LONCHERAS:
A Look at the Stationary Food Trucks of Los Angeles

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Loncheras, or *stationary* food trucks, are predominantly microenterprises owned and operated by Latino families in their own neighborhoods, contributing to their communities' economic development by keeping profits local. Mostly serving low- and moderate-income areas lacking in adequate food options, these wheeled kitchens are not generally known for directly competing with brick-and-mortar restaurants. They do, on the other hand, provide pedestrians and transit-dependent persons vital foodservices that they may not otherwise easily access. Most lonchera operators (also called "loncheros") own a single food vehicle and employ mostly their own family members in the business, answering to their own employment needs while providing affordable, hearty meals to other working-class residents. While frequently called "taco trucks," the typical lonchera serves an array of other dishes as well, frequently featuring a particular specialty—from a regional brand of string-cheese torta to spicy shrimp cocktails—and occasionally not serving tacos at all.

Contrary to common perceptions, loncheros incur significant overhead. The monthly cost of a parking space at a commissary (where health regulations require that a food vehicle be stored and serviced every day) ranges between $800 and $1000 per month, rates comparable to commercial rents per square foot in Los Angeles. Capital-investment expenditures made by food-truck operators are also considerable, ranging from a minimum of $30,000 for a used kitchen-equipped vehicle to well over $100,000 for a new one. Moreover, loncheras are at the top of a food chain that includes many large and small suppliers throughout the Los Angeles providing meat, produce, tortillas, bread, paper products and beverages among other necessary inputs. These include mom-and-pop tortillerias, bakeries and produce stores located in the same communities as the food trucks, the commissaries, as well as such corporate wholesalers like Smart & Final, Restaurant Depot and Costco. Also in the lonchera supply network are the manufacturers, retailers and maintenance providers of the vehicles and kitchen equipment.

What is the food trucks' economic impact?

The significance of food trucks to the Los Angeles economy, even by conservative measures, is considerable, given their numbers and their annual payments in supplies, taxes and regulatory fees.

- In 2009, there were 4,480 food vehicles operating in Los Angeles County, according to government records, and an estimated 2,016 in the City of Los Angeles.
- One small operation's expenditures alone totals nearly $38,000 a year in commissary fees and supplies and nearly $8,000 in taxes and regulatory fees.
- Food trucks' total yearly expenses in supplies and commissary fees are conservatively estimated at over $75 million in the City of Los Angeles and over $170 million in the County.
- Total payments in taxes and regulatory fees for food trucks each year may reach over $15 million for food trucks in the City and over $35 million in the County.

Loncheras and their customers

Loncheras are a distinct branch of the subsector of food trucks, as defined by their frequency of movement and locational behavior. They are sometimes confused with the trendy "Twitter trucks"—a tiny yet highly visible group of mobile kitchens famous for "tweeting" about their planned one- or two-hour stops in fashionable districts in pursuit of a relatively hip and affluent clientele—but loncheras are better known for staking out a single spot where they do business the entire workday on a daily basis for years on end. Apparently a 1970s offshoot of the industrial lunch-truck branch of the subsector—those that operate on fixed routes making multiple 15- or 20-minute stops to serve factory and construction-site workers—loncheras now likely make up the bulk of food trucks in Los Angeles. Anecdotal testimonies about lunch-truck operators transitioning to a relatively sedentary mode (as loncheras) as a result of toughening competition in industrial areas over the last few decades match the reality of a shrinking manufacturing sector in Southern California during this time period.

While lonchera customers are largely working-class Latinos, they are quite diverse in ethnicity, age, income, place of birth and, among immigrants, years of residence in the United States. Their immediate motives for consumption are also varied and include professionals and service workers on lunch breaks as well as people on the go; single adults or entire families on an outing and stopping for a low-cost treat; late-night customers with few other food choices; or neighborhood residents with limited traveling abilities to reach fixed-location restaurants.

Arguments for and against loncheras

The most common arguments used to advocate greater restrictions on loncheras are related to public health, their effects upon a neighborhood's economic wellbeing and upon the quality of life afforded its residents. But the strongest arguments in favor of protecting and supporting loncheras are also rooted in these same three areas of urban life.

The argument that mobile eateries are less healthy than fixed-location restaurants or even a danger to public health is the most easily refutable. Next to other providers of low-cost rapid foodservices frequently found in working-class neighborhoods—like McDonald's, Burger King or Pizza Loca—the typical lonchera fare compares quite favorably, serving meals prepared with fresh ingredients. Food trucks are also subject to the same level of oversight by health authorities as are their brick-and-mortar counterparts and the rest of the California foodservice industry.

Commonly aired charges against stationary food trucks—that they hurt rent-paying restaurateurs by luring away their customers; that they enjoy an *unfair* advantage due to having "no overhead;" and that they undermine a community's economic vitality by driving away with the profits at the end of the day—are also belied by the facts. Loncheras have historically served low-income, disinvested neighborhoods, filling a void in adequate foodservices, meaning that they have few or no direct competitors (unlike "Twitter trucks," which often park near restaurants). A food truck's overhead is also significant, spending tens of thousands of dollars each year in supplies, commissary "rents," taxes and regulatory fees, in some cases more than immobile restaurants. Finally, as small family businesses that are owned and operated locally

and largely stocked by neighborhood suppliers, loncheras appear to be a model for sustainable economic development.

Finally, the quality-of-life concerns over loncheras voiced by some appear to point to more complicated issues related to clashing ideologies about urban living and the proper uses of public space. Arguing that loncheras contribute to litter on the streets is contradicted by the reputation many seem to enjoy among their neighbors for maintaining their areas clean. The perception that stationary food trucks contribute to crime and blight may be linked to biases against their customers' ethnic or class backgrounds (after all, "Twitter trucks" and their relatively upscale fans have not been frequently said to promote crime or blight). However, this view may also be traceable to a lingering discomfort among some Angelenos with the City's increasingly urban lifestyle, marked by the greater use of sidewalks and other public spaces. In fact, many experts believe that greater pedestrian density represents "more eyes on the street" and contribute to increased safety.

Policy recommendations

In recognition of food trucks' vital importance to the social and economic life of Los Angeles, yet also acknowledging that improper regulation of an industry may lead to unintended consequence, the following are policy recommendations for the local food-truck industry:

- ***Creation of a mobile-food industry commission***
  The social and economic importance of the mobile foodservices in Los Angeles necessitates the creation of a commission by the City Council capable of dedicating special attention to this vital but complex industry. A mobile-food commission could play a crucial role in the formulation of comprehensive policies related to this segment of the local economy, whose particular characteristics touch upon issues of city planning and affect the lives of Angelenos in a multiplicity of ways. The commission's overarching goal would be to help improve the industry by providing informed guidance that leads to superior services and greater success in meeting the multiple demands that have long been the stimulus of mobile eateries.

- ***Provide food trucks opportunity to formalize parking spaces for annual fee*** Creating a regulatory permit process involving an annual fee for the opportunity to operate a food truck in the City would signify both an overdue recognition of the vital importance of this industry while also generating much-needed public revenue. The business permits would also exempt the motorized vendors from most time limits and parking-meter obligations on public streets, effectively formalizing a practice of semi-permanent locations in commercial and residential zones have served the public well.

  The payment of fees to the City combined with the special designation of their parking spaces would dispel any doubts about the legitimacy of a mobile kitchen's presence in a residential or commercial neighborhood. The measure would also provide current (and prospective) area residents, merchants and developers with reliable information about vendors' locations when making plans to live, work or invest in a nearby property. Additionally, the difficulty that health officials purportedly face in finding the vehicles

for code enforcement would also be likely solved with the assignment of official business addresses to the wheeled eateries.

- ***Commitment to work with the Human Relations Commission***
  The complexity of the mobile-food industry sometimes raises questions of importance to the diverse communities in Los Angeles, which call for direct involvement of the City's Human Relations Commission. Whether food trucks actually add to such problems as crime, litter or other public nuisances, or are misperceived to do so, such issues point to the age-old challenge of realizing harmonious coexistence among the various urban stakeholders. Rather than responding with well-intentioned but indelicate measures leading to win-lose outcomes, these intra-community disputes would be best addressed by broadening the avenues of communication between and among residents, merchants and public officials. The Human Relations Commission of the City of Los Angeles is aptly suited to facilitate this communication, invested with the ability and respect to act as mediator between the communities of a diverse metropolis.

- ***Improve communication and access to information***
  In order to address common and injurious stereotypes about sanitation levels on board stationary food trucks and to further incentivize compliance with health codes, the policy of assigning letter grades to anchored restaurants after passing an inspection ought to be extended to the mobile vendors. This change in policy, which appears to already be in the works, would do much to assure the public of safety of the various food options in the City.

  As well, while loncheros seem generally well-informed about health codes and food-safety practices, the interviews revealed that some operators did not always understand other laws that affected them, including the difference between recently invalidated ordinances and other parking restrictions that apply to the general public. Improving communication between authorities and loncheros and making such important information easily available is very important. This would probably be most effectively achieved through the cultivation of a close working relationship with food-truck associations, distributing easy-to-understand informational material in Spanish as well as English and hosting meetings with the vendors during which they may be heard about the needs and challenges they deal with on a day-to-day basis.

- ***Expand availability of public restrooms and waste containers***
  Redoubling efforts to expand the availability of publicly accessible toilet facilities and waste containers would go a long way in minimizing those public nuisances that stem from the lack of these services. Food trucks and other responsible and law-abiding streetvendors cannot reasonably be blamed for the problem resulting from this situation; indeed, fixed-location retailers frequently do not provide their customers with restrooms either. Ensuring the feasibility of the growing pedestrian culture that the vendors are helping to promote in Los Angeles requires that residents have much easier access to these facilities while away in the urban outdoors. New efforts should be made for increasing the availability of public restrooms, such as those few that have appeared in recent years in a handful of locations in Los Angeles. An alternative solution worth

exploring may also be to devise incentives for fixed-location businesses with toilet facilities to make them available to the general public during their business hours for free or at a low cost.

As well, tackling the problem of litter on the streets is a collective responsibility and is not to be charged solely to mobile vendors. Loncheros already place trash bins on the sidewalk next to their vehicles for their customers to dispose of their wastes. If increasing the number of public waste containers on the City's sidewalks is not an option, other strategies ought to be explored. One idea might be to incentivize all retailers to join in the effort to reduce litter by conveniently locating waste containers where they may be easily accessible to all pedestrians and not exclusively to their customers.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, *loncheras*, or stationary food trucks—also popularly called "taco trucks" in English—an undeniable fixture of the Los Angeles streetscape and culture for the past forty years, have become the subject of much debate and restrictive laws in both the City and the County of Los Angeles that, if enforced, would cause their disappearance. While courts have recently ruled these ordinances invalid under California law, members of the Los Angeles City Council continue to receive pressure from some constituents to tighten regulations on loncheras, which may number in the thousands locally and employ tens of thousands. But eliminating this quintessentially Angeleno institution would be a serious mistake, undermining important civic goals, like supporting economic development in our neighborhoods and promoting pedestrianism. Better would be for the City to create new rules that address the secondary effects of the mobile-food industry while optimizing the invaluable contribution loncheras make to the quality of life in Los Angeles.

Loncheras, which get their name from the Spanglish *lonche*,[1] typically park at a single location every day for several hours while serving ready-to-eat Mexican food. Although their customers come from all backgrounds, these kitchen-equipped vehicles have served Angelenos for about forty years, meeting the local working-class Latino demand for fast, inexpensive yet hearty meals in areas lacking in similar services. But in recent years they have garnered the disfavor of some residents and business owners who believe that the trucks may be unsanitary or contribute to blight, or even crime. Some have also claimed that mobile eateries enjoy an *unfair* advantage over brick-and-mortar restaurants, perhaps owing to the perception that they are not regulated and pay no taxes or the fact that their overhead costs are indeed lower. Arguments against them come from different directions, including restaurateurs reacting to the recent emergence of "Twitter trucks," which often park near fixed-location restaurants and may directly compete against them for customers.

The truth is that lonchera operators, or *loncheros*, must pay taxes and fees, like all licensed businesses, and comply with the same health codes as do fixed-place restaurants. Regulations also require that the vendor park his or her vehicle at a commissary for its daily storing, cleaning and servicing, which incurs monthly costs not unlike rent costs faced by anchored merchants. With the number of operating food vehicles in 2009 at 4,480 in the County of Los Angeles and nearly half that figure in the City of Los Angeles, their collective overhead is estimated, respectively, at over $170 million and over $75 million, most of which is funneled directly into other businesses and likely supports the employment of tens of thousands locally.

