cohesion to take justice by their own hands, disregarding the state's legal structures. The sign threatens to death any thief (*rata*) that comes into their neighborhood and attempts to steal from them. However, not all neighborhoods are as cohesive or have highly structured social networks to protect and help each other.



Sign threatening to death anyone who attempts to steal from their neighborhood. Photo credit: Irene Farah

In future research, I aim to study more in depth how street vendors are recognized by the state within a framework of open data and vendor enumeration, their social mobility patterns when there is a lack of job creation, and the impact of the newly constructed commercial mall on their livelihoods. All these questions beckon the study of the tensions between informal and formal politics, and how those governance structures reflect on conflict over the use and regulation of public space in Mexico City.