“Show them how they treat us”: Legal violence in the everyday lives of street vendors

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Accepted: 20 July 2021 / Published online: 14 April 2022
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Abstract
Since the 1930s, street vending in Los Angeles has been classified as a misdemeanor, punishable by jail time and fines. The Los Angeles Street Vendor Campaign (LASVC)—a coalition of Brown and Black street vendors and social justice organizations—succeeded in decriminalizing street vending. Drawing on data collected from 2013 to 2020 and utilizing ethnographic and digital humanities methods, this paper spotlights fifteen Black and Brown street-vendor leaders of the LASVC. Combined street-vendor leader narratives reveal how laws and enforcement practices undermined their ability to stay free, remain housed, and keep families and vending communities together. This paper differentiates between state-sanctioned legal violence, which led to dispossession and family separation, and community-sanctioned legal violence to demonstrate how laws that criminalize street vendors make them targets for other forms of violence, namely surveillance by co-ethnics. Legal violence often occurs simultaneously and cumulatively adds extra levels of precarity for street vendors.

Keywords  Street vending · Informal economies · Legal violence · Family separation · Race-relational · Urban ethnography

“Muéstrales cómo nos tratan”: Violencia legal en la vida cotidiana de los vendedores ambulantes

Resumen
Desde la década de 1930, vender en la calle en Los Ángeles se ha clasificado como delito menor sancionable con pena de cárcel y multas. Con sus esfuerzos, la Los Angeles Street Vendor Campaign (LASVC), una coalición de vendedores ambulantes negros y de otros grupos racializados y organizaciones de justicia social, ha logrado
descriminalizar la venta en la calle. Partiendo de datos recopilados entre 2013 y 2020 y usando métodos etnográficos y digitales de las humanidades, este trabajo destaca a quince líderes entre los vendedores de la calle negros y de otros grupos racializados de la coalición LASVC. Las narrativas combinadas de estos líderes revelan cómo las leyes y las prácticas policías minaron su capacidad de permanecer libres, con techo y con una unidad familiar y comunitaria. Este trabajo distingue la violencia legal sancionada por el estado que condujo a desposesión y separación familiar de la violencia legal sancionada por la comunidad para demostrar cómo las leyes que criminalizan a los vendedores ambulantes los convierte en blanco de otras formas de violencia, específicamente de vigilancia por personas de la misma etnia. La violencia legal a menudo ocurre simultáneamente y añade niveles acumulativos de precariedad para los vendedores de la calle.

Palabras clave: Venta de la calle/ambulantes · Economías informales · Violencia legal · Separación familiar · Relacionado a la raza · Etnografía urbana

Street vending classified as a misdemeanor

This paper centers the individual experiences of Black and Brown street-vendor leaders who are actively involved in the Los Angeles Street Vending Campaign (LASVC). This campaign is led by Brown street vendors who are overwhelmingly elderly, disabled, and woman-identified, in alliance with Black street vendors and allies from social justice community organizations like the East Los Angeles Community Corporation (ELACC), Public Counsel (a pro bono law firm), and Leadership for Urban Renewal Network (LURN).1 For a decade, street vendors boarded public buses with their children and grandchildren to meet, strategize, and create a thriving intersectional movement to decriminalize street vending. The anti-vending ordinance (No. 169319) made vending on city sidewalks and streets illegal and classified any infraction as a misdemeanor, punishable by 6 months of jail time and a $1000 fine (Kettles 2004; Miller 2014).2 Three enforcement agencies—the LA Police Department (LAPD), LA County Department of Public Health (LACDPH), and the LA Department of Public Works (Bureau of Street Services)—fined, jailed, and even deported street vendors (Miller 2014; Rosales 2012, 2013, 2020). This changed on 17 September 2018, when Governor Jerry Brown signed the Safe Sidewalk Vending Act SB 946 into law, prohibiting law enforcement from issuing

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1 In 2019, Leadership for Urban Renewal Network (LURN) was renamed Inclusive Action for the City. In 2019, community organizers from East LA Community Corporation (ELACC)—which focuses on economic and housing justice—reconfigured themselves as a new community-based organization, Community Power Collective.

2 The first anti-vending ordinance passed in 1910, specifically banning Chinese immigrants from selling produce on the street (Estrada 2019; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009).
criminal penalties for violation of sidewalk vending regulations throughout California (Safe Sidewalk Vending Act 2018).³

This monumental victory was won by street-vendor leaders from the LASVC, who fought tirelessly to organize despite their economic instability and precarious legal status. Street-vendor leaders consistently made their presence known, crowding city buildings to full capacity to publicly reveal how interactions with enforcement agencies caused them great suffering and cumulative long-term harm. The street-vendor leaders from LASVC refused to stay silent about their stories of violence, and the barrage of their persistent presence coupled with their never-ending testimonies, became such a powerful indictment against the anti-vending ordinance that law and policy makers were reluctantly forced into action.

In response to street-vendor leaders’ repeated requests for me to “show them how they treat us,” this paper explores how street-vendor leaders’ everyday lives were affected by the anti-vending ordinance (No. 169319). Drawing on the framework of legal violence (Menjívar and Abrego 2012), I examine how street vendors were criminalized by formal structures of power that legitimized “legally sanctioned social suffering” (p. 1413) by merging criminal and immigration law to enact legal practices that harm Black and Brown street vendors. This paper moves beyond single identity politics and toward explaining Black and Brown street vendors’ shared experiences of gentrification, criminalization, racism, and xenophobia. Through the LASVC, street-vendor leaders nurtured dialogue that successfully mobilized cross-racial and spatial solidarity in the decriminalization of street vending in California (Fig. 1).

### Milestones of the Los Angeles street vending campaign (LASVC)

The following is a brief timeline of the emergence of LASVC and of this study. In 2008, Caridad, a Boyle Heights-based street vendor in her late fifties, decided she had had enough of being chased by police and having her goods confiscated. She

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³ In addition, Senate Bill No. 946 requires the dismissal of any criminal prosecutions that have not reached final judgment and authorizes petitions for dismissal for some people.
walked up to East LA Community Corporation (ELACC), an economic and housing justice organization in her neighborhood, and demanded they utilize their resources to do something about LAPD’s harassment of street vendors. By 2010, Caridad had brought together a small group of street vendors to hold general meetings and establish a steering committee—comprising street-vendor leaders, ELACC, Public Counsel, and LURN, and that formally launched the Los Angeles Street Vending Campaign (LASVC).