Indeed, stationary food trucks are a grassroots solution to disinvestment and unemployment in many communities. They present little competition to brick-and-mortar foodservices because they mostly locate where few food options exist. Deeply rooted in their communities, most of the mom-and-pop operations belong to longtime Mexican immigrants who live and work within the same small geographic area, put in long work hours and primarily employ their families as they serve a local clientele that demands easy-to-access affordable, rapid food service. They also

[1] *Lonche* is a Spanglish word deriving from "lunch" and commonly used by Mexicans and Latinos in Los Angeles to refer to any homemade meal packed for consumption away from home.

represent for a few owner-operators a steppingstone into the mainstream economy, after having first worked as *un*regulated streetvendors of food.

Moreover, loncheras dwell at the top of a food chain that supports an array of other small businesses, including meat and produce wholesalers, tortillerías and bakeries. And as microenterprises owned and operated by families that live in the same communities, dollars spent at such a kitchen on wheels by-and-large return to other neighboring merchants in the purchases of supplies and to meet the operator's personal and family expenses—making loncheras a force for a community's sustainable economic development.

However, loncheras are also the unwitting vanguards of a movement to redefine life in Los Angeles as it evolves into a more truly urban center. The bustling activity often witnessed on the sidewalk by a food truck—often in residential areas where zoning codes preclude the establishment of fixed-location businesses—ensures that its presence is felt in the community. They heed consumers' demand for alternatives to driving to where they may buy a freshly cooked meal, making life easier for children, disabled persons and others with limited transport options, and enhancing the lives of those who choose not to drive. In sum, the mixed land uses promoted by their presence in residential areas help make Los Angeles a more livable urban center where sidewalks become public space and where residents become less dependent on cars to obtain the services they need.

However, this circumventing of segregated land-use limits, giving pedestrians an excuse to linger in the public way, seems to worry some residents who fear the prospect of living in a city that grows more urban, and less suburban, every day. Further adding to the discomfort of some of the loncheras' most vocal objectors are also the vendors' largely working-class Latino following, as suggested by remarks made by some stakeholders reflecting negative presumptions about the demographic group.

But some of the quality-of-life concerns that critics have raised are certainly valid. Unlike industrial lunch trucks—similar kitchen-equipped vehicles whose fixed routes through industrial areas keep them moving, stopping only briefly to serve hungry workers on breaks—the seemingly permanent presence of loncheras in a neighborhood may lead to nuisances if not dealt with appropriately. The daylong seeping of food odors from a mobile kitchen into one's home, for example, or late-night noise outside one's bedroom are annoyances that no one can be reasonably expected to tolerate. Measured policies designed to support the contributions of loncheras (and other streetvendors) while minimizing any negative side effects resulting from their work would be a win-win solution. But City policies toward mobile vending have too often seemed rather oblivious to the nuanced significance of the sector to life in Los Angeles. Thus, local treatment of vendors, licensed and compliant with health codes or not, has frequently appeared to be aimed at simply eliminating them altogether.

The emergence in recent years of trendy "Twitter trucks," relatively upscale mobile kitchens hawking pricey, "gourmet" street grub—whether inspired by Mexican or other culinary traditions or even such intercultural fusions, like Korean barbecue tacos—has also added to the

polemic about the place of food trucks in Los Angeles.[2] Their targeting of a young, hip customer base in fashionable areas frequently leads to direct competition with chic restaurants, bolstering complaints that mobile eateries could wrest profits away from *immobile* businesses burdened with rent obligations.[3] But while the differences between how Twitter trucks and loncheras operate are quite significant, the dissimilarity seems lost on many. Twitter trucks, which are miniscule in number but highly visible, are known to gravitate toward trendy or gentrifying districts served by high-end restaurants, unlike loncheras.

Given the proportions of the food-truck economy—in millions of dollars spent each year and thousands of residents employed—and the multiple economic and social benefits Angelenos reap from loncheras in Los Angeles, the City Council would do well in taking measures to protect and optimize the industry. Recognizing the importance of the industry to the City's economic and social wellbeing can be done while also addressing those aspects of the industry that currently may produce negative side effects. At the end of this document, policy suggestions are presented toward this goal.

[2] They are called "Twitter trucks" in this paper because of their famous, ingenious use of Twitter and other online media to advertise their constantly changing locations.

[3] Although they park at different locations daily, sometimes two or three places in a single business day, they generally remain in each spot for a few hours at a time, occasionally an entire afternoon or evening, which could arguably affect sales for nearby restaurants that cater to the same clientele.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The debate over the place of stationary food trucks in Los Angeles continues in 2010, despite court rulings in recent years that have overturned local ordinances on constitutional grounds. Partly resulting from the relatively recent emergence of "Twitter trucks" and their peculiar locational behavior that brings them into direct competition with relatively high-end brick-and-mortar restaurants, the City Council Transportation Committee held a hearing on August 11, 2010, to review potential avenues for reinstating parking restrictions on food trucks. Calls for the City to clamp down on the motorized vendors were heard from stakeholders ranging from restaurateurs to residents in neighborhoods where food trucks may park. And while much of the ire has been stoked by the newish internet-advertising peddlers of purportedly gourmet street food—a largely white, relatively affluent group whose target audience often live or work in trendy districts already served by various food establishments—any new measures regulating the vehicles could also bring negative consequences for a distinct branch of the mobile food industry, loncheras.

Yet not much is known about the food-truck subsector in Los Angeles or across the United States, as evidenced by comments quoted in the media by residents and public officials alike and remarks made by some stakeholders interviewed for this research. An enormous void in empirical research on the subsector's *stationary* food-truck branch, specifically, is also clear, despite loncheras representing a significant and, possibly, growing segment of the foodservice economies of many cities throughout the United States. To date, we have relied largely on newspaper articles and anecdotal evidence to glean facts about this phenomenon that has been at the center of significant debate and legislative action in recent years. Even government records are limited in their accounting of loncheras, as are the number of people employed in the subsector and the inner workings of the trade. Likewise, the size of the industry as a share of the city's gross domestic product is anyone's guess.

Seeking to serve as a starting point for those interested in learning about loncheras in Los Angeles, be they academic researchers or policymakers, this work is primarily based on extensive interviews with nearly two dozen lonchera operators, several customers and other actors in the mobile food sector. We continue with an overview of the regulatory framework currently governing the mobile-food retailers in California, a description of the inner workings of the local lonchera trade, its supply networks and the demographics of its labor and customer base. A central feature of the report are also the personal profiles of five individual loncheros in different areas of the City of Los Angeles. Finally, the thoughts and concerns of community stakeholders, including residents, merchants and officials from schools near the habitual location of a mobile kitchen as well as police officers working in their neighborhoods, also contribute to a discussion of the issues.

An important goal of this paper is that insight gained from facts about how the practices of loncheras as well as from the perspectives heard from lonchera operators and community stakeholders facilitate a better understanding of the role that the vendors play in the lives of Angelenos. A careful consideration of all the facts and viewpoints are also essential to the formulation of policy suggestions at the end of this paper.

WHAT IS A LONCHERA?

Loncheras, or stationary food trucks, are part of the huge and varied mobile-food sector in Los Angeles, which includes motor vehicles and wagons as well as pushcarts (some of which are equipped with plumbing and refrigeration) that are often seen on the City's sidewalks. These motorized and non-motorized peddlers range from those selling readily consumable meals, snacks, desserts and beverages to those that specialize in retailing fresh produce, uncooked meat and fish or other groceries.[4]

The California Health and Safety Code refers to a motor and non-motor vehicle used for retailing (cooked or uncooked) food as a Mobile Food Facility (MFF). The truck, wagon or pushcart may or may not be equipped with plumbing, refrigerators or freezers and cooking equipment and may be used to sell a wide array of edibles. Products commonly sold from an MFF in Los Angeles include tacos, burritos and shrimp cocktails, hot dogs, churros, popcorn and packaged ice cream or other frozen desserts, soft-serve ice cream, and a wide variety of groceries, such as fresh fish, eggs, produce, bread and tortillas.

The food vehicles referred to in this paper as "loncheras" represent a distinct branch of a subsector of the mobile-food scene in Los Angeles, that of the "hot trucks," those kitchen-equipped vehicles designed for cooking and serving hot meals. The Health and Safety Code refers to a wheeled kitchen designed for the preparation of ready-to-eat meals as a Mobile Food Preparation Unit (MFPU), which may be either a wagon to be towed by a motor vehicle or a gasoline-powered step van.[5] Different branches of the subsector include "Twitter trucks," "industrial lunch trucks" and those that cater to crowds at street fairs and other special events, amusement parks and to film crews at movie shoots.

Although morphologically similar—and, for the purposes of health regulation, identical—the diverse practices among food trucks in Los Angeles and their unique effects upon the local economy and quality of life in the City make it necessary to recognize the differences between the three most visible branches of the subsector: "loncheras" (or "stationary food trucks"), "Twitter trucks" and "industrial lunch trucks." The fundamental distinction in each branch's mode of operation is its locational behavior and frequency of movement.

Other commonalities may also be observed in each branch—in cuisine, ownership structure or the demographics of its labor or its customer base—but the variable that has proven most salient (and controversial at times) is the place and amount of time a motorized streetvendor typically parks for business. Thus, the legislative and legal actions that have resulted from the debate have focused on their parking privileges. A brief description of each of the three branches follows:

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[4] While the terms "streetvendor" and "peddler" are often used exclusively for a person who pushes a cart or stands on the sidewalk with his or her merchandise for retail, there appears to no reason to refrain from using the same terms for the operators of motor vehicles used for peddling in the public way, given that their practice is captured by the same concept of streetvending (despite their obvious greater investment in capital to do so).

[5] A van with a ceiling high enough for an adult to stand inside it, such as those used in delivery services, icecream vending and motorized food trucks.

Loncheras (or stationary food trucks)

The primary distinguishing feature of a lonchera among Los Angeles-area hot trucks is its sedentary behavior. While fully mobile—and required to be driven to a commissary for cleaning and storage at the end of each workday—lonchera operators, often called "loncheros," typically stake out a single spot in the City where they station themselves semi-permanently to serve customers. In this respect, a stationary food truck resembles a brick-and-mortar restaurant in that it becomes part of the built environment due to its constant presence at a certain corner or intersection: During its business hours, the typical lonchera is always in the same parking space or within a few dozen feet. Its likeness to a building-occupying establishment also extends to the influence it may exert, inadvertently, upon the social, cultural and economic life of the surrounding community.

Often associated with East Los Angeles and other working-class Latino areas, the wheeled kitchens (popularly known in English as "taco trucks," despite selling more than tacos) appear to be a response to the insufficiency of affordable and easily accessible foodservices in those neighborhoods. They tend to locate themselves relatively far from similar food options, be they fixed-place eateries or other stationary food trucks. The scattered location of such services—arguably the result of segregated land uses, the City's car-oriented development and inadequate mass transit—seems to have first opened the door about four decades ago for parking hot trucks every day for a full workday on public streets near people's homes and workplaces, thus undermining rules against mixing land uses on private real estate.

In all likelihood, the first loncheras were likely operated, originally, as "industrial lunch trucks" and this new mode of operation of the vehicles reflected the entrepreneurial ingenuity of Latino immigrants seeking to make a living while meeting an until-then unmet demand. Despite complaints from some residents and merchants in those neighborhoods over the years, stationary food trucks have enjoyed the support and patronage of many others and have become important institutions in their communities.

This paper provides an extensive and in-depth review of the lonchera economy of Los Angeles.

Industrial lunch trucks

Industrial lunch trucks are those mobile kitchens that are constantly moving, making multiple, brief stops on fixed routes through industrial zones or at construction sites, serving workers during their breaks.[6] Stopping for 15 or 20 minutes at a time, just long enough to provide a quick meal or snack to industrial laborers too far from other foodservices, the lunch-truck operator makes it a point of reaching each location at the same time every day, crucially providing reliability as well as nourishment.

A typical lunch truck's route—according to one vendor with two decades in the trade—consists of twenty stops at factories or construction sites, the first one taking place at the break of dawn and the last one, around two in the afternoon. Highly dependent on a stable lineup of sites where

[6] In Spanish, they are also popularly known as *loncheras de ruta*, a term that also contains the derivative of *lonche* but which is followed by *de ruta* (literally, "of route"), indicating its modal category.

hungry men and women may await, a good-quality route (as determined by the number of potential customers, as well as the amount of competition from similar foodservices, that may be encountered at each stop) can be as important as the vehicle itself to anyone hoping to make a living in the trade. Arranging a truck's schedule of profitable stops can, therefore, be a lucrative investment in itself, which is why a lunch truck for sale is usually much more expensive when it is sold along with its own route. Turf battles between operators are also not uncommon in the arduous process of determining a moving eatery's itinerary. However, the opportunity to gain financially from securing access to the stops on a route is not only for its operator or its seller: In cases in which a lunch truck is permitted to enter the premises of an industrial building to feed its employees—perhaps because no parking is allowed on the street outside—operators may pay hefty monthly fees to the manager of a property for the privilege of serving a captive audience.

