Street Vending in the United States: A Unique Dataset from a Survey of Street Vendors in America's Largest Cities

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The data described in this article come from an original survey of street vendors in the 50 largest cities in the United States. One of the most persistent, although little understood, features of the urban American environment, street vending is defined as "the retail or wholesale trading of goods and services in streets and other related public axes such as alleyways, avenues and boulevards" (Bromley, 2000: 1). Some vending occurs in a fixed location, whereas other vending is mobile and makes use of carts, tricycles, or motor vehicles. Vending may be practiced full time, part time, seasonally, or occasionally by businesses ranging from one-person micro-enterprises through numerous forms of partnerships, family businesses, franchisees, pieceworkers, and wageworkers of brick-and-mortar firms (Bromley, 2000).

Throughout much of its history, street vending was an occupation largely practiced by recent immigrants or others on the first rungs of the economic ladder as a way to make a living (Bluestone, 1991; Newman and Burnett, 2013). Although street vending fell into disrepute during the 20th century (Cross, 2000), the first few decades of the 21st century saw a reversal of the industry's fortunes. In the 2012 Economic Census, food vendors reported revenues of approximately $660 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In 2010, New York Times food columnist John T. Edge declared, "Street food is hip" (Allen, 2010). A 2009 Washington Post story on food trucks observed, "Street carts are the year's hottest food trend. Good, cheap food sates appetites in a recession, and low start-up costs are a magnet for entrepreneurs" (Black, 2009).

Despite the industry's contemporary growth and popularity, surprisingly little systematic information about it is available (Bromley, 2000). Demographic data about vendors, for example, are rudimentary (Linnekin, Dermer, and Geller, 2011/2012) or geographically limited. Survey studies gathered data from Los Angeles (Loukaitou-Sideris and Gilbert, 2000) and Dhaka, Bangladesh (Etzold, 2015), but those focused on single cities. Moreover, the academic literature about vending and vendors—although large—is overwhelmingly dominated by qualitative,

ethnographic, and phenomenological studies (Babb, 2013; Gaber, 1994; Greenberg, Topol, Sherman, and Cooperman, 1980; Jones, 1988; Rosales, 2011; Shepherd, 2009).

This lack of information means elected officials in U.S. cities typically make decisions about vending regulations informed largely by anecdote and plagued by partial understanding. Similarly, academic understanding of vending and vendors lacks systematic data with which to examine and test theories, observations, and effects across numerous contexts. The dataset discussed here begins to help fill this significant void.

The Data

TechnoMetrica, a New Jersey-based polling company, collected survey data by telephone during a three-month period in the fall of 2013. Because of the high representation of immigrants in the vending industry, multilingual speakers administered survey questions that were available in multiple languages.

The survey and data, which appear at http://ij.org/report/upwardly-mobile/street-vending-in-the-united-states-a-unique-dataset-from-a-survey-of-street-vendors-in-americas-largest-cities, include 233 questions about the vendors, such as personal characteristics, length of time in the industry, specialized training, and past employment. The survey also asks vendors the type of product or service they provide, where they normally vend, how many hours and days they work, and how many people they employ. Most questions are closed-ended using Likert scales or yes/no responses, but 12 are open-ended. The latter typically follow closed-ended questions.

The survey also includes a unique set of questions asked only of vendors in New York City (NYC) that can facilitate an economic contribution analysis. These questions were asked of 209 food and non-food (merchandise and printed material) vendors, or approximately 2 percent of the city's estimated vendor population (Devlin, 2011). NYC has three categories of licensed vendors—general merchandise vendors, food vendors, and vendors who are licensed but lack certain permits. The sample was proportionately stratified by these categories and quotas met through random selection. Participants were asked to provide revenue and expenses for one year (2012) on certain business operations. These questions were designed to be used in input-output analysis with the IMPLAN system (Day, n. d.) to measure the broader economic benefits that accrue to a community (Crompton, 2006) from an industry by measuring patterns of spending and re-spending within an economy (Bangsund and Leistritz, 1995).

Sample

For the general survey of all cities, the sample included 763 licensed street vendors across the 50 largest U.S. cities, by population, as depicted in exhibit 1. The sample was constructed by securing a list from each city of all licensed vendors. The total number of vendors across all city lists was 53,553. For sampling purposes, we treated this as the population of licensed vendors in the 50 cities, despite the unknown number of people who vend illegally in these cities as part of the informal economy (Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014; Webb, Bruton, Tihanyi, and Ireland, 2013). Categories of vendors who can work without government permission—such as those

selling written materials in NYC (Devlin, 2011)—result in no lists of such vendors. Because it was impossible to identify such vendors for inclusion in the survey, the results of any analysis using these data can be generalized only to licensed vendors.