By 2013, LASVC was working with two city council members, who represented a historically Black and a predominantly Brown neighborhood. After persistent organizing through vendor leader meetings and neighborhood meetings, political support grew, especially under new fears raised by the Trump administration. The city of LA passed the motion to decriminalize street vending in January 2017. Street vending is no longer a misdemeanor in the city of LA. The street-vendor leaders from this study took their fight to the state level. In April 2018, they boarded a bus heading to the state capital and courageously began lobbying senators. On 17 September 2018, they helped pass legislation that formally ends the practice of criminalizing street vendors in all of California.

During the time I was involved with the LASVC, it grew from two to ten street vendor communities. Each of these sites is a cultural landmark, in historically Black and Brown neighborhoods where street-vendor communities have congregated for several decades. LASVC could quickly mobilize for a hearing or protest because of vendor leader meetings, wherein a street-vendor leader representing each community met weekly with other leaders in Boyle Heights, and then facilitated neighborhood meetings in their respective communities. As a frame of reference, the West Side, where Beverly Hills is located, is affluent and predominantly white. The East Side, where Boyle Heights is located, is a predominantly Brown working-class and working-poor community. The South Side, where Leimert Park is located, is a historically Black working-class and working-poor community that more recently has become an increasingly Brown community (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Rosas 2019; Sides 2003). Vendors were of different races/ethnicities from across LA, with varying degrees of legality, literacy, and abilities. I want to underscore that in a vast, sprawling, and highly segregated city like LA, this organizing was a tremendous feat.

**Methodological intervention**

My training in informal labor began as a child in Santa Ana, El Salvador, accompanying my grandmother to sell books and stationery at a sidewalk stall that grew into a brick-and-mortar store. As an adolescent, I navigated the unfamiliar city of Seattle with my father selling CDs, delivering newspapers, and cleaning offices. All these

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4 Boyle Heights, Piñata District, Fashion District, Westlake MacArthur Park (Alvarado, 6th, 7th, Bonnie Brae), Main St. South LA (San Pedro and 31st), San Fernando Valley (pockets of Pacoima and Panorama City), Hollywood Blvd., Leimert Park, Exposition Park, and Placita Olvera.
jobs make up the informal economy that intergenerationally sustained us, and this project, because these experiences have fueled my desire to better understand families like my own.

When I was designing this study, street-vendor leaders voiced concerns about how the media coverage of the LASVC dehumanized street vendors, focusing on their disembodied hands and the products being sold. Street-vendor leaders expressed how each of them had a story they were eager to share, and they wanted to be not only seen, but also named. Street-vendor leaders also lamented how the public was unaware that street vending was illegal, and their suffering was invisible to the eyes of the larger public. Honoring these concerns, this study gained Institutional Review Board-approval, and street-vendor leaders had the agency to consent to being photographed and using a pseudonym; all fifteen street-vendor leaders consented to sharing their images and real names.

This paper draws from data spanning from 2013 to 2020 and makes a methodological intervention through an urban humanities approach that blends traditional ethnography with visual technologies to create “augmented fotonovelas” (Hidalgo 2015, 2021), or photo-based comics that combine interview transcripts with photography, video, and augmented reality (AR) to visually capture multiple facets of street vendors’ lived experiences of legal violence. Street-vendor leaders were directly involved in creating the fotonovelas—the medium allows them to speak about how they experience legal violence in the spaces they move through, and how they contest unjust laws. To advance justice for street vendors, these fotonovelas circulated in academic and public forums with students, professors, city staff, politicians, and funders. Through a collaboration with the LA Unified School District, these visual projects helped teachers develop a K-12 curriculum on street vendors’ lived experiences and contributions to Southern California.

Upon my attending several general meetings in 2012, I formed a research partnership with street-vendor leaders from LASVC, and staff from ELACC. LASVC and ELACC were drawn to my urban digital humanities approach, believing it would be an asset to circulate street-vendor stories and the LASVC message on social media platforms and events throughout the city. The data captured in this paper is from the period leading up to and shortly after the LASVC successfully advocated for the passage of SB 946. Over the course of our seven-year partnership, I conducted a total of forty-five interviews with the fifteen Black and Brown street-vendor leaders of the LASVC, which includes thirty in-depth longitudinal qualitative interviews (a total of three interviews per participant).

Participants held a variety of legal statuses, including undocumented, semi-legal, and citizen. Their ages range from thirty to sixty-five; twelve out of fifteen of the leaders were women, and five of those women are single mothers. Twelve of the street-vendor leaders are of Pan-Latinx origins, representing the countries of Mexico, El Salvador, Peru, and Guyana. Within this group, members self-identify as Black, Latino, Hispano, Mestizo, and Chicana. Three of the street-vendor leaders

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5 Fotonovelas and materials utilized during academic and public forums are archived: https://www.leighannahidalgo.com/fotonovelas.
are African American, and they all self-identify as Black. The categories Black and Latinx are not mutually exclusive; for instance, Yogita is Caribbean from Guyana, and while she might be considered Afro-Latinx, she self-identifies as Black. Therefore, I use the terms Black and Brown, to distinguish between these groups. As street vendors, they all reported earning under $15,000 a year, and nearly half of them became unhoused during my work with them.

To gain multiple perspectives of the LASVC, I interviewed four ELACC staff members, Janet, Carla, Rosa, and Isela; Doug the campaign lawyer from Public Counsel, a pro bono law firm; and Rudy, the campaign lobbyist and director of LURN. They were selected because, in addition to the street-vendor leaders, these three organizations made up the LASVC’s steering committee. I supplemented interviews with participant observation data gathered at community events, organizing meetings, protests, vending sites, and family get-togethers. Additionally, I draw on archival data from the LA city clerk—more than fifty court reports, letters in favor and in opposition of legalization, and transcripts from hearings at city hall. For the purposes of this article, I draw primarily on participant observation and interview data; however, I include some of the visual archive collected for the augmented fotonovela, which come from three sources: 58 hours of video footage and thousands of photos collected by myself and my partner; photos and video given to me by ELACC staff; and photos and video given to me by street vendors.

Legal violence in the everyday lives of street vendors

This article draws on the framework of “legal violence,” a theory developed by Menjívar and Abrego (Abrego and Menjívar 2011; Menjívar and Abrego 2012) to examine how contemporary society merges criminal and immigration law to enact legal practices that harm migrants. This framework draws on theories of structural violence (Farmer 2003) and symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2004). I apply this legal violence framework to examine how Black and Brown street vendors in LA were affected by the anti-vending ordinance (No. 169319). This legal structure made it possible to prosecute street vending as a misdemeanor (Miller 2014). Through state-sanctioned legal violence, however, violence was meted out through multiple enforcement agencies, with reverberations into many other aspects of street vendors’ lives. This paper looks at street vendors’ narratives illuminating the cumulative injurious consequences of the anti-vending ordinance that resulted in street vendors’ dispossession and family separation.