While Latinos of working-class background appear to dominate this branch of the subsector, some diversity in ethnicity and national origin is observable. Some operators were reported to be white, Asian immigrants, or of Armenian descent. Among those who were Latino, some were reported to be Central American immigrants. Many operators of industrial lunch trucks were also said to lease their vehicles (and routes) for a fixed weekly fee, often from a firm possessing a fleet of dozens or hundreds.[7]

Twitter trucks

A "Twitter truck"—as defined in this paper—is, in some ways, something of a hybrid of the lonchera and the industrial lunch truck. It is not entirely stationary like the lonchera, instead operating a route filled with feeding stops but remaining much longer (one, two or three hours) at each place than its industrial counterpart. Famously, these mobile eateries advertise their planned locations days ahead of time via internet-based media, such as Twitter, often very close to trendy restaurants in fashionable districts on the Westside and elsewhere.

Twitter trucks' followers generally seem to be more affluent than the workers served by loncheras and industrial lunch trucks and to already enjoy access to an array of other foodservices. In fact, the peddlers of "gourmet food" (as their relatively pricey menu items have often been described to differentiate them from the average lonchera or lunch-truck fare) appear to have stoked the ire of restaurateurs near their favorite business spots who complain that Twitter trucks insist on luring away their customers. Unlike loncheras and industrial lunch trucks, which are more likely to operate in areas with few other food options (due either to economic disinvestment in a neighborhood or local zoning laws), it appears that the tweeting hot trucks aim at carving out a niche within the market of culinary-experience seekers.

The adventure associated with the idea of "street food" that is bought and consumed on the sidewalk in the open air is part of the product marketed by the fancily decorated trucks (some of which are operated by large restaurant companies themselves) and seems to have become symbolic of the "urban hipster" lifestyle for many in Los Angeles.[8]

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[7] These companies often also own the commissaries where the vehicles are registered.

[8] The Twitter truck insurgency upon the scene of high-end restaurants in recent years has both reignited and given a new twist to an old debate about food trucks that remain parked at the same spot for more than a few minutes (i.e., loncheras, not industrial lunch trucks), particularly when outside of

What is a "traditional" food truck?

During an interview, a health department spokesman used the term "traditional food trucks" a few times to refer to industrial lunch trucks and allude to their longer history as a mode of business among the hot-truck branches.[9] Presumably with the same reasoning, other public officials have at times also used the adjective when distinguishing the ever-moving kitchens from other hot trucks. However, this usage of "traditional" seems to deny loncheras' four decades of existence as a modal category in Los Angeles, a long-enough period to argue that the stationary food truck represents a firmly established, albeit younger, local tradition. Further, using the adjective only for industrial lunch trucks also seems to imply that only they are *legitimate* and that other operations may not be worthy of legal protection.

No consensus appears to exist, however, on what a traditional food truck is. A *Los Angeles Times* article from the early 1980s uses "traditional catering trucks" interchangeably with "cold trucks" to refer to the older design of motor vehicles equipped only for the storage and serving of prepackaged meals, unlike "hot trucks" or "cook-aboard" vehicles that had begun by the late 1970s to dominate in the Los Angeles area's food-truck subsector.[10]

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industrial zones. Because of loncheros' preference for operating in otherwise-poorly-served areas, concerns over their presence have mostly come from residents who feel the trucks are a nuisance or contribute to blight in their neighborhoods. The loudest critics of Twitter trucks, on the other hand, appear to be the owners of fixed-location restaurants. Perhaps a combination of this new Twitter truck phenomenon and the increasing density of loncheras in Los Angeles is what has led in recent years to stronger actions by municipal authorities against food trucks that may stop moving.

[9] Terrance Powell, director of the Bureau of Specialized Surveillance and Enforcement of the Environmental Health Division, Los Angeles County Public Health Department.

[10] SEE Catering Trucks Find That Most Like It Hot HERBERT J VIDA L*os Angeles Times (1923-Current File);* May 3, 1982; ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881 - 1986) pg. E1).

LAWS AND REGULATIONS

Contrary to common perceptions, loncheras are no less regulated than other food retailers in Los Angeles or anywhere in the state. For instance, the California Retail Food Code—part of the California Health and Safety Code—establishes a series of rules governing the sale of food for local governments to enforce.[11] Not only do most of the rules applying to brick-and-mortar restaurants also apply to food vehicles but the Code details how the activities of a mobile kitchen must be carried out. Section 113709 of the Code also gives local authorities the right to enact their own policies to further public safety,[12] such as the letter-score system for food establishments that many localities in the County of Los Angeles have implemented.[13] In the City of Los Angeles, as in nearly all other municipalities in the County and unincorporated areas, enforcement of health regulations is carried out by the Environmental Health Division (EHD) of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. Within the EHD, the Food Inspections Bureau houses the Vehicle Inspection Program, which oversees code compliance among all mobile food vendors.

Another area of state law specifically referring to food trucks is the California Vehicle Code, which gives vendors ample freedom to park on public streets for the sale of food. In fact, the clause in Section 22455 stating that "a local authority may… adopt additional requirements for the public safety regulating the type of vending and the time, place, and manner of vending from vehicles upon any street,"[14] has been critical in overturning local ordinances restricting the amount of time a food truck may be parked at one location. The courts found that the City and County ordinances—each of which required in their respective jurisdictions that a food truck, after being stationed for 60 minutes in a commercial zone or 30 minutes in a residential zone, be

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[11] Simply referred to as either the "Health Code" or the "Code" from here on.

[12] The exact wording is: "Authority to establish local requirements [113709.] This part does not prohibit a local governing body from adopting an evaluation or grading system for FOOD FACILITIES, from prohibiting any type of FOOD FACILITY, from adopting an EMPLOYEE health certification program, from regulating the provision of CONSUMER toilet and handwashing facilities, or from adopting requirements for the public safety regulating the type of vending and the time, place, and manner of vending from vehicles upon a street pursuant to its authority under subdivision (b) of Section 22455 of the Vehicle Code."

[13] The policy of assigning letter grades to fixed-location restaurants ("A" for 90 to 100 percent compliance; "B" for 80 to 89 percent compliance; and "C" for 70 to 79 percent compliance) after passing an EHD inspection was instituted in 1998 after a series of widely reported failures in the branch of Food Inspection Bureau that is charged with overseeing the immobile eateries. SEE… Inspection Grades Up for Eateries in County; Health: New system of awarding letters instead of numbers yields higher marks, officials say, but it is too early to make a correlation to increased food safety.; [Home Edition] *TERRY McDERMOTT*. Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, Calif.: Oct 9, 1998. pg. 1

[14] The exact wording is: "Vending from Vehicles [22455.] (a) The driver of any commercial vehicle engaged in vending upon a street may vend products on a street in a residence district only after bringing the vehicle to a complete stop and lawfully parking adjacent to the curb, consistent with the requirements of Chapter 9 (commencing with Section 22500) and local ordinances adopted pursuant thereto. (b) Notwithstanding subdivision (a) of Section 114315 of the Health and Safety Code or any other provision of law, a local authority may, by ordinance or resolution, adopt additional requirements for the public safety regulating the type of vending and the time, place, and manner of vending from vehicles upon any street. Amended Sec. 3, Ch. 139, Stats. 2008. Effective January 1, 2009."

moved a half mile away or more and not return for at least one hour[15]—failed to meet the law's requirement of public safety as the condition for any local regulations on a vendor's right to park and do business.

While the restrictions on loncheras legislated by the County Board of Supervisors was challenged and overturned only four months after being passed in 2008, the ordinance approved by the Los Angeles City Council in 2006 was in effect for three years before being declared unconstitutional. However, according to vendors interviewed for this study, enforcement was inconsistent and often only followed calls to the police from a resident or merchant in the area demanding that a food vehicle be moved or cited for staying past the time limit. Not surprisingly, the situation created a great deal of ambiguity over the legitimacy of loncheras and exposed operators to the whims of an unfriendly neighbor or the particular inclinations of a law enforcement officer.

The motorized streetvendors were always permitted under state law, overseen and licensed by the health department, required to pay fees and taxes as well as incur the costs commissary services and, simultaneously, were subject to random, seemingly arbitrary punishment by local authorities. This situation also appears to have created especially strong incentives for a lonchera operator to keep area residents and merchants happy, lest the weapon of selective enforcement be deployed against his or her business.

Food safety

The same food-handling and -storage techniques approved by the Health Code to protect consumers at fixed-location restaurants and other foodservice establishments apply to mobile facilities. State law requires that all persons employed in foodservice have adequate knowledge of safe practices, including personal hygiene habits that prevent airborne contamination, methods for cleaning utensils and equipment, and appropriate procedures, layouts and temperatures for displaying and storing food.

To ensure general knowledge of such information among a food business's employees, Section 113947.3 of the Code requires that at least one employee on each vehicle must possess a food-handler's certificate, which requires passing an examination accredited by the American National Standards Institute and which remains valid for five years. The exam tests individuals on their familiarity with the potential causes of food-borne illness at every step of the cooking process and storage and the techniques that best prevent it (Code Section 113947.2).

A "Written Operational Procedures" statement, describing in detail all of the vendor's menu items, ingredients and condiments as well as the way they would be handled, prepared, stored and served, must also be approved by health officials before the a permit is issued and, subsequently, kept on file on the vehicle. The document refer to the preparation methods for food and condiments, how "potentially hazardous foods" would be protected from high temperatures and served to customers and for a description of the manner in which utensils would be cleaned and sanitized.

[15] See Los Angeles Municipal Code Section 80.73(b)(2)(F) and Los Angeles County Code Section 7.62.070

Commissary requirement

All food vehicles must be cleaned and serviced daily at a commissary, where it must also be stored during all hours when it is not in operation (Code Section 114295). Commissaries for MFPUs are essentially parking lots that include facilities for the cleaning and servicing of the vehicles, including the restocking of ice and water supplies, and may include facilities for the storage and preparation of food. Electrical outlets at each of the vehicle parking spaces also allow the powering of a vehicle's refrigerators and other onboard equipment (when the propane-fueled generator on board most kitchen-equipped vehicles are turned off). Commissaries, which are usually privately owned establishments that charge for their services, are also regularly inspected for code compliance. One of the prerequisites for obtaining or renewing an MFPU permit is that the mobile vendor submit proof of his or her vehicle's registration at a commissary approved by health authorities.

While permit holders must (with few exceptions) be registered tenants at one of the twenty-six MFPU commissaries in the County approved by the EHD, a vendor may hire the services of a Mobile Support Unit (MSU) that can travel to the location of a food truck to facilitate the cleaning of its interior and the disposal of wastes and replenish ice, water and food supplies.[16] An MSU's services, while allowing the servicing of a mobile kitchen at its place of business, cannot serve as a substitute for the services of a commissary.

Restroom access

Food trucks operating in a single spot for more than one hour must be within 200 feet of approved toilet and hand-washing facilities to which its employees may have ready access (Code Section 114315). Because such a restroom is usually located inside a fixed-location establishment, the lonchera operator must provide health officials with a signed written statement from its owner or manager authorizing access by food-truck employees.[17] Failure to provide proof of access to such a restroom to a health officer conducting an inspection is grounds for a food truck's immediate closure.[18]

Health permit and certification decal

Currently, the EHD charges $695 for issuing or renewing an MFPU permit, which remains active for one year. [19] MFPU permits must be renewed or canceled by the beginning of the department's fiscal year, which runs from July 1 to June 30.

A necessary step in the application process is submission of an "Operational Procedures Statement" that lists a complete menu of items to be offered and details how the food will be

[16] MSUs must also pass inspection for approval by health authorities and be registered with a commissary for their own servicing and storage.

[17] "Mobile Food Facility Information Packet: Operational Guidelines," Los Angeles County Public Health Department

[18] Mobile Food Facilities Guide. Los Angeles County Public Health Department. pp. 24

[19] To compare, the permit fee for a fixed-location food business with 0 and 10 seats is $553; 11 to 30 seats, $707; 31 to 60, $817; 61 to 100, $915; and so on, the highest health-permit fee of $1,468 being for an establishment with 401 seats or more.

handled, cooked, stored and served. It must also explain how kitchen utensils and equipment will be cleaned and sanitized.

The EHD also checks for proof of registration with a commissary, possession of a valid food-handler certificate for at least one employee per MFPU, indicating successful completion of an examination on food safety. For those vendors planning on parking for business in the same place for over one hour, showing evidence of employee access to an EHD-approved restroom within 200 feet (a letter from management, for example) is also necessary.