The sample was constructed as a stratified random sample. The number of participants in the sample from each city was proportional to each city's percentage of vendors in the vendor population. After proportional quota frequencies were set for each city, vendors from the respective city lists were called randomly until quotas were filled or lists were exhausted. Lists were declared exhausted only after vendors were contacted multiple times at varying times of the day and week. The data file includes probability and sample weights to reflect the unequal probabilities of participants ending up in the sample and the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of vendors in certain cities due to response biases. Using the population figure of 53,553, a 95 percent confidence interval, and the sample size of 763, the overall margin error for the survey is approximately 3.5 percent. Margins of error for individual questions were typically between 3 percent and 4 percent.

Exhibit 1

Sample Cities and Number of Respondents Per City

City	Number of Respondents	City	Number of Respondents
Albuquerque, NM	9	Louisville, KY	2
Arlington, TX	5	Memphis, TN	2
Atlanta, GA	7	Mesa, AZ	2
Austin, TX	29	Miami, FL	61
Baltimore, MD	3	Milwaukee, WI	7
Boston, MA	8	Minneapolis, MN	3
Charlotte, NC	9	Nashville, TN	2
Chicago, IL	14	New York, NY	209
Cleveland, OH	5	Oakland, CA	25
Colorado Springs, CO	2	Oklahoma City, OK	3
Columbus, OH	20	Omaha, NE	5
Dallas, TX	20	Philadelphia, PA	33
Denver, CO	4	Phoenix, AZ	5
Detroit, MI	1	Portland, OR	11
El Paso, TX	32	Raleigh, NC	6
Fort Worth, TX	24	Sacramento, CA	9
Fresno, CA	4	San Antonio, TX	38
Honolulu, HI	6	San Diego, CA	7
Houston, TX	28	San Francisco, CA	9
Indianapolis, IN	3	San Jose, CA	15
Jacksonville, FL	12	Seattle, WA	5
Kansas City, MO	14	Tucson, AZ	18
Las Vegas, NV	5	Tulsa, OK	5
Long Beach, CA	5	Virginia Beach, VA	3
Los Angeles, CA	5	Washington, D.C.	4

As the results of a first-of-its kind survey of vendors, these data are unique, but they are not without limitations. The most significant limitation is that city-specific analyses are essentially impossible. The project for which the data were gathered was designed as a national study. Individual city analyses—other than the economic contribution analysis in NYC—were not anticipated. I briefly discuss how other researchers might consider using the survey to gather data for a city study.

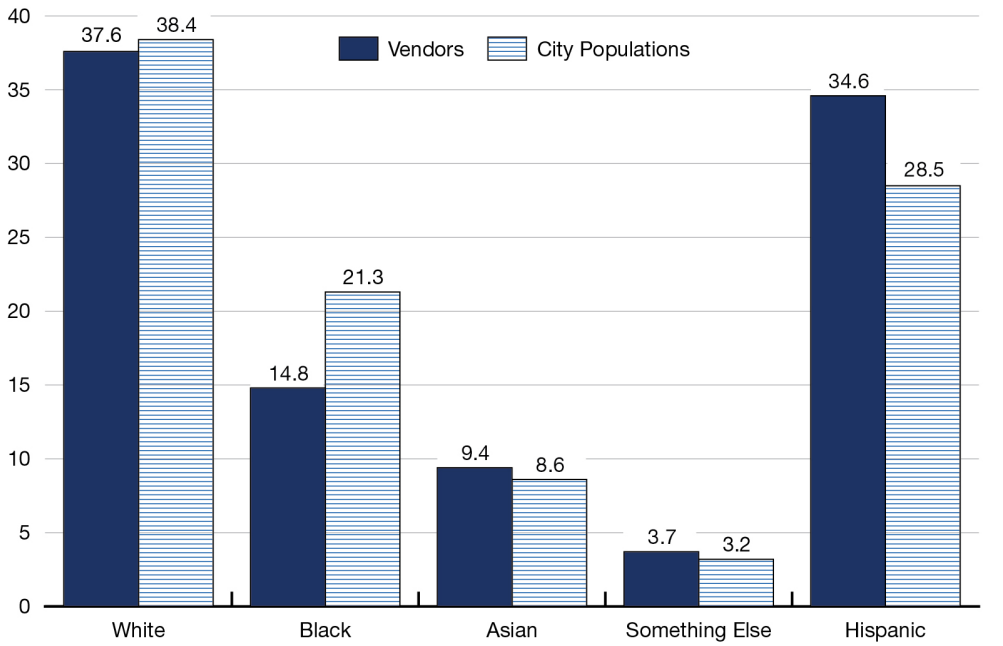
What the Data Reveal About Vendors in America's Largest Cities