I draw on legal violence as a lens to analyze informality in response to Ananya Roy’s (2005) challenge to look at informality beyond a sphere of unregulated activity through which the marginalized survive. Rather, it must be examined as a site that reveals the states’ role in creating the informal. Roy concludes that the state exercises its power to deem what is formal and informal and decides which kind of informality will be tolerated and which will not. Utilizing a legal violence frame to understand the anti-vending ordinance reveals the state’s role in merging carceral and immigration regimes to normalize severe and unjust treatment of street vendors. Street vending is a highly racialized and gendered economic practice that is heavily
policing by law enforcement (Bhimji 2010; Cross and Morales 2013; Estrada 2013; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2011; Kettles 2004; Morales and Kettles 2009; Muñoz 2008, 2016; Rosales 2013, 2020; Zolniski 2006).

Legal violence related to street vending has been the subject of studies in anthropology, sociology, and geography, where scholars (Forkuor et al. 2017; Galemba 2008; Hummel 2017; Malasan 2019; Vargas and Urinboyev 2015) note how laws criminalize street vendors and how street vendors mobilize to thwart legislation and law enforcement (Bhimji 2010; Carroll et al. 2016; Muñoz 2008; Zolniski 2006). However, the impacts of criminalization are not limited to formal prosecution; scholars note how encounters with law enforcement commonly involve seizure and confiscation of vendors’ property (Cross and Morales 2013; Estrada 2013, 2019; Kettles 2004; Morales and Kettles 2009; Rosales 2012, 2013, 2020). Aside from the unwarranted humiliation, this enforcement amounts to the loss and destruction of a vendor’s livelihood. Informality scholars call attention to how cities disrupt unwanted immigration by cracking down on sectors in which urban poor immigrants are concentrated (Light 2006; Rosales 2013). According to the Census Bureau, 61% of the informal labor force in LA County comprises undocumented immigrants (Haydamack and Flaming 2005). Laws construct immigrants as illegal in the same way that laws construct street vendors as criminal.

Thus far, street-vendor studies in the United States have focused on Brown street vendors (Cross and Morales 2013; Estrada 2013, 2019; Kettles 2004; Morales and Kettles 2009; Rosales 2013, 2020). Black street vendors in the United States have been understudied (Duneier 1999; Venkatesh 2006), and Black street vendors’ experience of legal violence in relation to Brown street vendors warrants further investigation. The Black and Brown street-vendor leaders of the LASVC provide an opportunity to examine legal violence through a race-relational approach (Molina 2014; Molina et al. 2019; Johnson 2013; Pulido 2006) that situates the anti-vending ordinance as a legal system that linked the lives of Black and Brown street vendors across difference. Indeed, it was the shared experience of policing that brought Black and Brown street-vendor leaders into a room together, enabling them listen to each other’s experiences with law enforcement and identify common connections, thus motivating them to work together for decriminalization.

LAPD records about street-vendor arrests are typically not made public. With pressure from street-vendor leaders from the LASVC, the LAPD released two years’ worth of records. It is important to know two things: first, arrests were the preferred method of enforcement over citations. The LAPD’s own records demonstrate that arrests rose from 795 in fiscal year 2012–2013 to nearly double the next year, to 1235. In the same corresponding years, police issued 271 and 286 citations, respectively (Miller 2014). During that time, street vendors were two to four times more likely to be arrested than to receive a citation, signaling that elimination was a key strategy. What these numbers point to is a concerted strategy on behalf of the state and law enforcement to practice “human caging” (Lytle Hernández 2017) as the preferred mechanism for eliminating poor Black and Brown street vendors. While the LASVC was actively fighting to decriminalize street vending through the city courts, all signs pointed to an escalation in LAPD’s efforts to criminalize street vendors.
In 2015, the LA Times profiled a seventy-nine-year-old immigrant woman who received seven citations from the same officer in just a month and a half (Los Angeles Times Blog 2009). When Doug, the LASVC pro bono lawyer from the Public Counsel, did a review of court dockets, he found that during just a two-month period in 2017, more than one hundred misdemeanors for violation of the LA County code section that prohibits “peddling” were charged and set for arraignment.

In this article, I analyze street vendors’ narratives of being trapped in state-sanctioned legal violence as they reflect on past traumas and the long-term harm of the law. First, this paper reveals how state-sanctioned legal violence reverberates into the home, by dispossessing people of their livelihoods and severely limiting their ability to stay housed. Second, state-sanctioned legal violence ruptures families—one consequence of interactions with law enforcement is permanent family separation. Among the fifteen street vendors I worked with, the legal violence they endured was carried out by a wide variety of state-sanctioned actors—bankers, social workers, security guards, police, jailers, and immigration officers. It is important to note that these forms of legal violence often occur simultaneously, are intersecting, and cumulatively add extra levels of precarity to the lives of street vendors. Thus, street vendors are exposed not only to immediate suffering, but also long-term harm.

Third, my analysis reveals how legal violence is internalized by members from within their respective communities. I call this community-sanctioned legal violence to highlight how street vendor criminality is normalized to such an extent that even co-ethnics are complicit in using the punitive arms of the law to dispossess street vendors. In this paper, street vendors emphasize how the legal violence they experience is upheld by community-sanctioned actors—priests, business owners, and neighbors—who participated in surveilling, extorting, and reporting street vendors. This is tied to what carceral scholars have called a “matrix of surveillance” (Rios 2011), wherein Black and Brown people become surveilled by a constellation of ordinary people who are, in effect, deputized by the state to facilitate the surveillance of Black and Brown people (Gilmore 2007).

**State-sanctioned legal violence: Dispossession**

Although devastating, the impacts of state-sanctioned legal violence are not limited to formal prosecution. Street vendors experience another form of legal violence that causes great housing insecurity through the confiscation of their products and subsequent devastation to their livelihood and the dispossession of their homes. One of the most common experiences vendors described was being dispossessed not only from their places of work, but also from their homes, motorhomes, and apartments. Nearly half of the street-vendor leaders from LASVC became unhoused during my work with them. These state-sanctioned forms of legal violence serve to reinforce racial inequality, whereby Black and Brown families are systematically removed from work and home by lawful means (Chakravarty and Ferreira da Silva 2012; Molina 2016a, b; Rugh 2015; Rugh and Massey 2010; Wyly et al. 2009). Given street vendors’ precarious situation in a legal system that leaves them unprotected in
multiple ways, the main causes of dispossession street vendors experienced during the time of the study was the confiscation of goods and products that decimated their livelihoods. These losses were compounded by multiple systems of inequality and legal violence, such as the financial losses resulting from subprime loans, skyrocketing rent prices, and unforeseen tragedies and health issues that made it impossible for them to pay their rents or mortgages.