In order, too, is a thorough inspection of the vehicle at its registered commissary, ensuring it meets structural requirements. These include the operational status, quantity, size, location and other characteristics of sinks, tanks, air vents, refrigerators, stoves, the amount of floor and counter space, the height of ceilings, etc. Indicating completion of the permit issuance or renewal process, the operator is then issued a Certification Decal that must be placed in a visible place on the vehicle's exterior.

For $340, the aspiring purchaser of a brand new vehicle may also submit a mobile facility's blueprint to the EHD for preapproval before it is actually built, helping to avert costly design errors.[20]

A health permit may be suspended if any of these documents is found to be missing or no longer current at the time of an unscheduled visit by an inspector upon a food truck or if any unsafe practices or equipment failures that may result in a health hazard (e.g., inadequate food-storage temperatures) are observed during an inspection.

Health inspections

Each MFPU must be inspected by an EHD officer at least twice a year—once at the time of permit issuance or renewal and a second, unscheduled time during the course of the year. Inspections upon a vehicle also follow any complaints filed by members of the public.

The EHD does not currently assign letter grades to MFPUs after passing an inspection as it does to fixed-location restaurants, but plans are underway to extend the policy to mobile eateries as well (Powell, November 11, 2009). Nonetheless, every food-truck operator is required to keep a copy of his or her vehicle's last inspection report on board and make it available to anyone who may want to see it.

Loncheras are largely the result of a strong local demand for cheap and rapid food services on the sidewalk and health laws requiring that food for sale always be prepared inside an enclosed facility (hotdog or taco stands where meat is grilled in the open air, for example, are unpermitted). But a lingering source of tension, according to some lonchera operators, lies between many Latino customers' preference for direct access to the garnish and condiments that

[20] A list of manufacturers experienced in building EHD-approved mobile facilities (often simply adding a kitchen to an existing step van or trailer) is also made available at the Vehicle Inspection office, although anyone may be contracted to do the work.

go with their food (typically chopped onion, cilantro, radishes, lime and pickled jalapeños as well as a variety fresh salsas) and the rules that say they must be kept inside the facility, chilled and protected from air-borne contamination.

Many loncheros follow suit and simply hand out the condiments that customers may want in small plastic bags or containers with each meal they serve. Others, however, risking citation by authorities, seek to please their patrons by placing the condiment choices on the outside of the vehicle so that they may help themselves from large containers that they may open and close after each taking. As one such vendor put it, “The inspectors won’t let us... If one arrives right now, I’ll get busted.”

THE LONCHERA ECONOMY

The local lonchera economy is one that many Angelenos have depended on for decades, as it has conveniently and affordably met the nutritional demands of many while also providing employment and economic independence to working-class families. Its lack of recognition by economists and government accountants and the limited resources available for this study leaves us with little data to measure loncheras' share of the Los Angeles economy, forcing us to rely on rough estimates get an idea of the trade's significance.

However, while answering to the needs of thousands of *individual* workers and consumers, the particular configuration of the trade—the "vicinality" of the typical lonchera's economic relationships—also points to wider positive implications for the development of the communities that the mobile kitchens are part of. With their homes, business locations and suppliers so frequently in the same neighborhood, the multiplier effect resulting from a vendor's practice of locally reinvesting lonchera profits means that a greater proportion of the dollars that enter the neighborhood are likely to remain.

In this section, a brief description of the inner workings of the trade is followed by a discussion and charts of loncheras' revenues and expenses.

Patterns in the lonchera economy

As described earlier, what mainly separates a stationary food truck from other hot trucks is not its menu or the people who make up its labor or its customers, but its frequency of movement and locational behavior. A lonchera is that *movable* kitchen that is quite sedentary, reliably found at the same place and time every day that it is open for business for years on end. However, other patterns in this branch of the subsector are discernible as well, such as its products, ownership structure, the demographics of those who make up its labor and its customers and the supply networks that support loncheras.

Food products

As the term "taco truck" suggests, loncheras are widely known for selling not just any Mexican food but, particularly, tacos. However, some loncheras do not offer tacos at all and, when they do, the dish is usually only one of a variety of *antojitos* on the menu, like sopes, tostadas, quesadillas and flautas.[21] Other top sellers are burritos and tortas, which may or may not come with meat but typically contain beans, rice, lettuce, tomatoes and sometimes avocados. Individual vendors also often gain local recognition for their particular skill in preparing a certain meat filling—say, tacos made with such beef cuts as *cabeza*, *asada*, *suadero* or *lengua*; pork-based *carnitas* or *al pastor*; *birria*, usually made with goat meat; or grilled chicken—or for their

[21] In Mexican Spanish, an *antojito*, which literally means "little craving," is a somewhat substantive snack, typically consisting of tortillas (or other variations of the cornmeal-based product, such as tostadas, sopes, raspadas, gorditas, tlayudas) topped with such ingredients as beans, rice, cheese, perhaps meat. A few servings of an *antojito* may be considered a full meal for a person, although they are commonly deemed appropriate only for informal occasions.

specialty dishes, like a *cemita poblana* with breaded beef, string cheese and chipotle peppers or fried shrimp tacos bathed in mildly spicy salsa and topped with avocado slices.

Some vendors serve larger meals requiring more involved preparation, including such hominy-based soups as pozole and menudo as well as beef or chicken stew rich in vegetables and broth. And many also serve such non-traditional dishes as *hamburguesas*, albeit after some "Mexicanization," such as burgers topped with sour cream, hot peppers, mayonnaise, avocados, grilled onions in addition to cheese, pickles, mustard and ketchup.

On the other hand, their beverage selections—like their bags of chips, cheese curls, and crackers—are usually much less remarkable, consisting mostly of national soda brands and bottled juice and water, which customers may reach for themselves from the icebox on the lower right side of a lonchera. Some vendors, however, also serve *aguas frescas*. Those loncheras that start the day early enough may also serve something like eggs with chorizo and beans in a burrito or on a disposable plate. For light breakfasters, coffee with *pan dulce* or donuts or a prepackaged slice of sweet bread is often also available.

Ownership, labor and customers

Explaining why the typical lonchera fare is based on Mexican recipes, the motorized streetvendors themselves appear to be overwhelmingly Mexican, despite the national and ethnic diversity of Los Angeles's Latino population. Of the twenty loncheros interviewed for this study, all but one reported having been born in Mexico.[22] All said they had lived in the United States for at least fifteen years and they all reported being owner-operators for the last 6 to 30 years. Except for one family that owns three loncheras, they each also said they owned only one. As is classic in small immigrant-owned businesses in the United States, nearly all reported tapping primarily into their own families—spouses, children and relatives—for their labor needs.

As a general rule, the small-time enterprisers interviewed for this study share plebeian origins, tracing their origins to countryside towns or gritty industrial centers in Mexico. Once in the US, before pursuing economic independence through self-employment, their occupations ranged from pushcart streetvending and housecleaning to working on farms, factories, butcher shops and restaurants. The factors motivating their decisions to become their own bosses were also heard repeatedly: losing a job or source of income or wishing to make a better living than their wages afforded them; an ability to cook and interact with customers; possessing limited English or other marketable skills; knowing their community well (their market); and being moved by an entrepreneurial spirit. While all vendors reported being open for business over forty hours a week and working an arduous 50 to 70 weekly hours as they cook and serve customers, shop for supplies, clean and maintain their vehicles and do the books, a sense of personal pride in relying on their own bootstraps to make a living came clear in the interviews.

[22] Only one lonchero said he were born somewhere other than Mexico: a US-born man of Mexican. For reasons that are not entirely clear, greater ethnic diversity seems to exist among operators of industrial lunch trucks than in loncheras, including people of Central American, East Asian and Armenian birth as well as white Americans.

Loncheros said that people who enjoy their fare, although mostly Latinos too, are quite diverse in terms of ethnicity, birthplace, age, socioeconomic status and immediate motives for consumption. Evident to the casual observer, in fact, lonchera customers appear to be recent and longtime immigrants as well as non-immigrant Latinos. They include those of both Mexican and Central American roots as well as non-Latino customers; professional as well as blue-collar workers at lunch or on the go; area residents who cannot or choose not to drive to other locations; hipsters or late-night partygoers sobering up with food and a soft beverage before heading home; single men and day laborers who do not cook; cash-strapped individuals or homeless persons with little money to spend; and families on a Sunday or a weeknight treating themselves to a favorite *antojito* that is quick, inexpensive and can be enjoyed on the sidewalk.

Community-based entrepreneurship

Determining the best place to locate a lonchera requires balancing several needs, including proximity both to suppliers as well as flows of potential customers in market areas; sufficient distance from competitors; friendly neighbors and access to a restroom approved by health inspectors; parking for the mobile facility as well as for any customers arriving by car; and safety from crime, to which vendors may be especially vulnerable. Finding the right spot for a lonchera is a process that involves much trial and error, operators say, and which may take months or even years to complete.

A natural outcome is that loncheras seem to be mostly found in Latino-heavy areas that lack speedy and affordable food options (of acceptable quality and taste), frequently the same neighborhoods that the entrepreneurs live in. Thus, many loncheros interviewed reported living relatively close to their workplaces, sometimes only a short walk away. A 10-mile distance was, by far, the longest reported between the home of one lonchero family (in Pico Rivera) and their workplace (in Boyle Heights). All other commutes were 5 miles or shorter, likely far below the average commute in Southern California.[23]

Suppliers feeding into the lonchera food chain—from commissaries, meat and produce wholesalers, bakeries, to tortillerías and other suppliers—also appear to be mostly located within a few minutes' drive from where they park for business. Some exceptions to this were usually larger wholesalers, like Costco, Smart & Final or Restaurant Depot, stores that a few loncheros driving several miles to shop to once a week. A more common exception was the cluster of independent meat and produce wholesalers located in downtown Los Angeles, around Olympic and Central avenues.

In general, however, even when vendors traveled several miles to restock supplies, their destinations were under 10 miles away and in the City of Los Angeles.[24] And quite frequently, operators found their needs met in the same neighborhoods they worked in, making last-minute supply runs practical when needed.

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[23] It may also be argued that loncheros spare the urban environment from greater road congestion and air pollution, given not only their short commutes but the fact that they provide easy access to foodservices to customers' homes and workplaces.

[24] For that matter, loncheros in other cities who reported driving to other localities for a portion or all their supplies also tended to say that they buy from wholesalers located in the City.

Such was the case of one Boyle Heights vendor, for example, who met her customers' demand for freshness in her lonchera's specialty dish, *cemitas poblanas*, but minimized losses via verbal agreements with two small Mexican bakeries that they provide one or two dozen bread rolls within fifteen minutes of her request by phone. Located within a mile of her place of business, either she or her sons were able to pick up the orders from either bakery.

Suppliers

Many of the loncheras' suppliers—like the neighborhood bakeries mentioned above and the wholesalers clustered around Olympic and Central as well as several tortillerías and even some commissaries—are also small and family-owned businesses. Larger wholesale retailers that vendors report buying goods from were Smart & Final, the Restaurant Depot and Costco, whose outlets in Boyle Heights, South Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley make them convenient choices for food businesses in those areas, particularly for stocking up on bottled beverages, packaged snacks, paper products and disposable utensils.

Supermarkets, independent ones as well as belonging to national chains, were also important sources of goods stocked by loncheros. Most operators, however, said that they preferred limiting trips to the non-wholesale retailers to "emergency" occasions when they run out of a necessary product—like tortillas or napkins—in the middle of a workday.

The requirement that lonchera employees have access to a restroom within 200 feet also obligates vendors to find fixed-location establishments in the area willing to provide it. Arrangements described by interviewees frequently involved an economic benefit for the provider, adding another local business to the food chain.[25] The toilet facilities were also nearly always located in smaller shops in the neighborhood because, according to operators, management at larger companies tend to be reluctant to write or sign any statement allowing restroom access to a lonchera's employees.[26]

Commissaries

Analogous to a brick-and-mortar eatery's monthly rent, the commissary fees that loncheros pay each month range from $800 to $1000 per assigned parking spot. A vendor may refill a mobile kitchen's water tanks and iceboxes, dispose of liquid and solid wastes and access an electrical outlet to power its refrigerators overnight while parked at a commissary. Many of the commissaries currently approved for hot trucks in the County also have supply stores, providing convenient access to operators as well as the possibility of buying on credit for some.

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[25] Payments for the restroom access reported by interviewees ranged from mere discounts on lonchera meals for the business owner and employees to a one-time payment of $60 to a monthly $150.

[26] One lonchera operator, for instance, said he was pressured into making the difficult decision to relocate his business when the restroom-access rule was first introduced some years ago because the only area establishment with acceptable toilet facilities was a Food 4 Less across the street from his truck. Although the vendor was a longtime customer of the supermarket and he and his employees had already regularly used its restroom for years, the store manager said he was not authorized by corporate headquarters to sign any such document agreeing to provide access.