With these data, we begin to gain a general understanding of the personal characteristics of vendors, their businesses, and their backgrounds prior to vending. The descriptive statistics present some but not all of the information contained within the survey. Where possible, the data are compared to the general populations in the cities composing the sample (with data drawn from the 2012 American Community Survey) or to businesses.

The face of vending. The people who provide food, merchandise, or services from trucks, carts, and stands in America's 50 largest cities are a more diverse group than these cities' general populations. As exhibit 2 illustrates, greater percentages of vendors are minorities compared to the cities' populations, with the most pronounced difference among Hispanics, at six percent. Moreover, 51 percent of vendors are immigrants to the United States, far outpacing the overall percentage of immigrants in the cities (23 percent). On average, vendors have lived in the United States for 22 years.

Exhibit 2

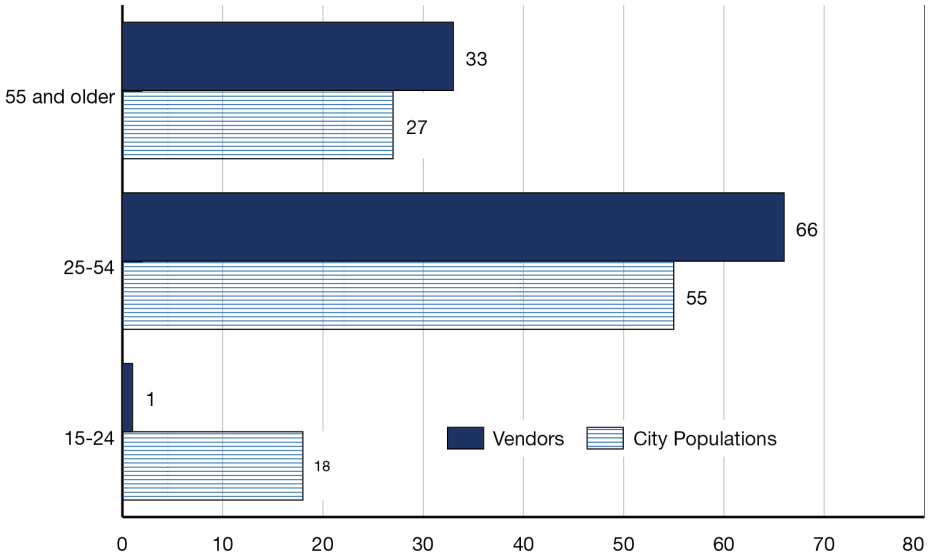
Vendors More Racially and Ethnically Diverse Than City Populations



More men than women populate vendors' ranks, with men representing 68 percent of vendors but only 49 percent of the cities' populations. Vendors also tend to be older than the general populations in their cities. Exhibit 3 illustrates significant disparities in all age categories. A greater percentage of vendors fall into the 25–54 and 55+ age categories than do members of the cities' populations overall, and comparatively very few vendors are younger than 25.

Exhibit 3

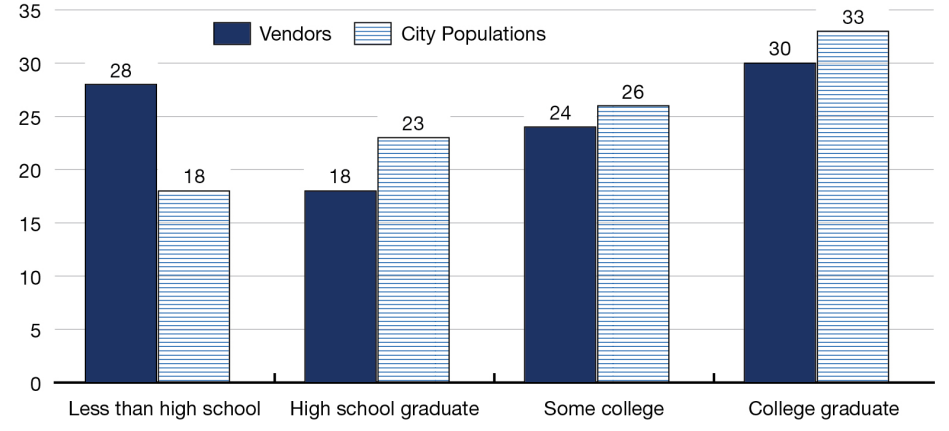
Vendors Tend to be Older Than City Populations



Vendors tend to be somewhat less educated than their cities' general populations. As exhibit 4 illustrates, a greater percentage of vendors did not complete high school, but the percentages of vendors who completed some college or graduated from college are similar to the cities' populations.