Informality scholars critique the harm that legal violence causes street vendors, showing the economic burden that confiscation and arrest have on small enterprises; the burdens are tremendous and represent a huge setback for these small enterprises (Morales and Kettles 2009; Muñoz 2008, 2016; Rosales 2013, 2020). Compounding the financial and emotional strain of this criminalization, many vendors report their equipment and other property is confiscated during enforcement encounters, in some cases without receipt or instructions on how to retrieve. A report produced by the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) on the confiscation of vendor’s property in LA\(^6\) includes numerous firsthand accounts of vendors describing the loss and or the destruction of their livelihood because of the anti-vending ordinance.

My study of street-vendor leaders in the campaign revealed similar themes as the NLG report. Caridad is a street vendor in her fifties, from Colima, Mexico, and is an undocumented single mother to four daughters. She shares how, in the 2000s, she and several other dozen vendors had been selling in the Big Buy (discount store) parking lot in Boyle Heights. However, there came a moment when the neighborhood was starting to change in anticipation for the building of the Metro Gold Line, as well as the Hollenbeck Police Station (Los Angeles Times Blog 2009; Los Angeles Police Department 2009). With those coming changes, efforts to eliminate street vendors in the area began increasing steadily. Caridad recounted her experience working at the Big Buy parking lot and getting her goods confiscated by police.

We spent about 2 years, 3 years selling there and then the moment arrived when the City [LA County Department of Public Health] would not let us. I remember that in 2008 about 20 patrol cars arrived on the side of Soto and Cesar Chavez Avenue and on the side of that . . . what’s it called . . . bridge. It’s as if we had been criminals. Twenty patrol cars there and the City there to take everything and they took everything and told us that we could not vend.

For street vendors like Caridad, the economic burden of these losses is tremendous. To recuperate these losses and start over can be next to impossible for undocumented vendors (Bhimji 2010; Rosales 2013).

This event was not an isolated incident, and Caridad calculated that each time the police confiscated her belongings, she lost $3000 in food and equipment:

For that reason, those of us who sell in the street try to not use expensive dishes and materials. We instead use items from the 99-cent store. They have taken my vending items 3 times already by Cesar Chavez St. All the food,

\(^6\) Doug, the campaign lawyer, pointed to the National Lawyers Guild report: https://michaelkohlhaas.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/NLG-Report_5-1.pdf.
$300 for the cart and the pots, it was a lot back then in 2008 and in 2009. In 2010, they took away my belongings right here on 4th and Breed St.

Recall that street-vendor leaders in the campaign reported earning under $15,000 a year, so for Caridad, this confiscation decreased her annual income by 20%. Now imagine this happening to Caridad three times between 2008 and 2010. Caridad experienced confiscation of her livelihood by authorities two more times since that initial interview in 2013, for a total of five times. The economic losses Caridad has experienced were exacerbated by the Great Recession in 2008 that caused the housing market to collapse. Even though Caridad had faithfully paid her mortgage on her home in Boyle Heights for an entire decade, the intensification of street-vendor elimination put her in a predicament during which she struggled intensely to cover her mortgage payments (Fig. 2). The loss of home, or struggle to stay housed, was a consistent theme that repeated itself throughout my years working with street vendors. Black and Brown street vendors in the campaign found themselves linked through similar housing struggles, which facilitated their cross-racial alliances in the LASVC. Caridad lost her home because of forces that compounded the subprime loan crisis, like the economic burden caused by the lawful confiscation of her products and E-Verify’s stricter immigrant verification processes.

Deborah, a Black single mother on disability and a street vendor, in her fifties, experienced a similar home loss. Since street vending is illegal, many Black and Brown street vendors limit the days of the week they vend, to decrease their risks, but this also limits the amount they can earn. This factor was compounded by the subprime loan crisis (Molina 2016a, b; Rugh 2015; Rugh and Massey 2010; Wyly et al. 2009), which made it difficult for Deborah to be able to afford to pay her mortgage. When I visited her during the fall of 2016, Deborah confided,

I haven’t been able to pay the mortgage in some months and the rest of my bills. It may not be worth as much as I owe on it. I got caught up in the countrywide home housing thing. I’ve managed so far and am here. I’m fortunate that I did become a homeowner. Many say I shouldn’t be here and be a homeowner. At this time, I’m trying to keep it, but I don’t know what’s going to happen.

Fig. 2  Photograph of Caridad vending with daughter and grandchild
As this passage demonstrates, street vendors were affected by multiple compounding and intersecting forms of legal violence, such as financial institutions that predatorily targeted Black and Brown families, specifically single-mother heads of households like Caridad and Deborah, for subprime loans (Chakravarty and Ferreira da Silva 2012; Molina 2016a, 2016b; Rugh 2015; Rugh and Massey 2010; Wyly et al. 2009). As scholars have noted, “race rather than class or creditworthiness” determines who received a subprime loan (Lipsitz 2011, p. 9). Deborah was fighting the foreclosure of her home in the courts, whereas Caridad’s undocumented status gave her no legal recourse to fight for her home. The housing market collapse disproportionately robbed the wealth of Black and Brown people (Chakravarty and Ferreira da Silva 2012; Nicolaci da Costa 2017; Molina 2016a, b; Rugh 2015; Rugh and Massey 2010; Wyly et al. 2009). These subprime loans, coupled with the anti-vending ordinance, made economically vulnerable street vendors targets of dispossession.

State-sanctioned legal violence: Family separation

In addition to dispossession, street vendors experience another form of state-sanctioned legal violence through family separations. While there are no records showing how many children have been present during these altercations with law enforcement, my observations and those of previous street-vendor studies indicate that the children and grandchildren of street vendors are often present (Estrada 2013, 2019; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2011). For that reason, it is important to consider how these enforcement policies impact multiple generations of families. For parents, the fear of arrest is exacerbated by the fear of family separation through Child Protective Services (CPS). Something that Doug emphasized to me was that these risks are not merely hypothetical. He pointed out a series of cases in Southern California in which street vendors were facing deportation. These included a mother of five fighting deportation after spending months in a detention center, separated from her family. This situation stems directly from a simple sidewalk vending citation (Marquez 2017). While her example was the most recent, it is by no means the only example. Like the examples of family separation referenced by Doug, this became a recurring theme among street vendors in my study. Family separation is a form of legal violence—where family life is disrupted by law enforcement.

I want to highlight two important points that these cases bring to light. First, state-sanctioned legal violence makes it possible for street vendors, who have not committed violent crimes, to be labeled as criminals, thus justifying their subjection to the deeply entangled carceral and immigration regimes. Second, legal violence affects not only individuals—it subjects entire families to intergenerational violence. Federal immigration enforcement practices tear immigrant families apart, and local policies prohibiting and criminalizing sidewalk vending enabled and exacerbated these risks.