Most lonchera operators, however, say that they prefer to pursue better bargains offered by other wholesalers, in spite of the pressure some reported being subjected to by a few commissary managers to fulfill all or part of their needs at their stores. (According to several accounts, it is well-known that commissaries will sometimes threaten a mobile vendor with eviction if he or she fails to meet an unwritten quota of weekly expenditures at their supply stores, even when the tenant is current with rent obligations.[27])

Food truck manufacturers

Meant not as an endorsement but as a reference for aspiring new owners, the EHD distributes the names and addresses of twenty-two manufacturers that have previously built food trucks for use in the department's service area. On the list is AA Cater Truck, which enjoys a reputation for producing high-quality (and expensive) vehicles in the industry, serving not only small-time lonchera operators with savings to invest in new facilities but also supplying such corporate entities as McDonald's and 7-Eleven with mobile kitchens for their own purposes. While AA Cater Truck will usually use brand new chassis to build a kitchen on it, other manufacturers may, including its closest rival—Wyss Catering Truck Manufacturing in Santa Fe Springs—and other manufacturers on the list will often build a kitchen aboard a used chassis or step van that may have previously been used for completely different purposes.

Most lonchera operators interviewed said they mostly made use of small operations when they needed to purchase a truck or have it repaired, such as Polo's Mobile Catering Truck or Beto's Sheet Metal Company, both of which are located in East Los Angeles.

[27] One commissary manager at Slauson Foods said that, while he did know what happens at other commissaries, his company has no such quota. Instead, he said, his firm actively encourages tenants through "special discounts" to purchase their supplies at the company store because "that is the only way we can make money… not by just charging for parking."

What do the food trucks mean to the Los Angeles economy?

Below is a chart outlining the revenues and expenses of a relatively low-grossing lonchera, whose operator was one of the twenty interviewed for this study. Using this vendor's food truck as an example, we obtain in the following charts a rough estimate of the size of the food-truck economy in the City and in the County of Los Angeles.

One Lonchero's Revenues and Expenses

Gross estimated sales in 2009	**$**	**75,000**
Estimated gross sales without sales tax	***$***	***68,337***

Payments in taxes and regulatory fees		**Yearly**
County Health Permit	$	695
DMV Vehicle Registration	$	432
Sales taxes (@9.75%)	$	6,663
Business taxes (@$1.27 per $1000 in gross sales)	$	87
TOTAL	**$**	**7,877**

Expenses in supplies (not including labor, vehicle/equipment costs, etc.)		**Yearly**
Commissary fees (@$27 per day)	$	9,828
Vehicle insurance	$	576
Meat (@$300 per week)	$	15,600
Other supplies (vegetables, beverages, paper products, etc.)	$	5,720
Gasoline (@$60 per week)	$	3,120
Propane (@$60 per week)	$	3,120
TOTAL	**$**	**37,964**

The charts below show that if all food trucks operating in the EHD service area registered similar sales amounts and expenses in 2009, the subsector's contribution to the public treasury and local businesses would approach $100 million in the City and twice this amount throughout the EHD service area. (The actual total may be higher, given that this mobile kitchen's operator reported lower annual sales than most of the loncheros interviewed.)

Number of Mobile Food Preparation Units in October 2009*

Jurisdiction (in October 2009)*	**Permitted MFPUs**
City of Los Angeles	**2,016
All other jurisdictions within the EHD service area	4,480

**Source: EHD.*

***Estimate based on proportion of business addresses within Los Angeles city limits, according to EHD data.*

Estimated revenues and expenses of all MFPUs

Food trucks' payments in taxes and regulatory fees	**City of LA**	**Countywide**
County Health Permit	$ 1,401,120	$ 3,113,600
DMV Vehicle Registration	$ 870,912	$ 1,935,360
Sales taxes (@9.75%)	$13,432,346	$ 29,849,658
Business taxes (@$1.27 per $1000 in gross sales)	$ 174,965	$ 388,811
TOTAL	$15,879,343	$ 35,287,429

Food trucks' expenses in supplies (not including labor, vehicle and equipment costs, etc.)	**City of LA**	**Countywide**
Commissary fees (@$27 per day)	$19,813,248	$ 44,029,440
Vehicle insurance	$ 1,161,216	$ 2,580,480
Meat (@$300 per week)	$31,449,600	$ 69,888,000
Other supplies (vegetables, beverages, paper products, etc.)	$11,531,520	$ 25,625,600
Gasoline (@$60 per week)	$ 6,289,920	$ 13,977,600
Propane (@$60 per week)	$ 6,289,920	$ 13,977,600
TOTAL	$76,535,424	$170,078,720

LONCHERO PROFILES

The following profiles are based on personal interviews that were carried out between February and April 2010.

Mariana

Mariana has been operating a lonchera for about six years, which is how long it has been since Edgar, her husband, passed away after having a heart attack. He bought the truck from somebody who was exiting the trade because he wanted to be his own boss. Before leaving his job of several years at a dental ceramics laboratory, however, he first wanted to try his hand at running the lonchera in the evenings after getting out of work. Meanwhile, Mariana was working on a transition of her own after having cleaned other people's homes in the San Fernando Valley for twenty years, since her arrival from a little town in Zacatecas, Mexico. Having just completed coursework toward a medical assistant certificate, she was now doing a required unpaid internship at a clinic. But suddenly she became a widow and the family was left without a source of income or savings, leaving her no choice but to make her husband's investment a success.

Mariana vividly remembers the struggle to find the right spot for the lonchera, a place that combined foot traffic, a demand for *antojitos*, parking, safety and friendly neighbors, including one that may provide access to a restroom. With relatives, her four adult children—all of whom had their own jobs and three of whom were married and raising families—and her 14-year-old son pitching in however way they could, she stepped up to one of the greatest tests of her life.

Among the first locations Mariana tried doing business at was a gas station in Van Nuys, where street parking was scarce but where the station manager onto the property if she agreed to send her customers to his store to buy beverages. It seemed to work out, with plenty hungry customers, until the manager realized that he could get in trouble for breaking land-use zoning rules and asked her to move on. Another two spots also provided a lot of hungry customers, such outside a 99 Cent Store overflowing with customers and place near a golf course, who Latino employees complained that no other food options were in the area. But the store manager didn't want her there and repeatedly called the police to make her move and while nobody bothered her when she parked near the golf course, no businesses were willing to make their restrooms available so she could meet the health-code requirement.

Finally, Mariana found a place that appeared to be an ideal. It was just outside a DMV center in the Canoga Park/Winnetka area and only a few blocks away from home. Two- and three-story apartment buildings in the vicinity provided ready customers in the evenings and she found that, since the center was closed during her business hours, customers who drove could conveniently park in its massive, ungated and empty parking lot. However, when DMV officials learned about this after-hours use of the lot, she was again forced to move. In order to not abandon the loyal clientele she had already built, Mariana started parking across the street from the DMV in front of a medical clinic that also closed in the evenings and where street parking was ample.

However, just when it seemed that the trial might be over, someone started calling the police to demand that she be move or cited. And night after night, Mariana says, she faced the choice of either moving and foregoing her opportunity to earn an evening's income or staying and having to pay a fine. Such frequency of citations drove up a week's business costs into the hundreds of dollars.

One evening as the usual two police officers arrived at the truck to tell her to move or be issued another ticket, Mariana, tired and exasperated, asked them, "I'm sorry, but do you really believe that my work is hurting somebody? I need to work and the neighbors here appreciate me. Is someone actually calling you to complain about me?" The officers replied that there was really only one person who called every night to complain and that, even though they didn't personally agree with the law, they had to enforce it. After questioning them further, Mariana got enough hints about the identity of the complainer to figure out who he was: an elderly white man who lived a few blocks away and frequently walked his dog by the truck.

Mariana felt that she needed to talk to the man and ask him why he was bothered by the lonchera. She had an idea of where he lived—she had once seen him entering a certain apartment complex—and she went there one afternoon, found his door and knocked. She giggles when she recalls how shocked he appeared when he saw her standing at his door. Mariana asked him if he was the person who always called the police to complain about her, to which he said yes. She asked him why and he said that it was because he didn't like the smell of tacos when he walked by the truck.

Then Mariana began to explain to him that she was only doing that work because she needed to earn an income. She remembers saying to him, "I believe I have a right to work so that I can pay for my house and my bills and so I can finish raising my son, who is the youngest and still needs me." She also told him of the tens of thousands of dollars her late husband had invested in buying the truck and then bringing it up to code and of the thousands that she continued to pay in taxes and fees and other business costs. And she pointed out that even though she had immigrated to this country while he was born a citizen, he didn't seem like a rich a man to her but, rather, like a worker just like her and that he ought to know that the life of a worker is not easy.

The old man then looked very ashamed, Mariana says, and said he was sorry. He agreed with her that she had a right to make a living and promised he would stop calling the police. After that, she says, things finally began to improve, allowing her and her family to just focus on working and not constantly moving. Now, she says, the only police officers who ever stop at the lonchera are those on their lunch breaks.

Alma and Jose

Alma and her husband Jose have been in the lonchera business for 20 years. Alma has lived in the San Fernando Valley since she moved here from Zacatecas in the mid-1980s. She came at 17 to find work, staying with her siblings for some time. Then while attending night school to learn English she met Jose, a native of Guadalajara, whom she eventually married.

They dreamed of making money and moving to Mexico to start a business, perhaps importing cargo trucks used to transport agricultural products to the cities. They both worked hard but only made minimum wage, Jose worked at a butcher shop and Alma worked at a dry cleaner's. She developed asthma and an eye infection there, which she thinks came from the dust in the shop. However, Jose tried supplementing his income through the occasional, informal purchasing and fixing up used cars to take them to Mexico for resale.

By 1990, their first child was born and they found that they could not raise a family on their incomes. Their savings were also not sufficient to move back to Mexico and start a business there. But having seen for years a popular lonchera's long line of customers at a favorite local park where they often spent time on the weekends, it occurred to them that ought to explore opening a similar small business. The work seemed easy enough, Alma said, and the costs of entering the business were relatively less than the investment needed in other kinds of business. They also figured that, since that locally famous lonchera's specialty was serving *tacos de cabeza*—despite its name, "Big Burrito"—they might compete with it by serving from their own truck other dishes.

Alma had an acquaintance who happened to own a catering truck but who had no use for it and kept it stored in his backyard. She said she suspected the guy was involved in shady business and that perhaps the truck had been some kind of payment to him in an illegal transaction. But she figured the vehicle was probably usable and that the guy who owned it would be happy get rid of it. She suggested to Jose that they offer to buy it, and they did, using the small but significant amount of cash he had saved up from years of selling used cars—about $15,000.

Before leaving their jobs, Jose and Alma decided to try to test their luck running the lonchera business. They went directly to the park where the *tacos de cabeza* guy was making a killing. Alma laughs as she tells the story. She said that they had hoped that customers who got tired of waiting in line would come to their truck to eat. "But we knew nothing about this kind of work," she said. "We parked near that other truck, but none of the customers ever came to us—they all kept going to him. It was very humiliating."

She says that they tried doing business in a few other places where either there were no customers, parking was difficult to find in the exact same location—crucial for developing a customer base—or too highly restricted to stay for a certain number or hours. They both began to feel highly discouraged, but before finally giving up, they found that business was decent outside some an office of what was then the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The foot traffic resulting from members of the public as well as employees going in and out of the building turned up loyal customers. After a few weeks of parking and working there and seeing that they could a decent living if they dedicated their full energy to it, they decided to quit their wage jobs. It wasn't long before Jose, who had continued supplementing his income with sale of used cars, was able to purchase another used food truck. And then a third one. With their three loncheras, operated with the help of relatives and acquaintances from their hometowns in Mexico, Jose and Alma earned a reputation in the community for being particularly ambitious and determined to move up the ladder.

By the year 2000, they began toying with the idea of opening a restaurant. Alma remembers that one night, after leaving the commissary where they cleaned and stored their trucks, they drove past a place that always seemed to have a large crowd hanging out on the sidewalk, going in and out of the building. It looked like a cheerful environment and she asked Jose what must the place be. He said it was a dance club. She also noticed that there was a Mexican seafood restaurant next door to the club but that it closed every night at 10 pm, precisely when all those potential customers began to arrive. And she imagined they must get hungry.

Alma says she then suggested to Jose that they go find out how much the restaurant may sell for. She thought they could perhaps re-open it as a *taqueria*, since tacos and other *antojitos* would probably sell better than seafood among the evening party crowd. They ended up selling the three trucks to buy the restaurant. By most measures, the venture was successful: They were able to make recoup their investment and earn a small profit over a short period. But they also found that paying the additional rent, utility bills and cleaning staff that came with providing services that they never provided with a lonchera—indoor seating, music, climate control—it was difficult to keep prices for quick food low enough for their target clientele and they felt the pressure to serve more involved and expensive meals. They recognized that the demand for street food, the casualness of a simple meal in the outdoors, couldn't be met by a brick-and-mortar restaurant. "It's a different kind of work altogether," says Alma. So they decided to return to their trade, loncheras.