Exhibit 4

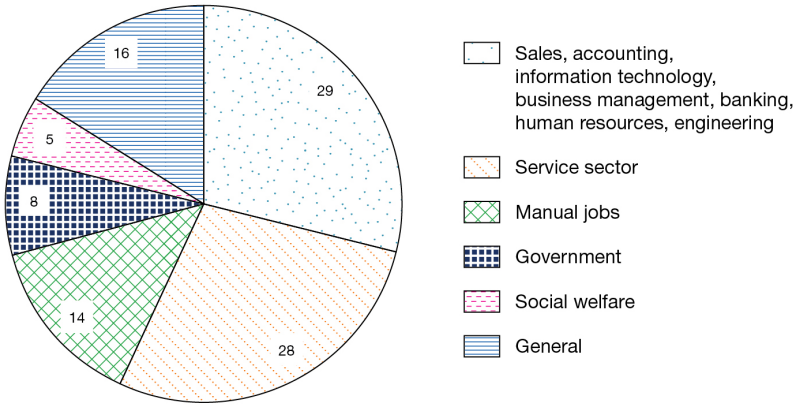
Education of Vendors Compared to City Populations



Unlike peddlers of yore who often lacked skills or opportunities, many of today's vendors enter the vending business from other employment. Indeed, 73 percent held jobs prior to vending. As illustrated in exhibit 5, most worked in professions such as sales, accounting, information technology, and the like. Some worked in the service sector, particularly as drivers, house and office cleaners, and food service workers, including cooks, chefs, and restaurant managers. Others worked in areas termed general employment (temporary jobs, retail); manual jobs (construction, auto repair, manufacturing); government (teaching, military, law enforcement, postal service); and social welfare (health care, counseling, nonprofits).

Exhibit 5

Vendors Worked in a Diversity of Occupations Before Vending



Moreover, vendors who work part time (approximately 33 percent) or seasonally (approximately 40 percent) typically work other jobs (see exhibit 6). Of seasonal workers, those not employed during off-seasons typically report disabilities, retirement, or student status as relevant reasons. Of those who report working during the off-season, most do so in general industries, such as retail or temporary jobs, or in the service sector providing cleaning, transportation, or food services. Next is information about professional (sales, technology, management, engineering) and manual (construction, manufacturing, auto repair, agriculture) sectors. The remainder works in government or social services.

Exhibit 6

Employment of Part-Time and Seasonal Workers

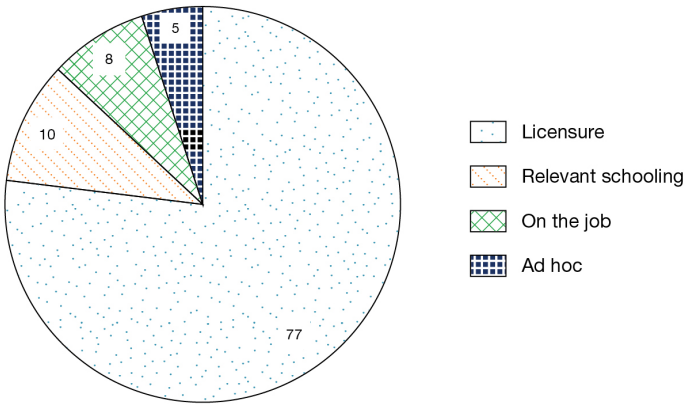
	Seasonal (%)	Part Time (%)
Not employed	37	28
Employed		
General	20	9
Service sector	20	31
Professional	8	11
Manual	8	10
Government or social services	7	11

Among part-time vendors, those who report no other employment largely do so for the same reasons as seasonal workers. Of those who work, most do so in the service sector, whereas around the same percentages work in government or social welfare, the professional sector, manual labor, or general industries. If vending was once primarily for those who lacked other opportunities, that is not the case today. Most vendors come to the business from other employment and, in the case of seasonal and part-time vendors, engage in other meaningful employment alongside vending.