Chaveli migrated to the United States with her husband, leaving her two eldest daughters in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Here, Chaveli soon conceived her third child, a
boy named Joshua (pseudonym). Her marriage dissolved, and she found herself as a single parent in need of a job where she could bring her child along with her when he was not in school. I have known Chaveli, a fruit vendor, for five years and have seen her tell her story with the police at press conferences and rallies at least half a dozen times. Although she is recalling an event that happened more than a decade ago, every time she describes this past trauma her lips tremble, she bursts into tears, and she struggles to finish telling her story.

Chaveli’s story goes as follows. When Joshua was eight years old, he accompanied Chaveli on weekends when she sold fruit. In her own words, Chaveli described the most traumatic altercation she had with authorities:

I was working in Lincoln Heights, 2nd and Broadway. I was selling fruit on a Saturday when a prepotente [high-handed] police officer came. What a barbarity. I have not been able to overcome that experience. He exited his police car, I had clients I was tending to. He told me to move, that he was taking me. “Why?” I asked. I was not doing anything bad. But he treated me like a criminal, he treated me like I was the worst person. And the worst part of it was that he handcuffed me and put me in the back of his car. My son got scared. There was no one for me to leave him with. There was a client who said, “I will take responsibility for him,” but the police officer said, “No.” By chance there was a pastor. When I was placed in the police car, the pastor came to talk to me. He asked me, to ask the police officer for forgiveness. But I told him, “I did nothing to offend the police officer.” My clients were saying, “Leave her alone, she isn’t doing anything bad.” The police officer took my son’s scooter away and was also putting him into the back of the police car with me. My bag was emptied, and all my things were dumped everywhere. The pastor told me, “My daughter, ask this police officer for forgiveness or they will separate you from your son, just tell him you’re sorry.” That is when I started to cry and I felt impotent, angry, and rage, but I told the pastor, “Okay.”

In that moment, Chaveli begged the officer for his attention. The officer refused to look her in the face, but Chaveli continued, “I am sorry. I am not sure in what moment I offended you, but I am sorry.” The officer never addressed her, instead he addressed the pastor, indicating he was satisfied, and would leave Chaveli in peace. He let her out of the car and took off her handcuffs, but in many ways Chaveli remains cuffed to that memory.

Even today, she cannot free herself of the fear, shame, and impotence of that experience. Her son, Joshua, was very afraid. Chaveli had taught him that if anything ever happened to her, he was to call the police officer and his older sisters living in Mexico for help. On the impact of this experience on her son, Chaveli shared, “In front of him, they handcuffed me. It was something traumatic for him because he wanted to be a police officer. But seeing that situation took his desire away.” At that impressionable age, her son previously believed the police were there to help. Helping others was his aspiration, but he could not reconcile his previous image of police officers with what he had witnessed an officer do to his mother. This experience with police officers was traumatic for both mother and child. Yet for several decades, this experience has been commonplace.
For parents, the fear of arrest is exacerbated by the fear of family separation through processes set in motion by Child Protective Services (CPS). This was not the last time Chaveli was traumatized in her line of work. She has endured several more altercations with police officers that have resulted in approximately $1200 in citations and being booked in jail and fingerprinted. She says her greatest fear in each of those moments was “losing my son.” I asked her about those confrontations with officers and what she thought would happen to him. “Well, I couldn’t say, but it was a feeling of despair thinking about what could happen to him. Where would he go and where would he be? So many things go through your mind that I can’t explain it, others can’t imagine it.” Chaveli elaborates, “It is the feeling of being impotent, because you have not committed a crime. The only crime I’ve done is to be a vendor.” Here, Chaveli is stating a phrase that is often repeated by vendors, which is that street vendors are selling goods and services that under normal circumstances would not be considered criminal, yet because street vending is classified as a misdemeanor, police officers treat them as though they are violent criminals and pose a dangerous threat to the public. These events negatively affected Chaveli’s mental health, in addition to making her economic situation more precarious. Despite the trauma of these events, in the spring of 2018 her son graduated from high school, and aspires to go to college to study business administration. Chaveli is overcome with joy at her son’s success.

Losing a child, simply for trying to provide a livelihood for that child, would seem itself as if it should be unlawful. Yet it is a reality experienced by many street vendors whose status as immigrants and working parents is criminalized. The story of MariPosa and her mother Rosa is one example. MariPosa is in her thirties and currently works as a street vendor. She is also a single mother of two girls. MariPosa is Guatemalan and Salvadoran, but she was born in Mexico City as her parents made the arduous voyage to the states fleeing the wars in their home countries. Street vending is intergenerational in MariPosa’s life, as her mother Rosa and father were both street vendors. MariPosa shares a memory of being in her childhood home when she experienced legal violence. Her parents used to sell pirated CDs, and MariPosa shared her story about when the police came to her home to confiscate the CDs and arrest her parents.

They took my dad, my mom and me and I couldn’t do anything about it because I was a kid. There were a lot of cops. A lot of people and they dropped the door with something huge and I just remember crying and they said, “Get on the floor!” I was crying and remember them taking me. I was just 5. It was about a year. My mom would come and visit me, but it took a long time for us to be reunited.

While MariPosa’s mother Rosa was incarcerated, MariPosa was taken by Child Protective Services. Family separations like these are state-sanctioned legal violence that reflect common themes in my study. A study by pediatricians on family reunification shows that when a child is separated from their mother, chronic stress manifested in increased levels of cortisol, which has long-term biological consequences in terms of growth and development, in addition to the psychological damage of traumatic separation (Barnert et al. 2015).
Even after Rosa was released from jail, MariPosa languished in the foster care system; it was not easy for Rosa to regain custody, due to her legal status as an undocumented Salvadoran refugee, her lack of linguistic and economic resources, and difficulty navigating the foster care system. As an undocumented immigrant with a criminal record, Rosa was affected by compounding and intersecting forms of legal violence that made family reunification a challenging process. Meanwhile, while MariPosa was separated from her parents and a ward of the state, she was abused by her foster parents. MariPosa and Rosa were reunited, but the marriage between her parents dissolved—yet another way in which legal violence creates domestic instability in street vendors’ lives. This family was treated like they posed a violent threat; they were dragged from their homes in front of their child, their family was separated, and their child was placed in the foster system, where she suffered various other forms of violence. And all of this had long-term intergenerational repercussions on the family (Fig. 3).

MariPosa explained that her mother, Rosa, was a single mother and struggling to get back on her feet after being incarcerated. MariPosa shared how they were unhoused and living in Rosa’s car for a period.

