



BLOG

## License to grill: Recognizing street vendors in our economy

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No one can deny how irresistible the aroma of al pastor twirling on the flaming spit is. It is a smell that defines Los Angeles. Street vending in Los Angeles existed long before the food truck renaissance in the late 2000s. [As early as the 1870s, spicy tamales vendors were recorded heating up the palates on the streets of the city.](#) However, even with the incredible contributions of street vendors to our culture, communities, and economies, they are not treated with the respect they deserve. Now more than ever, during this crucial time of economic recovery from the pandemic, we need to overhaul the laws that have left street vendors out for so long. California [Senate Bill 972](#)—a bill to increase access to permits for food vendors—will work to create an inclusive and aromatic [open-air economy](#) where our beloved food microentrepreneurs can thrive.

Life as a street vendor, especially those selling food, can be incredibly difficult. Our [Street Vendor Emergency Fund](#) survey found that food vendors—as compared with merchandise vendors—typically:

1. Have been vending on the streets longer, making the transition to a new career difficult
2. Are more likely to rely on street vending as sole income
3. Are more vulnerable to disruptive events like global pandemics. Food vendors were further behind on rents and had a harder time accessing government assistance.

These factors lead to street food vendors' greater need for emergency cash assistance during the pandemic. The city estimated that 20% of the street vendors in Los Angeles are food vendors, but almost half of the emergency fund applicants were food vendors.

	Food vendors	Merchandise vendors
Estimated distribution of street vendors in the city ( <a href="#">by City of Los Angeles</a> )	20%	80%
Distribution of Street Vendor Emergency Fund applicants	43%	57%
Years of vending experience (median)	9 years	7 years
Relying on street vending as sole income	81%	73%
Months behind on rent in March 2021	3 months	2 months

MONTHS SPENDING OFFICE IN MARCH 2021	0 MONTHS	2 MONTHS
% with a Social Security Number	17%	22%
% with an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number	26%	28%
% receiving government assistance during the	16%	18%

This Table shows the results of the survey conducted by IAC, based on surveys completed (In total, we received 3,251 survey responses; These surveys represent 2,774 unique street vendors. 1,589 [43%] were food vendors, and 1,185 [57%] were merchandise vendors who applied for the Street Vendor Emergency Fund.)

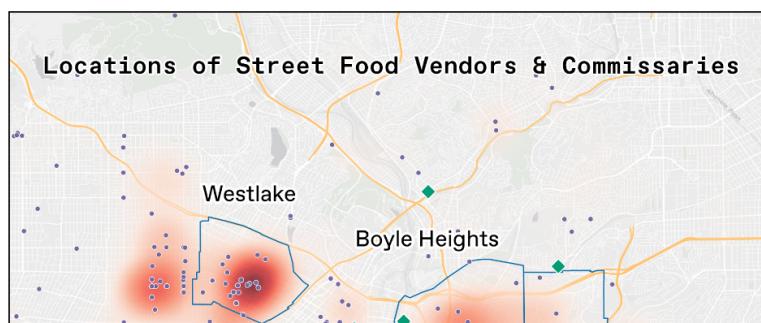
Street vendors are also frequently the victims of acts of violence, as [Inclusive Action wrote last year in response to a series of attacks on street vendors](#), "if street vendors continue to be perceived as 'informal' or operating 'illegally' due to government treatment, they will continue to be targeted by passersby." Fast forward to this year, these egregious acts show no signs of subsiding and continue to surface in the news regularly despite often being recorded.

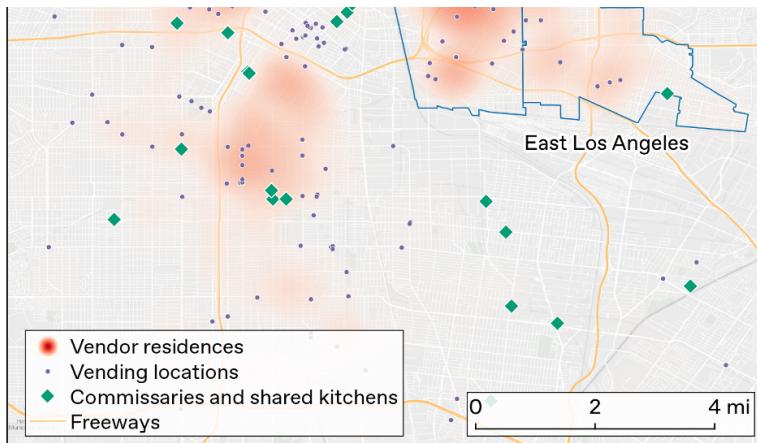
It doesn't help that obtaining the required vending permit to become "legal" is much harder for food vendors. The first hurdle both street food and merchandise vendors face is the need for a Social Security Number (SSN) or Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) for Los Angeles's Business Tax Registration Certificate to initiate the permitting process. Less than half of the vendors have either an SSN or an ITIN, as found through the survey. The ITIN application process is lengthy; the applicant has to mail in and live without their identification (like passports) for [seven weeks to 11 weeks](#). In recent months, we have heard this number increasing to 26 weeks or more due to backlogs.

From there, merchandise vendors can complete the remaining permitting steps with relative ease, the permit fee notwithstanding. However, food vendors need to jump another hurdle, and perhaps the most insurmountable one: they must obtain a Los Angeles County health permit. To obtain the county health permit, the Los Angeles County Public Health Department requires food vendors to have the following and pay the associated fees:

- Cart blueprints and proposed menu ([\\$796](#) fee)
- Food manager's certification (around \$150 for the course and exam)
- Commissary lease (cost varies, can be hundreds of dollars per month)
- Final check of cart and application ([\\$393–\\$772](#) fee)

On the surface, these requirements may appear reasonable or necessary, but there are hidden systematic barriers in the permitting process which make meeting these requirements nearly impossible. First is a hidden cost. A health department-compliant cart can run [more than \\$15,000 in total costs](#)—the same amount as the typical annual income of food vendors. Then there is the physical constraint. Operating a mobile *food cart* that needs to satisfy the requirements for *food trucks* (whom the current law is designed for) is inconceivable. For example, a food cart that is compliant with the food code, would need to have two sinks (one with three compartments and one integral to cart for handwashing) and carry 20 gallons of water which together weigh over 300 pounds! Finally, there is a lack of available commissary—to store and clean food carts—to meet the permitting requirement. Out of the limited commissary spaces in Los Angeles (published by the County Public Health Department and found on [socalmfva.com](#)), only two are located in the top three neighborhoods where most food vendors we surveyed live—Westlake, Boyle Heights, and East Los Angeles.





The long list of unfair challenges against these food microentrepreneurs call for economic inclusion policies like SB 972. This bill, **co-designed with and led by street vendors**, will modernize the retail food code by streamlining the permitting process and providing food vendors with accessible alternative facilities to traditional commissaries. Despite the challenges and discrimination hurled their way, street food vendors continue tirelessly to contribute to our local economy, light up our streets, and—because we are what we eat—serve up the fuel that makes California resilient. Let's imagine together what we can collectively achieve by fostering an inclusive economy for California.

[Take action now and email your state assemblymember today to voice your support for SB 972](#) – a bill that would modernize the state's food code, protect street vending, and bolster the hard working vendors that contribute to the culture and vitality of our state.

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