Once, on a night out with friends, they stopped for tacos at a trailer lonchera that was pulled by the operator's van. Its windows were large and reached low enough for customers standing on the sidewalk to see the *taqueros* in action. It hit them that the excitement that comes with watching the cooking process reminded them of the street-food experience throughout Mexico's towns and cities, where loncheras don't exist but where vendors set up sizzling griddles, tables and benches every night on the street, sometimes even blocking cars, to cook and eat in the open air, becoming neighborhood centers of social interaction. One of their friends suggested that if they return to operating loncheras, they purchase trailer kitchens, pointing out that they had larger and lower windows than the step vans more commonly used for loncheras and assuring them that this particular characteristic would draw more customers. Alma indeed credits the trailer's larger, lower windows as one of the reasons for their success, although she says that nowadays there are also some trucks designed with similar windows that facilitate greater visual contact between the cook and customers.

By 2001, Alma and Jose had bought a trailer lonchera and soon bought another two. However, rather than leaving the restaurant, they decided to rent it out. Eventually, Alma said, they persuaded the owner to sell them the entire building, which has four commercial units that they now rent out to different businesses. They now operate three loncheras at different locations in the Valley, including Canoga Park, Winnetka and Van Nuys and live in a single-family home they purchased eight years ago. Aside from herself, Jose and two of their children employed in the daily operation of the business, they also employ seven people for an hourly wage.

Liliana, their 20-year-old and oldest child, believes that growing up in an entrepreneurial family has played a huge role in her and her siblings' development and has led them to get a college education. She plans to begin attending Woodbury College as a transfer student in the fall and

earn a bachelor's degree in accounting while Jose Jose, 18, has just been admitted as a freshman to UCLA. Alma hopes that Liliana and Jose Jose's three younger siblings will follow in their footsteps and seek a college education one day as well.

Alfredo

Alfredo says he didn't come from a background of great need, like a lot of other immigrants, when he decided to move to the United States from his native Merida, Yucatan. When asked about his accent, which differs markedly from the set of *yucateco* vowel inflections and patterns of speech emblematic of that southeastern Mexican state—where a vibrant Mayan culture continues to permeate every aspect of life —he explains that it reflects the way of speaking of people in the center of Mexico "because my family is middle class." He had only one other sibling grew up comfortably, helping their father run an prominent electronics store in downtown Merida. After graduating from high school, he says that he contemplated studying law but later changed his mind and decided to dedicate his time to helping his father with the family business. When he was in his early 20s in the mid-1980s, however, their fortunes turned and they were eventually forced to close the business.

Not knowing what to do next, but certain he was bored with life in the beautiful-but-dull colonial city of Merida and that he needed to get out, Alfredo opted for what he thought would be an adventure: working in Los Angeles.

His first job was at a McDonald's. Not content with his tasks there or his wages, Alfredo later sold hot dogs at Dodger's stadium for a time. Eventually, he fell into restaurant work, bussing dishes and later waiting on tables. Over time he learned how to provide customer service and earn good tips by combining courtesy and efficiency as well as pleasant social skills. Graduating later to fine dining allowed him not only to refine these skills and also learn to cook gourmet dishes, including how to prepare succulent beefsteaks. He says that that experience shows in the pride and skill with which he prepares tacos, quesadillas and burgers in his one-man lonchera business on a lonely Van Nuys street today. While not operating a "Twitter truck"—he doesn't advertise online, his prices are low and he has only one habitual place of business—he says he takes great care in serving good-quality food, using fresh ingredients and olive oil for many of his dishes.

Perhaps influenced by his family's tradition of entrepreneurship, Alfredo was interested in starting his own business after several years of waiting on tables. He and a friend had talked about starting a lonchera business together and they bought a used trailer kitchen for $30,000, each putting down half the money and planning to invest thousands more apply for upgrades needed to get the permits necessary for operation. But when his friend's marital problems caused him to abruptly cancel his plans and move to Las Vegas, Alfredo had no choice but to buy him out, using his remaining savings he had planned to invest in the vehicle's upgrade. He had to store the mobile kitchen in somebody's garage while he started the slow, painstaking process of pooling enough cash again for the investment.

Like others in immigrant communities, Alfredo was able to save money by joining a number of *cundinas*—a savings and credit association common among people who don't use banking

services—created among friends and his restaurant co-workers. In his case, he entered a number of what he describes as "unas cundinas muy fuertes," meaning that he submitted to the regimen of contributing large weekly sums, reflecting his effort to save up enough money to open his business and have a cushion of savings as he built a loyal customer base. Being single and having no children made doing this possible on his earnings as a waiter, but it still took him two years.

Alfredo estimates that he spent at least $20,000 on making the upgrades to his trailer lonchera necessary for health inspectors to issue a permit. Because he would be a new permit holder and not a renewing one, all the latest standards would apply. Health officials required him to get new or different kinds of equipment and make a number of physical changes to the layout and interior design of the kitchen. He says that even after he thought he was done spending thousands of dollars and remaking the lonchera, an inspector noticed that a ceiling vent was two inches shorter than codes required. That alone, he says, cost him another two thousand dollars.

Finally, in Alfredo was able to get proper permits and start his business six years ago. But he has had much more trouble getting his business off the ground than expected. He went through all of the same difficulties that loncheros always do in trying to find the spot that combined the ideal density of potential customers with an unmet demand near his home and suppliers, parking, nice neighbors and restroom access, and safety.

One place where he parked for over a year in Van Nuys seemed ideal in all of these ways. It was only a few blocks from his home, where he lives in a trailer home that he rents. The business was less than he had wished for, not earning him enough to hire any permanent or full-time help, but it was steady and he was able to get by. But then one night he was robbed at gunpoint. Alfredo says it took him a few minutes to realize that the thief was threatening him with a gun—he had thought the guy's demeanor seemed playful and Alfredo thought he was a customer pulling a prank—but then the guy opened the unlocked door to the lonchera and barged in demanding cash. "It was quite a scare," he says, "because it had never happened to me." He called the police but, after taking his report, an officer told him that he was in a dangerous business working in a lonchera. Then it happened a second time. Then a third.

At some point he decided that he needed to move and not continue risking his life. After struggling again for some time, he decided to rent out the trailer to a family whose own lonchera was in the shop for a few months undergoing repairs and upgrades while he tried to sell it and look for other kind of work. He didn't actually collect rent from them but they agreed to pay his weekly commissary fee of $225 so he wouldn't lose his spot in case he needed to resume operating the lonchera. He was unable to find a customer for his asking price, however, and when the family was ready to return the trailer, he took it back and decided to keep looking for the ideal location. Although he had only bought it for $30,000, his total investment, including the upgrades and repairs, totaled $50,000—not a price people in the business were willing to pay for his trailer even before the recession hit.

For the last several months he has been parking in an area near the Van Nuys airport just a few feet away from a street that separates a residential zone from the industrial zone where he is located. He parks in the evenings, arriving at 6pm after business offices and most factories have

closed up, rendering the streets especially lonely and dark on weeknights. He admits he finds the loneliness rather unsettling and he is still a bit jumpy from the armed robberies he has experienced but he knows he needs to "hacerle la lucha"—put up a struggle—if he is going to survive. He also thinks it is the reason he has a steady trickle of customers that is allowing him to get by for now, mostly residents that find other food options to be too far away.

Alfredo still hopes someone will buy his lonchera for a better price than he has been offered. The cold and rainy weather of this past winter was terrible for loncheras, which bank on warm, sunny days to draw people to the outdoors. The economic crisis has made things much worse. But Alfredo says it drove him to the brink of despair, having to dip into his remaining savings not just for his personal expenses but to cover his business costs. Still, a few rays of sunlight would come through, especially on warmer days, and he still has hopes that he will build enough of a clientele there and that warmer, dryer weather in the months ahead will allow improve his fortunes. Or he hopes someone will buy his lonchera for a better price than what he has been offered in the past.

Griselda y Ramon

Griselda and Ramon started out as route lunch truck in 1985, when a frequent customer at the Tommy's in Glendale that Ramon worked at convinced him and his brother to buy his business. He had long operated an industrial lunch truck, serving hungry factory workers at about twenty different sites per day. But he was going out of business and moving back to Mexico. He offered Ramon and his brother a bargain price if they would take out of his hands.

Griselda and Ramon had been in Los Angeles only two years but they had been working in the Central Valley picking grapes for a few years before that. "We got tired of the sun," says Griselda. She describes herself as a native of Puebla, even though she was actually raised in the Mexico City working-class suburb of Nezahualcoyotl, or "Ciudad Neza," in tune with a pattern often seen among people who trace their roots to southern states like Puebla and Oaxaca due strong regional identity emanating from those places. Ramon also calls himself a *poblano,* though was actually born and raised in Puebla. Shortly after getting married they came to California.

In Los Angeles, while they were not doing physically demanding work—Ramon and Esteban at a Tommy's and Griselda at a shoe factory—they were all making minimum wage and they were eager for opportunities to increase their incomes. Griselda and Ramon wanted to raise children but they didn't feel financially ready to raise a family. So the idea of buying someone's food truck that came with a set of stops on a fixed route sounded appealing. With Esteban as a partner, they were able to pool savings together as well as monies borrowed from various relatives and the three bought the truck.

The seller also gave them some pointers on how to carry on the business. But Griselda says that the work proved tough very quickly, requiring that they start their seemingly endless workdays at 4 am that left them exhausted. Worse, however, was that the decline in manufacturing in the 1980s and the increasingly scarce factories and shrinking of the workforce, made competition with other industrial lunch-truck operators, who zealously claimed their turfs, more and more

difficult. By 1988, Griselda and Ramon (who had bought Esteban out by then) decided to try staking out one place in the city and seeing how they fared as a stationary food truck. Aside from potentially finding an untapped market, they figured, the move would also save them money due to the lower gasoline expenses and relieve them of the stress of driving all day and potentially getting into traffic accidents.

They were rather lucky in finding the right spot, a corner less than a mile from their home in Boyle Heights that they had long thought would be an ideal location for a food business. Because it was right next to a cemetery around which dozens of joggers passed every night—who sometimes looked hungry, Griselda jokes—they felt sure there would be plenty of customers. They have been at the intersection now for 22 years. Although they don't claim to have any specialties, they came to be known in the neighborhood for their tortas, which Ramon says came to referred to locally as "las tortas del panteon"—the cemetery tortas.

Ramon and Griselda have enjoyed ups and downs. The business has never made them rich but for a time they enjoyed a degree of stability that made it possible for them to raise their two daughters, Monica and Jessica, and send them to Catholic schools for their education. Today they speak with pride of Jessica's graduation last year with a bachelor's degree from UCLA and Monica's upcoming graduation. Eight years ago, they also purchased a home in Pico Rivera, after paying rent in Boyle Heights for 19 years.

However, whatever successes they have enjoyed have not come for free. The '80s and '90s were a hard on the working-class neighborhood and gang violence was rampant. For years, the gangs controlling the intersection routinely demanded payment of "rent" and threatened them with death if they resisted. There were also thieves unaffiliated to gangs that the family had to contend with, scary incidents that Monica says are a permanent part of her girlhood memories of helping with the family business. One night, in a botched robbery of their lonchera, Ramon was shot in the chest and his right leg, where he still has a lodged bullet. But he says that times are much better now in that respect, although the local gang still regularly sends someone to collect their extortion money.

Hard economic times, however, have taken their toll on the family. For one, Jessica's plan of finding work that would utilize her skills as a college graduate have been put on the back burner and, instead, she helps her parents with the operation of the business. (While talking to Griselda, she took a call from Jessica and Griselda could be overheard telling her daughter to buy the ingredients so she could make some green salsa.) Sales have also slumped a lot in the last two years, according to Ramon, and they have been very frustrated. Ramon says he feels especially sad that they have been unable to help their daughters with college-education costs and that they've had to rely on loans. They struggle just to make their mortgage payments these days. Also Ramon suffers from arthritis, which severely limits his ability to work the long hours he used to log and he has no health insurance.

As a result of all this, in the last year they have begun looking a second location where they could operate during the daytime because they've only operated at night at the Boyle Heights spot all these years. Now they divide their time. While Ramon continues to work late evenings

from 7 to midnight or past midnight on weekends, Griselda has been staking out locations downtown.