There were times when we were on the street. We were homeless. But she had a car so we would sleep in the car. That was a sucky experience for me because I would get bullied at school. I didn’t have nowhere to shower, so I didn’t smell that perfect. My clothes were always dirty. I remember one time they kicked me out of the class because my feet smelled. I couldn’t take a shower and they didn’t know.

In school, MariPosa was bullied for being a street vendor. She was teased for having unclean clothes and body odor. Instead of experiencing compassion, she remembers her teachers kicking her out of the classroom because she “smelled bad.” Over the years, things stabilized for Rosa and MariPosa. They switched to selling toys, then cut fruit in the Boyle Heights area, but running from the police with her mother was a constant. Much of the pain that MariPosa describes in her childhood stems from how LA created punitive policies to fine, arrest, and

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**Fig. 3** Photograph of MariPosa vending with her mother Rosa, pictured in the background.
incarcerate the most marginalized workers in the city, who were overwhelmingly women, undocumented, elderly, and disabled. Mother and daughter Rosa and MariPosa were forcibly separated because of a legal system that normalizes punitive practices that equate street vendors to violent criminals (Forkuor et al. 2017; Galemba 2008; Hummel 2017; Malasan 2019; Vargas and Urinboyev 2015).

Each of these women’s experiences give us a window into how the state apparatus—LAPD, LACDPH, financial institutions, and Child Protective Services—interact to enact violence on the lives of street vendors, not only by taking away their livelihood, but also by imposing family separation. Legal violence like this is likely to target street vendors because their work makes them hypervisible in public spaces (Bhimji 2010; Cross and Morales 2013; Estrada 2013; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2011; Kettles 2004; Morales and Kettles 2009; Muñoz 2008; Rosales 2013; Zlolniski 2006). These accounts recognize the complex experiences of street vendors, who are formerly incarcerated, unhoused or in the process of becoming unhoused, and struggling with feelings of brokenness over the trauma of family separation. These narratives reveal the intergenerational impact criminalization had on families for the last several decades.

Community-sanctioned legal violence: Surveillance

Cases of violence against street vendors—spanning battery, robberies, and murder by state-sanctioned and community-sanctioned actors—continue to be documented and are available for public viewing across multiple media platforms. A Google search for “street vendor attack” generates 23.5 million hits, signaling a high occurrence of violence against street vendors. The most extreme cases of legal violence resulted in the deaths of Black street vendors, including Eric Garner and Alton Sterling. Both Garner and Sterling were murdered by police officers—their slayings were captured on camera and went viral (Badger 2016).

In just the year 2017, Doug, the LASVC pro bono lawyer from the Public Counsel, referenced several violent attacks and harassment of sidewalk vendors that made headlines in places like the Bay Area, Los Angeles, Berkeley, Alameda County, Silicon Valley, the Central Valley, Fresno, Orange County, San Bernardino County, and many others (Arellano 2017; Bond Graham 2017; Flores 2017; Márquez 2017; Rose 2017; Smith 2017; yourcentralvalley.com 2018). In a legal brief, Doug argued that these attacks are not just isolated incidents—they are part of a broader legal system that delegitimizes sidewalk vending. When vendors are forced into the informal economy and criminalized for their work, they are isolated from legal protections and more vulnerable to attack, harassment, and extortion. In the case of street vendors in LA, for decades communities accepted and internalized hierarchies of inequality to such an extent that the injurious treatment of street vendors by state-sanctioned actors was not only justified but, in many cases, community-sanctioned actors also became complicit in perpetuating that violence (Muñiz 2011; Rosales 2013, 2020; Zlolniski 2006). When laws dehumanize sidewalk vendors, then community-sanctioned actors feel permitted and even emboldened to do the same.
Much of the street-vending scholarship focuses on a dichotomous point of contention of the state versus street vendors (Bhimji 2010; Crossa 2009; Forkuor et al. 2017; Galemba 2008; Hummel 2017; Hunt 2009; Malasan 2019; Setšabi and Leduka 2008; Vargas and Urinboyev 2015). Scholars have looked at how street vendors are pitted against gourmet food trucks and brick-and-mortar businesses, with those two receiving a favorable reception and differential regulation than street vending (Martin 2014) and how members of neighborhood associations participate in vigilantism against street vendors (Muñiz 2011). However, there remains an insufficient understanding on the tensions outside of street vendors and the state. Focusing on the legal violence that street vendors experience as a conflict solely between street vendors and the state obfuscates the violence vendors experience among co-ethnics from within their respective communities. Highlighting tensions between street vendors and co-ethnics serves to make our communities accountable for their internalized legal violence and participation in the broader state project to eliminate street vendors. To be fair, not all such relationships were contentious. Street vendors also reported harmonious relationships, consistent with the findings of other street-vendor scholars (Chinchilla and Hamilton 1996; Crossa 2009), but here I want to underscore a disconcerting pattern of contentions between street vendors and co-ethnics that merits further exploration.

Both Caridad and Deborah highlight how co-ethnics participate in surveilling street vendors. These experiences highlight how criminalized groups become entangled in a “matrix of surveillance” (Rios 2011), where ordinary people are functionally deputized (Gilmore 2007; Muñiz 2011) to report on street vendors in the service of the broader apparatus of policing and eliminating street vendors. For Black and Brown people, the threat of using the police force against co-ethnics is particularly egregious, given how altercations between police and Black and Brown people often end in excessive force and even death beyond the arrest (Los Angeles Times Staff 2020). Yet co-ethnics are often active participants in the hyper-policing of Black and Brown street vendors, who are at a comparative economic disadvantage with access to resources (Rosales 2013, 2020; Zlolniski 2006).

After being displaced from the Big Lots parking lot, Caridad has been vending with her daughter, Esmeralda, by an elementary school in Boyle Heights. The owner of the panadería (bakery) has been in constant conflict with Caridad and Esmeralda. The panadería owner, also a Brown immigrant, has called the police on Caridad on numerous occasions. To minimize contentions with the brick-and-mortar owner, Caridad sells on that corner only on Saturdays and Sundays, severely restricting her ability to make a livelihood. Caridad is aware of how both her business and the bakery mutually benefit each other: “The bakery benefits from me, and I benefit from it, because a lot of clientele comes to me and asks me about the bakery, and I send them there. And others go to the bakery and then come to me.” This is consistent with studies that find that street vendors benefit brick-and-mortar businesses (Crossa 2009; Chinchilla and Hamilton 1996; Miller 2014).

Since I have known Caridad, her goods have been confiscated by authorities on two different occasions because of calls placed by the panadería owner. These calls cost Caridad $6,000 in losses. As previously mentioned, these losses compromise
street vendors’ livelihoods and increase their housing insecurity. Caridad recalls feeling frustrated when she confronted the owner and asked, “Mija [my dear] how have I been a bother to you? I don’t want to be rude with you, I know you are within your right. I know you need your parking, but I have tried to disturb as little as possible. I am vending illegally, you’re telling me, and a police officer will tell me, pero déjame hacer la lucha [but let me do my hustle]. How am I bothering you?” Despite Caridad trying to reason with the bakery owner, the woman continually called the police on Caridad.