Although most vendors come to the business from other jobs, 37 percent complete specialized training to work as vendors. Of those who report completing specialized training, most do so as part of licensure requirements (see exhibit 7). Examples include hygiene classes and testing regimes and take an average of five months to complete. Beyond licensing requirements, the next largest percentage of vendors complete some form of schooling relevant to their business. Schooling may include general businesses courses or specialized training (for example, blacksmithing, leatherworking, photography, or cooking classes). Next are vendors who report receiving on-the-job training from other vendors, parent companies/franchisors, or other relevant businesses (for example, restaurants). The remainder receive training on an ad hoc basis, which includes online resources, personal instruction (such as art or music lessons), or friends.

Exhibit 7

Most Vendors with Specialized Training Received it from Mandatory Licensure Requirements



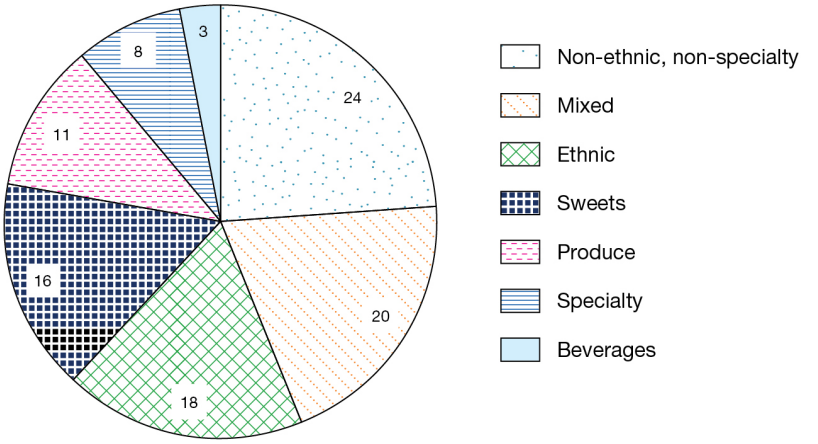
Lack of specialized training does not equate to a lack of success in vending. On average, vendors have worked in the business approximately 8 years and plan to continue for at least another 10. Moreover, more than one-third of vendors who own their businesses plan to expand, and almost half of those who work as employees in a vending business intend to own their own vending business in the future.

The business of vending. If the people who vend are diverse, the types of businesses they operate are less so, at least in broad categories. Almost 78 percent of vendors sell food, followed by 21 percent who sell merchandise, and less than 1 percent each who provide services or "other." Among food vendors, the greatest percentage sell non-ethnic, nonspecialty foods commonly found at concession stands (such as burgers, hot dogs, fish); slices of pizza; sides; beverages; and desserts (see exhibit 8). A similar percentage offers a mixed menu, somewhat like a small restaurant. They

sell some specialty items but also offer sides, beverages, and desserts. A slightly smaller percentage sells ethnic foods from around the globe, followed by food vendors who sell sweets; produce; specialty items like lobster rolls, crabs, or pretzels; and beverages.

Exhibit 8

Vendors Sell a Diversity of Food

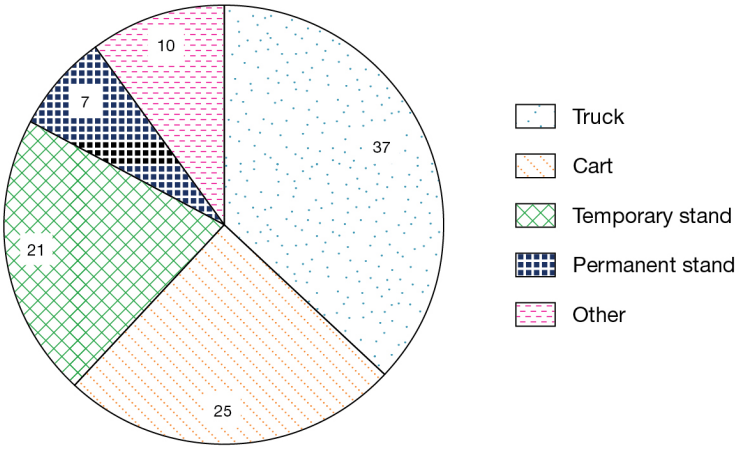


Of vendors who sell merchandise, 39 percent offer a mixture of items, such as apparel, cosmetics, gifts, novelties, and accessories. Some sell common products (socks, handbags, sunglasses, watches), whereas others offer homemade wares (craft items, finger puppets, woodworking) alongside more standard stock. Other vendors (31 percent) offer specialty items only—often artwork or crafts but also more unusual items like glass light fixtures, Tiffany-style lamps, pistol and rifle shells, and emu oil. The remaining merchandise vendors devote themselves to specific common items (for example, exclusive apparel or cosmetics).