At the time of the interview, she was trying out a spot near the Fashion District downtown. But in the one month she has been there, it hasn't been easy. The parking restrictions on many of the streets there have caused her to struggle to find a place that would be close enough to the sidewalks crowded with shoppers but also be able to stay for more than one or two hours and, at the same time, stay away from potential competitors. She isn't sure that it's going to work out and she gets depressed and worried thinking about how they are going to manage. Ramon helps bring supplies, check up on her and then help with the cleaning of the truck at the commissary at the end of her day so that she may go home and he can drive the truck to Boyle Heights for the evening shift. When it is time to close up there, he drives back to the commissary to clean and prepare everything for Griselda's day the next morning, which starts at 6am. He gets home between 3 and 4 am on a typical night.

Francisco

Francisco came to the US at 18 and has been in the business since 1989. He bought his lonchera from his sister-in-law's husband, Sergio, who was ill with liver cancer and couldn't work any longer. Sergio offered to transfer Francisco the lonchera, including the parking spot that he had staked out and clientele he had cultivated since the 1970s when he started the business himself. As Francisco explained, a lonchera is more valuable when it comes with the spot and its customers, which usually means that someone buying it must pay much more than if they were only buying the vehicle.

Francisco had just been laid off by a furniture manufacturer that was being relocated away from Los Angeles. He had been a supervisor there for several years, and wasn't sure what he would do next. He had five children and his wife, Consuelo, to support and a mortgage to pay.

For Sergio, selling the lonchera (even if at a lower price because it was to a relative) meant not losing the investment and being able to leave something for his wife and children if he died from his illness.

For Francisco, of course, acquiring the truck and becoming self-employed was a solution to his unemployed status and helped him avert having to request food stamps or other government aid for his family.

Sergio had been parking for at least ten years outside a Pacific Bell office in Westlake, near MacArthur Park, and had benefited from the mostly Latino crowd that would walk in to pay their phone bills. He worked with Francisco the first two weeks to make sure that he understood the ins and outs of the trade before finally retiring and leaving it all to the new lonchero. Sergio died six months later.

Years later, the Pacific Bell office closed that location and the flow of customers dried up, he found that he had enough of a following among residents and workers in the area that it was

worth sticking around. He moved a few blocks away but remained close enough to the government and labor-union offices that provided so many of his customers during lunch.

Francisco serves his customers in the MacArthur Park area Monday through Friday, from 9am to 4pm. Products at his lonchera are mainly burritos, tacos, and tortas. There are no specialties on the menu, per se, but he perhaps stands out among lonchera operators because of the wide range of dishes he prepares in a one-week period. A few days a week he will make chiles rellenos, birria (marinated goat meat), beef or chicken stew and other specialties, which he usually announces to his regular customers verbally a day or two in advance.

His customers are overwhelmingly Latino, but they come from all walks of life. They include government-office workers, security guards, tv news reporters, bus drivers, police officers, parking-lot attendants and sanitation workers. They also include people in the neighborhood who sometimes buy a meal from him on credit and homeless day laborers to whom Francisco will sometimes grant a free meal.

While the lonchera was operated by the entire family for many years, Francisco's wife now stays home to take care of her mother and his grown sons and daughters (some of whom are raising their own families) have other jobs. He mostly works the with one other person, a longtime friend. They start the workday at 6:30 am at the Royal Catering commissary in Huntington Park, where they stock up on some supplies and begin the cooking process every morning. Other supplies he buys from a produce truck that parks nearby and yet other items he buys on his days off from wholesale distributors in downtown Los Angeles. Their workdays end between 5 and 6 pm, after they have cleaned the truck and started soaking the pot of beans that will be cooked the next morning. His wife then picks him up to go home, which is also in Huntington Park, about a five-minute drive from the commissary.

CUSTOMERS

Customers encountered while buying from different vendors at different times of day and night provided sometimes identical motives, including the nearness of a lonchera to home or the workplace that made it accessible on foot, on a bicycle, or after a shorter drive than if they had to go elsewhere. Price, flavors, the nutritious quality of the food, the lack of comparable alternatives in the vicinity and, not infrequently, the friendly relationships they had developed over months or years with the operators of a lonchera were all mentioned as motivating factors for their patronage as well.

A customer who appeared to be in early sixties who was ordering tacos and quesadillas at Mariana's lonchera on a weeknight had arrived by car and said he lived about five-minute drive away. "My wife is older now and gets tired and she's been kind of sickly," he said, "so sometimes I tell her to forget about cooking." As a result, he buys dinner to take home at various mobile as well as anchored establishments with inexpensive fare a few times a week. However, he estimates that he buys from this particular eatery once a week, which is more often than other places, because of its closeness to home and the variety of offerings. "I can enjoy a hamburger from McDonald's once in a while," he said. "But one gets tired of that taste" while he doesn't easily tire of Mariana's *antojitos* "maybe because it's cooking from my land."

"These guys practically raised me," said a 30-year-old man referring to Ramon and Griselda. He lives at the same address half a block away in Boyle Heights since childhood, he said, and he and his family have been regular customers since he was about seven. That is also his daughter's age, with whom he had arrived there that night to take a break from bicycling around the block and enjoy a quick, small meal while seated on milk crates next to their bikes.

In Canoga Park, another customer who was there with his wife and two toddlers said they had only moved to the neighborhood a few months earlier but had already made it a custom to have dinner at Mariana's lonchera about once a week. After a long workday, he said, he sometimes felt like enjoying quality time with his family by taking them out for a treat that was both "inexpensive and relaxing." In a neighborhood of wide streets filled with fast-moving cars and few parks, the family finds relaxation after a leisurely six-block walk to the lonchera and dining while sitting on the sidewalk, sometimes on the curb with their feet in the gutter.

At Alma's in Winnetka, one customer works in the kitchen of a brick-and-mortar Mexican restaurant himself, said he often eat at the lonchera because he lives in a studio with no kitchen a few blocks away and owns no car that can easily take him to other alternatives.

At Francisco's lonchera, a newscaster and a cameraman with a Spanish-language television station said they lunched there with some regularity because the service is faster and cheaper than other options in Westlake. Two city employees that had walked there from their offices two blocks away nodded in agreement but added that, while relatively quick, affordable food was actually available from various fixed-location businesses in that area, they each offered a specific kind of product and service. Among the customers that day were also day laborers who find that the truck offers the best bargain around—the most calories, from beans, rice, meat and tortillas,

for the least money—as well as a homeless man to whom Francisco sometimes gives a free meals of tacos.

Two young women, who parked their behind Alfredo's lonchera one evening to buy tacos, a burrito and a burger to take home for themselves and their mother said they live close enough to walk—about twenty minutes away, they said—which they sometimes do, but had driven that night because they "felt lazy" and were "in a hurry." They also said that they often eat out, pick up food or order Domino's pizza. However, unless they order pizza to delivered, they must travel for food and the next closest other option, a Denny's, is at least one mile away.

STAKEHOLDER VIEWPOINTS

Interviews were also conducted with other stakeholders between the months of February and May 2010. Twenty-five residents within 200 feet of a lonchera and fifteen fixed-location merchants as well as officials at five schools (four elementary and one middle school) within two blocks of a wheeled kitchen were asked their opinions on loncheras. Eight officers with the Los Angeles Police Department were also asked about concerns they or people in the communities they work in had regarding loncheras. They included Senior Lead Officers and Community Relations Officers and all worked in the following neighborhoods: South Los Angeles, Van Nuys, Canoga Park, Woodland Hills, Koreatown and Downtown.

Of the residents, five were pedestrians approached while passing by a mobile unit (but not stopping to consume the vendor's fare) and all said that they lived within four blocks or less while nineteen were found in their homes, either directly across or on the same side of the street.

Also contacted was a legislative aide to Los Angeles County Supervisor Gloria Molina, who led the effort to pass the county ordinance that sought to end the practices of stationary food trucks.

Roxanne Marquez, Legislative Analyst, County Supervisor Gloria Molina's Office

Roxanne Marquez, legislative analyst for County Supervisor Gloria Molina, expressed satisfaction with having helped Supervisor Molina draft the ordinance that would have placed tight restrictions on lonchera operators' ability to park and do business. She said that too many vendors had been very irresponsible, leaving garbage behind when they left, leaked oil on the ground, contributing to noise in the residential neighborhoods they operated in and ignoring residents' complaints about the problems. In general, the loncheras undermined the quality of life in the communities, she said.

Marquez's concerns echoed those voiced by other public officials, focusing on quality-of-life issues and alleging and noise and litter as a top priority but she also talked about their effects on the economic well being of restaurants and said the loncheras didn't pay rent. But she also expressed surprise when informed of the monthly commissary rates ranging between $800 to $1000 for a parking spot, a value equivalent to more than $2 per square foot—comparable rate to retail rents per square foot in the city—saying, "They do?"

Asked if she believed whether the ordinance, as it was written, risked putting some loncheras out of business, Marquez firmly said no. She said that because "they have rushes of heightened activity," a one-hour or thirty-minute stop at one location would suffice for a stationary food truck to do business before moving to another place half a mile away.

Despite her conviction that the ordinance was right, Marquez wouldn't support reviving it because it is "no longer necessary." As a result of the scare, she believes, lonchera operators have changed their behavior, becoming "better neighbors" and picking up after themselves and being more respectful. Molina's office doesn't receive as many complaints from constituents as in the past, she said. Recent developments, like the formation of an association of lonchera

operators—Asociacion de Loncheros, L.A. Familia Unida de California—are also encouraging, said Marquez, because it should help improve communication between public officials and health authorities and the motorized vendors.

Police Officers

Overall, the police officers were by far the most critical of stationary food trucks among the stakeholders interviewed for this study. All but one officer—who was stationed in South Los Angeles and was one of two with Spanish surnames—cited a wide range of problems associated with the presence of loncheras in their respective districts. However, the most recurring theme in the interviews was their opinion that the vendors contribute to blighted conditions in neighborhoods and, as a result, a decline in the quality of life. A number of officers also named the "broken-windows theory" as they explained their belief that such blight naturally leads to increased rates of crime in a community. Specifically, according to most of the officers, the sale and consumption of food in the public right-of-way harms communities by drawing nonmoving crowds on the sidewalk who may litter, attract prostitutes or drug dealers or whose chatter may bother area residents. A public nuisance caused by customers in an intoxicated state was also frequently mentioned as a major problem associated with loncheras.

Hinting at the views among Hollenbeck Division police officers (in Boyle Heights), phone calls to the station reached a desk officer who directed interview requests on the topic of loncheras to "the Vice Squad" as opposed to a Senior Lead or Community Relations Officer. Even after a clarification that the phone call was not regarding unpermitted streetvendors but fully licensed loncheros, the officer insisted that the call should go to the Vice Squad office.[28]

Curiously as well, several officers also brought up an issue that one might not expect to hear from law enforcement agents asked to explain their work. The "unfair advantage" enjoyed by mobile eateries over their brick-and-mortar counterparts was the third most mentioned problem (the first two being "blight" and "crime"). One officer in Woodland Hills, while acknowledging that there are not many loncheras in his district because its population density and small proportion of Latinos are not ideal for the trade, was emphatic about what he felt was the unfair competition food trucks bring to fixed-location restaurants. His account of a Mexican woman "who came here legally" and worked hard to realize her dream of self-employment by opening a restaurant that served dishes in the style of her home region only differed from the stories told by many loncheros in the final twist: "She ended up closing," he said, "because a taco truck that pays no rent took all her business."

The Woodland Hills officer also asserted that a majority of lonchera operators do not live in the San Fernando Valley neighborhoods that they work in, saying that they are most likely residents of "North Hollywood, maybe, but mostly South LA." This fact, he said, means that the mobile vendors take dollars away to other communities whereas fixed-location restaurants contribute to the surrounding local economy by occupying and paying rent for retail spaces—averting the negative effects of widespread vacancies—paying business and sales taxes and, indirectly, property taxes. Additionally, he insisted, they may hire locally while loncheras do not. When told that lonchera owners are required to pay the same sales and business tax rates as other food

[28] Several voice messages at the offices of the Vice Squad and Senior Lead Officers went unreturned.

retailers, he pointed out that many food trucks are not equipped with cash registers and, therefore, “they don’t even know how much they’re selling or making.”

One of two Van Nuys Community Relations Officers also interviewed spoke extensively about the relationship between loncheras and crime, going as far as saying that “they facilitate crime.” While most officers used less accusatory language, there appeared to be widespread consensus among them that, aside from litter on the streets contributing to an atmosphere hospitable to lawbreaking, the congregation of customers on the sidewalk makes it easier for the illegal sale of narcotics to occur openly in the public sphere. Drug dealers, said the police officer, “make appointments by phone to meet for a transaction at a truck and then just pretend to be customers.” A delinquent’s ability to “blend in with the crowd,” combined with the absence of surveillance cameras on the sidewalk that could capture patrons’ activities as they often do at brick-and-mortar establishments, according to this officer, make the street-food scene an ideal setting for criminal activities.