Caridad does her best to be a good neighbor. She does not sell bread, so as not to negatively impact the baker, yet the baker has started selling tortas, tacos, and arroz con champurrado—all things that Caridad sells, to sabotage her sales. On one of the numerous occasions when the police officers came at the behest of the baker, the police officer and Caridad had the following exchange: “We have more important things to do than to talk to you, but the baker keeps calling and calling us.” The policing of street vendors is not purely relegated to law enforcement; as this story demonstrates, brick-and-mortar business owners also participate in surveilling street vendors. As co-ethnics, one might expect the brick-and-mortar business owner to aid a struggling street vendor; however, the panadería owner is deputized and relying on the arms of the police force to surveil and eliminate street vendors. This behavior on the part of the baker puts Caridad at a very real risk of being arrested and deported. I did not interview the panadería owner personally, but based on her continual calling of police and the economic capital required to start up a small brick-and-mortar business, it is safe to assume that there is a difference in terms of race, class, and legal status between Caridad and the panadería owner.

For decades street vendors studies have demonstrated how street vendors do not compete with brick-and-mortar businesses, rather they help brick-and-mortar businesses by increasing foot traffic (Chinchilla and Hamilton 1996; Muñoz 2008; Yen et al. 2015). Yet, the public discourse on street vendors is that immigrants like Caridad import backward economic practices, present a public health risk, and are tax evaders who benefit from an unfair advantage over brick-and-mortar businesses (Forkuor et al. 2017; Martin 2014; Setšabi and Leduka 2008). These attitudes are rooted in racialized discourses and cultural stereotypes (Martin 2014; Novo 2003). Street vendors’ race, class, and legal status deem them as a public nuisance to be eliminated, whereas brick-and-mortar business owners are perceived as the entrepreneurial backbone of the economy who, as such, have a right to earn a living.

Leimert Park has been a popular vending site in the Black community of Crenshaw for decades. Deborah, a Black street-vendor leader of the campaign, has been at the forefront of organizing Black vendors at Leimert Park and organizes with Brown vendors in Boyle Heights (Fig. 4). Although she currently lives in the valley—the instability caused by the 1992 uprisings permanently displaced her from living in Crenshaw, near Leimert Park—Deborah faithfully “goes back home” to vend every Sunday at Leimert Park. Out of necessity, Deborah also sells food at the Echo Park Dub Club, located in Central LA. But vending at Leimert Park is where Deborah feels at home. She remains involved in what is happening in the area and attends Leimert Park neighborhood meetings every Monday at the Vision Theater.
At these meetings, community members, business owners, and people with political clout in Leimert Park discuss neighborhood politics and upcoming events.

As in much of LA, Leimert Park is undergoing many changes, and many of the earlier inhabitants and even small brick-and-mortar businesses in the neighborhood can no longer afford the rent increases. In the example that follows, Deborah’s narrative reveals a conflict in the Black community; like the tension in Caridad’s community, it is based primarily on class hierarchies and the perception that street vendors are undeserving criminals. This contention manifests as a struggle over who has legitimate right to be within this historically Black cultural center: the inhabitants of the park are poor Black street vendors and unhoused people.

In 2016, a Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) celebration was organized on Sunday by Mr. Williams (pseudonym), a prominent Black businessman with lots of political clout. Leading up to the MLK parade, the street vendors, including Deborah, made it a point to ask questions at the neighborhood meeting about how the parade at the park would impact the local population of vendors. Mr. Williams and the other entities organizing the Martin Luther King Jr. event told them that nothing would be different. Street vendors at Leimert Park are accustomed
to arriving very early to claim their parking spots closest to the park to easily unload all their wares. When many of them were arriving it was still dark, but they noticed new signs posted: “no parking after Sunday at 4:30AM.” For these street vendors, the “no parking” sign was the first indication that the MLK event was actively seeking to eliminate the vendors who had been setting up there every Sunday for decades.

At that moment, all the vendors looked to Deborah to see what they should do next. Deborah devised a plan. They were each going to pay the unhoused park dwellers to watch their tents, while the vendors parked a distance away and carted over their merchandise. However, as the unloading was taking place, two MLK event organizers approached the street vendors and began threatening to call law enforcement. Deborah described the altercation:

Deborah: “I said, ‘Yeah well, what’s going on?’”
MLK organizer: “We have an event here and we have a permit, so you guys are going to have to get out of the park.”
Deborah: “I have a permit for this park too and there is nowhere on my permit that says your permit overrides my permit, so we have a problem. I’m not going nowhere.”
MLK organizer: “Yes you are. I’m going to call the police if you don’t get out of the park.”

Deborah shares how that morning tensions escalated between Mr. Williams, MLK organizers, and the Leimert Park street vendors. Mr. Williams threatened, “If you don’t get out of the park, we are going to have to give you a situation [a problem] and we can confiscate your stuff, and have you arrested.” In that instance, something snapped in Deborah, and she decided she was not going to relinquish her space. She was going to stay there and fight, albeit at a safe distance.

When huge white trucks pulled up with all the tents and stage for the MLK parade, the vendors were pushed to the sidewalk on the other side of the park. This co-ethnic tension is marked by class, as the street vendors were replaced by younger Black entrepreneurs who sold products appealing to the consumption practices of young professionals. Scholars have noted the ways that young entrepreneurs are seen as catering to the “creative class” with products perceived as part of a “cool” and “hip” neoliberal city, whereas street vendors are perceived as unsightly and linked to so-called backward economic practices of the developing world (Martin 2014). Below Deborah shares how other street vendors felt about the events that unfolded that day:

The vendors got a taste for themselves of how they were wanting to displace us, and we resented to a degree. We wasn’t part of their event but they didn’t exactly kick us out. They moved us out of the park but across the street. We were still a part of the event, but they saw that we were resisting, they called the police. I got the video. They had about 15 police cars. All these people were staring around to see what we were going to do.
As the passage above demonstrates, Mr. Williams and MLK organizers called the state apparatus to do their bidding in the elimination of street vendors from the park. As Deborah shows, what began with just two officers arriving on scene quickly escalated to a sergeant being called, and before long Deborah recollected fifteen police cars were present.

Deborah explained how co-ethnics justified using the arms of the LAPD to dispossess street vendors of access to public space and economic opportunities at Leimert Park:

They see us, the vendors, as a nuisance instead of being a positive economic force. They deal with us [vendors] like they’re vagrants or criminals. They consider the vendors like the homeless. Mr. Williams [Black businessman] is all about gentrification. We want to keep it on the small mom and pop level. He wants to see corporate dollars coming into the neighborhood.