Just as most vendors sell food, the majority (83 percent) operate mobile vending units, such as trucks, carts, or temporary stands. As exhibit 9 indicates, most mobile units are trucks, followed by carts and stands. Permanent stands (kiosks, market booths, designated areas at stadia or arenas) represent the smallest percentage of vending structures. On average, vending structure owners hold title to one unit, but some own 10, 20, or even 50 units. The majority of vendors, however, run a single unit. Those who sell from something other than trucks, carts, temporary stands, or permanent stands most often do so from trailers pulled behind a vehicle but the diversity of operations also includes selling from designated areas within other businesses, suitcases, and personal vehicles—even off a vendor's person (for example, tickets held in a bag).

Exhibit 9

Most Vendors Operate Mobile Units



Vendors overwhelmingly own the businesses in which they work. Of the 96 percent who own their vending businesses, 90 percent also own the structure from which they vend. The remaining vendors own the vending business but rent the vending unit. Thus, many vendors invest a nontrivial amount of money to establish their businesses through the purchase of a vending unit, which can run into the tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars.

To make good on this investment, location is critical, just as it is with any other retail business. Where vendors locate depends on the type of structure they operate (see exhibit 10). The plurality of mobile vendors operates in business districts, followed by "other" and street fairs and events. Smaller percentages serve customers at sporting or event venues, in restaurant and bar districts, or at subway entrances.

Exhibit 10

Locations Vendors Work Most

Location Type	Mobile Units (%)	Permanent Stands (%)
Business district	43	30
Sporting or event venues	8	4
Restaurant and bar districts	2	3
Street fairs and events	22	NA
Subway entrances	1	NA
Other	24	41
Markets	NA	21

Although vendors work 5 days a week on average, the number of days worked differs based on full-time (67 percent of vendors) versus part-time status. Part-time vendors work about 4 days per week, whereas full-time vendors work 5.5 days. Their workdays are long. Each day on average, vendors spend about 7 hours interacting with customers and a little more than 3 hours preparing

to sell, which can include preparing food or packaging merchandise. In addition, they spend 1–2 hours per day on organization, such as bookkeeping, purchasing, and the like.

Vendors dedicate this time to their businesses even with full- or part-time help. About 39 percent of vendors who own a business employ full- and part-time workers, despite small budgets. Indeed, vendors pay all of their expenses—supplies, fuel, wages, insurance, taxes, fees, and so forth—from average annual sales totaling about $105,000 per vendor.

From annual sales, these business owners reap an average profit of almost $26,000 per year, but they pay themselves only about $15,000 annually. Food vendors report annual incomes of approximately $16,350. By comparison, this figure is 25 percent of restaurant owners' $66,115 salaries (Catinella, 2013) and only about $5,000 more than the federal government's poverty threshold for a single person (Poverty Guidelines, 2014).

Conclusion

This article presents a new dataset created from a survey of street vendors in the 50 largest cities in the United States, as well as a brief analysis of the data. The analysis provides a snapshot of vendors and their businesses and demonstrates the scope of the data and possibilities for analyses. Additional analyses with these data could include—

- An investigation of the relationship between variables or constructs within the data (such as personal characteristics and business traits).
- An examination of the relationship between city regulations on vending and characteristics of vendors or vending businesses.
- An economic contribution analysis as briefly described, using NYC data.
- A study of how these data reflect broader political and economic government parameters.

A particularly useful follow-up would be a second wave of data collected from the same cities using the same survey. Creating a panel dataset would likely be impossible, but a longitudinal cross-sectional design would still allow for some change-over-time analyses and the stronger analytical designs that go with them. Vendors are a "hard-to-reach" population, however, thereby increasing the survey costs associated with telephone surveys. A lower-cost approach might be to use the survey to gather data in one city. Such data could be paired with ethnographic data in a mixed-methods study to provide a particularly rich description and analysis of the vending industry in a city.

Such studies would provide invaluable insights on a feature of U.S. urban environments that is as old as cities themselves. Given the ubiquity of vending and the challenges cities face in regulating it, the contributions would be more than academic.

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