This passage sheds light on the logic of global neoliberal cities, where public space must be recouped from street vendors for the “creative class” to enjoy access to art, culture, and the type of consumption that appeals to young professionals (Crossa 2009; Martin 2014). McKittrick and Woods (2007) argue the conferral of rights and protection are denied to Black people who are deemed as “the homeless, the jobless, the incarcerated, the invisible laborers, the underdeveloped, the criminalized, the refugee, the kicked about, the impoverished, the underdeveloped, the abandoned, the unescaped” (p. 2). In LA, co-ethnics are deputized to surveil Black and Brown street vendors in the service of the state apparatus because of the perception that the street vendors are unsightly and unworthy of rights and protection (Hunt 2009; Martin 2014). In stark contrast is the favorable reception of young entrepreneurs to gourmet food trucks and brick-and-mortar restaurants, owned by citizens whose class and legal status entitles them to fully participate in the life of the city (Martin 2014).

Ultimately the MLK organizers succeeded in displacing the earlier inhabitants of the park that day, but Deborah refused to cede the space altogether. She led her community of street vendors over to an adjoining sidewalk, where all the vendors were crammed together on the sidewalk. They were all so packed in that Deborah could not properly display her wares and neither nor her peers really sold anything during the MLK parade. But for Deborah, it was not about selling things that day. It was about standing their ground and sending a clear message to Mr. Williams, MLK organizers, and the police: the street vendor inhabitants of Leimert Park would not be erased from the space. This moment helped solidify Deborah’s role as a street-vendor leader at Leimert Park and made clear to her peers in the Black vending community why it was important for Leimert Park street vendors to be involved in the LASVC.

Many vendors believed they would never be displaced, as they had held their respective spaces at Leimert Park for generations. Scholars of gentrification have noted the complex ways in which class differentiation among co-ethnics pits groups against one another, as the upper-income neighbors facilitate the gentrification process at the expense of low-income inhabitants (Huante 2017). But now, neighborhood changes were affecting South LA inhabitants in tangible ways. Deborah believes this event shook up her peers and helped her convince them that the
LASVC was not about single-identity politics. Deborah had been saying this for a while and met a lot of resistance—the LASVC was not only a Brown issue, it was a Black issue as well. After the MLK parade, Deborah had a lot more success recruiting her peers to join the neighborhood meetings she facilitated as a leader in the LASVC.

Both Caridad and Deborah’s narratives of legal violence demonstrate how street vendors are perceived as an ever-present danger to the neoliberal urban imaginary of LA, thereby normalizing lawful violence against street vendors for decades (Hunt 2009; Martin 2014; Setšabi and Leduka 2008). This exposes how legal systems construct street vendors as criminals—to justify their elimination.

The power of cross-racial dialogue

On 21 September 2018, the LASVC succeeded in decriminalizing street vending throughout all of California. Legalization did not happen overnight. These seeds were sown for a decade, while Black and Brown street-vendor leaders engaged in cross-racial dialogue and strengthened their alliances during organizing meetings, town halls, exhibitions, and demonstrations. As this article demonstrates, Black and Brown street vendors’ common struggles of dispossession, family separation, and surveillance had the power to create closeness (Hooks 1994). Through cross-racial and spatial congregation, street-vendor leaders in the LASVC cultivated a sense of security and sanctuary by naming shared traumas (Morrison 2004; Johnson 2013).

It took all of them to make legalization happen, but these landmark victories are only on paper. In the 3 years after street vending was decriminalized and a permit regulatory system introduced, the city issued only 165 permits to the ten thousand eligible street vendors (Cummings and Smith 2021). The LASVC continues to fight a tangled web of city, county, and state laws that, de facto, still render street vending illegal.7

The anti-vending ordinance has had lasting and ongoing consequences in the lives of Black and Brown street vendors. Building on the legal violence framework, this article demonstrates how legal violence—the merger of carceral and immigration regimes—intertwine to dispossess families and vending communities. This view presents a rich picture of the myriad ways street vendors experience legal violence in their daily lives. Beyond considering how punitive policies affect individual vendors, this article outlines the reverberations of legal violence on street vendors’ ability to stay free, remain housed, and stay together. My findings also demonstrate how state-sanctioned legal violence creates a hierarchy of inequality ranging from

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7 Although SB 546 legalized street vending, city officials are causing it to become functionally illegal. Since 2020, and amid the COVID-19 pandemic, local city officials failed to uphold just regulation for street vendors. While street vendors are the originators of outdoor dining, the city creates new barriers for them through imposing onerous equipment requirements, prohibiting slicing fruit and hot-holding previously prepared food, and erecting chain-link fences around street-vending community landmarks like Echo Park, while simultaneously relaxing regulations and allowing restaurants to freely serve food outside.
racism to expressions of class power that are internalized by community-sanctioned actors who facilitate the surveillance and dispossession of street vendors. My study takes a race-relational approach to analyze how Black and Brown street vendors have shared experiences of legal violence, and how they mobilized around common suffering. Together they utilized righteous anger to fuel them as they confronted political stakeholders—city staff, politicians, and funders—and powerfully asserted their right to live and work with dignity and free from repression. In the words of Audre Lorde (2007), “Anger is loaded with information and energy... Focused with precision, it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change” (p. 127). The street vendors in this study exemplify how shared narratives of dispossession, family separation, and surveillance can powerfully advance movements that challenge legal systems.

Over seven years, street vendors shared their greatest fears, most painful moments, and their darkest truths in the hopes that I could, in the words of street-vendor leaders, “show them how they treat us.” This article strives to celebrate street vendors’ humanity—and is inspired by how adamantly street vendors vocalized that they had stories, ones they are eager to share and have heard. Their daily struggles are a true testament to the resilience of the human spirit and its ability to imagine liberation in landscapes of legal violence, where unfreedom persists. The narratives in this article represent a group of people who faced unspeakable legal violence and, on the surface, seem to have lost it all. But it would be a mistake to see this selection of painful recollections as the stories of victims. Street-vendor leaders from the LASVC see themselves as luchadores (fighters), and in the cosmic battle of life, they see themselves winning. Vendors’ stories demonstrate how to hold the burden of past and current trauma, while maintaining hope in the possibility of a more just future. Such a feat is critical for this political moment.

**Acknowledgements** I dedicate this work to the Los Angeles Street Vending Campaign and the street-vendor leaders continuing the fight for legal protections. This work was supported through research grants from the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment; the Institute for American Cultures; and the Diana Wilson Fund. I also gratefully acknowledge the anonymous reviewers of *Latino Studies* for their insightful feedback.

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