Examples provided by the police officers of how loncheras lowered a community’s quality of life included the paper, plastic or styrofoam dining utensils that too often litter the streets and which they believed would not be there if it were not for the mobile eateries’ presence. Most, however, admitted that the direct perpetrators of this nuisance were likely not the vendors themselves, but customers who walk away and improperly dispose of their wastes due to the absence of trash bins. Public drunkenness, noise and, to a lesser extent, prostitution, were also complaints that officers said they commonly heard in residential areas where loncheras operate, particularly in the evenings. The Van Nuys officer quoted above, when discussing the quality-of-life ramifications of an urban street-food culture, also expressed huge discomfort—even dismay—with what some people deem an acceptable use of public space, exclaiming at one point that some customers will even “eat on the curb at 2 a.m.!”

On the topic of public safety, one officer in Koreatown said that loncheras contribute to pedestrian endangerment, explaining that sometimes “people will jaywalk or cross the street without looking out for cars just to get to a taco truck.” When asked what he thought of the argument that the presence of lonchera customers may help increase public safety because they represent more eyes on the street, he suggested that the opposite is more likely: The vendors contribute to public danger, he said, by encouraging people “to be outside, on the street, where they may be exposed [to crime] as opposed to staying out of harm’s way” in the safety of the indoors. The Van Nuys officer, responding to the same question, in turn asked, “Are those the kinds of eyes you want on the street?”

The one dissenter among the police officers was one in her third decade on the job in South Los Angeles who said that, in all her years of work, she had never cited a lonchera for anything. She refused to criticize her colleagues for having different opinions, however, allowing for the possibility that unique conditions in their respective precincts may explain the variation in views. In the communities in which she works, said the officer, too many problems of a more serious nature, like violent crime, make focusing on the alleged problems caused by loncheras a low priority because they “don’t bother anyone here.” To the question about the likelihood, in her opinion, that the presence on the street of average people drawn by the vendors contributing to public safety, she said, “I can see that.”

Another police officer who now works in the Skid Row area, but who said she had previously worked in South Los Angeles too, disagreed. She said she had cited many stationary food trucks in South Los Angeles as well as downtown for various reasons and suggested that her colleague, who sees no problems with any streetvendors, simply has a different personal opinion.

Stakeholders with a negative opinion

It was difficult to find community stakeholders who were unhappy about the presence of a stationary food truck in their neighborhoods. Only four area residents and two merchants expressed concerns about the presence of a lonchera.

Two of the four residential neighbors with complaints said they felt strongly about their opinions. Two were in Winnetka, near one of Alma and Jose's kitchens, and one was in Boyle Heights, near Griselda and Ramon's truck. A fourth person was a former Boyle Heights resident who remembers that a lonchera (albeit not Griselda and Ramon's) parked every day in front of his family's home while they lived there. Of these four, three said that they could not actually accuse the vendors in their neighborhoods of leaving trash behind, contributing to a lack of safety in the area (whether by creating traffic or pedestrian problems or otherwise) or in any credible manner contributing to an increase in crime. Instead, their complaints could be described as loncheras' potential contribution to a scarcity of parking and, perhaps, "visual blight."

In the suburban district of Winnetka, one dissatisfied neighbor was an 18-year-old man who described himself as Hispanic and said he has been living there with his family for nine years. The lonchera, which Alma runs from 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. daily about 150 feet away from his door, has been regularly parked at that particular location (in front of a vacant lot with overgrown grass) for three years. He said he and his family find the truck to be a nuisance mainly because customers that arrive by car too often park directly in front of their home on the street. This street, while full with moving traffic, appeared remarkably empty of parked cars at the time of the interview on a weekday at 5 p.m., despite the relative lack of restrictions on parking on the stretch. The single-family house also has a 3-car garage. When questioned about the complications created by the customers parking in front of his home, he said that the problem was mainly one of distasteful appearance and a feeling of lack privacy due to the nearness of strangers who could see into the home's front yard. He also said, however, that he wouldn't consider it to be a big problem.

Another neighbor, a man who appeared to be in his 50s who described himself as white, said he had lived at that address for twenty years and whose home was less 100 feet directly across the busy four-lane street from the lonchera, used the term "blight" to describe its effect on his community. He said he felt this opinion strongly. When asked for details, he paused and admitted that he "can't honestly say" that he had seen in increase in litter in the area, public endangerment, or crime rates as a result of the food truck. He then added that it simply "attracts people who don't belong in this neighborhood."

In Boyle Heights, on the same side of the mostly residential street where Ramon parks every evening in front of an (apparently vacant) auto-repair shop's parking lot, a man in his late 30s who said he was Latino and had been living there for "a few years," also said he would rather see the lonchera go away. He acknowledged having tried its food one evening and feeling underwhelmed by it. The main problem associated with the truck, he said, is that its customers, who sometimes arrive by car, exacerbate the parking problem on his street. With no garage or driveway on his property, finding parking on any given night when he got home from work was a challenge. Rarely, he said, is he able to park directly in front of his home and occasionally he has had to park around the corner of his block. When asked what was the longest distance from his front door he has had to park his car, he said it was one and a half blocks.

Finally, the fourth person, the former Boyle Heights resident, was an Asian-American man in his late 30s who said his family had been very unhappy about the food truck that habitually parked across the street from his family's single-family house. He said it was the source of disposable plates and other litter scattered about on the street and the odor of cooking oil and food that they did not care to smell the whole time that the vehicle was there.

The fifteen merchants interviewed included five owners or managers of Mexican-food restaurants, the manager of a Taco Bell outlet and the president of the Pizza Loca Company. Others interviewed were owners or managers of a donut shop, a gasoline station, a groceries and liquor store, a bank and the sellers of clothes, perfume, children's toys and optical lenses. The owners of two food establishments—a small, struggling Mexican-food eatery and the Pizza Loca Company—expressed the only negative opinions coming from this category of stakeholders, albeit for different reasons.

The Guatemalan owner of a Fashion District kitchen that specializes in serving speedy and cheap Mexico City-style quesadillas spoke about his frustrations during hard economic times, especially since he must compete with hawkers of illegal bacon-wrapped hot dogs cooked on makeshift pushcarts outside his business and, in the last month, with Griselda and Ramon's lonchera at their new daytime location one block away. He is a recent arrival at in the area himself, he said, having been forced to relocate when several hole-in-the wall commercial spaces in a building at Broadway and Fifth Street, where he had been a tenant for several years, were closed for renovation. In the six months since moving to the new neighborhood, where sidewalks are overrun daily with Latino shoppers that he hoped would be crowding onto his benches and tables, he has been unable to build a decent customer base.

The concerns of the pizza-chain president were not about a lonchera's impact on his business's finances but, rather, about what he believes are its blight-producing effects on the surroundings. While he said that he had not visited the Pizza Loca store in Boyle Heights in the evenings when Griselda and Ramon's truck is parked nearby, he spoke generally about the unpleasant appearance of stationary food trucks and his belief that "they don't pay rent" and that "they get fewer inspections" from the health department. For these reasons, he also feels that lonchera operators enjoy an unfair advantage over some food retailers, particularly those that sell Mexican food, for which he remarked, "I feel sorry for King Taco and those guys." However, he also said his biggest gripe is with the unregulated streetvendors and not with stationary food trucks.

Stakeholders with a neutral or positive opinion

Sixteen of the other twenty-one residents interviewed said they appreciated having a lonchera as a neighbor and five people in different communities also said that they didn't care either way because they felt they neither derived benefits nor suffered any consequences from its presence. This viewpoint was illustrated by the live-and-let-live attitude of a Chinese man who said he never eats from the lonchera near his home but walks by it every day: "They're just trying to survive… like everybody," he said.

The five persons with a neutral opinion of the lonchera in their communities had different reasons for not consuming from it, ranging from distrust in the quality or safety of the food to having no taste for the menu items to simply having no need for it. Two were white, a man and a woman and the others were Latino. They all also said that they would probably be bothered by the vendors if they made bad neighbors. But in all of these cases, just as the three critics themselves had acknowledged, the neutral stakeholder said that the food-truck operators picked up after themselves, including regularly sweeping the sidewalk, and could not be said to make or attract people who make too much noise or cause any kind of nuisance, commit crimes or endanger the public.

One woman in Van Nuys, who manages an apartment complex at the intersection where Alfredo's trailer kitchen can be found six nights a week, also said she had no need to consume from it and had "never actually been near it." But she said that she liked seeing it there when she looks out the window every night because it brightens an otherwise dark, lonely corner. She said the sight of people engaging in normal activities made her feel the area was relatively safe, "less scary."

The rest of those residents with a positive opinion described themselves as Latinos, except for one woman who said she was African-American. They all said they eat from the food truck nearby, either regularly or occasionally, or simply liked having the option to do so if they ever needed or had the desire for it. One elderly Mexican woman in Boyle Heights, who said she was disabled and could not drive or walk very far, was especially emphatic about the good she saw in having easy access to a menu of varied and economical food at Ramon and Griselda's lonchera across the street. A similar sentiment was expressed by a woman who uses a wheelchair in Westlake and who said she is a regular customer at Francisco's lonchera. This woman also spoke of her years-long friendship with Francisco, whom she also appreciates for his willingness to give her credit when she is short on cash.

A mother of three children also near Francisco's location said that while she does not often visit any food trucks in the neighborhood, she likes having the choice to do so when she doesn't find the time to cook. While other low-cost eateries are available in her neighborhood as well, the menu items are not the same and she appreciates there being a variety of them within walking distance from her home. A similar opinion was expressed by an older man arriving home from work on a bicycle across the street from Mariana's lonchera in Canoga Park. He said that his wife cooked nearly all their meals but that when she was too tired to do so they appreciated being able to cross the street for food rather than traveling farther.

School officials

None of the school officials contacted expressed any concerns about the loncheras located within a few blocks of their campuses, although one elementary-school principal in Van Nuys had much to say about the streetvendors operating pushcarts who "sell junk food to my kids" after classes have let out.

If a lonchera were to park too close to the school's entrance, she said, "then it would also be a problem" but probably not as bad as the sellers purely non-nutritious snacks like tortilla and potato chips or cheese curls and ice cream. A nearly identical opinion was held by every school official reached by phone at elementary schools in Boyle Heights, Westlake and Canoga Park and a middle school in Winnetka.

Merchants in the vicinity

Among the business representatives interviewed was a Boyle Heights-location manager of a Los Angeles-area chain of Mexican seafood restaurants who also said that he would only be bothered if a lonchera, such as Griselda and Ramon's truck, parked directly in front of his business. Being two blocks away, however, he saw no problem with it even though he may lose a few customers to it. In his case, he believes that the kind of product and service his restaurant offers is different enough from the lonchera's that the impact of competition cannot be significant.

However, another Mexican-food restaurateur also near Griselda and Ramon's intersection also had nothing negative to say, despite selling tacos, burritos and other items similar to those on the lonchera's menu. The owner said that his business and the lonchera, while selling "practically the same products," serve distinct market niches, given that he offers full service in an indoor space with dining tables and chairs while a food truck offers fast food for people with less money to spend. He also said that the actual products, though technically the same, have different styles that reflect each kitchen creates.

In the Fashion District location, the manager of a corporate fast-food chain outlet two blocks away from a lonchera said that the distance between the two eateries ensured that there are no problems, unlike the pushcart food vendors on the street that the police is slow to chase away. She acknowledged, however, that a two-block distance felt like the minimum threshold for her not to be irked by a kitchen on wheels.

Other business owners and managers close to loncheras also dismissed the question that a stationary food truck near them could present problems for them or the neighborhood. A Korean retailer of toys in the Fashion District, for example, shrugged his shoulders and said "the Mexicans like it," referring to the overwhelmingly Latino shoppers in the area. The Sikh owner of a groceries and liquor store that he has operated in Canoga Park for twenty years also said that he doesn't consume lonchera fare because "I'm a vegetarian" but that he had no problem with the truck. He was very unhappy, he said, about what he believed was a continual rise in crime in the neighborhood, which he attributed to the growing presence of "gangs and Spanish people from Mexico." But when asked if he believed that the lonchera half a block away contributed to the problem, he readily shook his head and said, "No, they are not gangs."

The Filipino owner of an auto-repair shop in Van Nuys, outside of which Alfredo parks every night, said that the lonchera not only provides him and his workers with a food option in the few hours before closing but helps keep burglars away from his property after dark. To help ensure that Alfredo stays, he offered him ready access to the restroom in the shop even before he was asked.

Several other owners, managers and employees of various other neighboring businesses also described themselves as regular or occasional customers of the loncheras nearby and invariably disagreed with critics' charges that mobile kitchens hurt their neighborhoods in any way.

DISCUSSION

The most common arguments used to advocate greater restrictions on loncheras fall into three categories: those related to public health, their economic effects upon a local community and the quality of life in a neighborhood. The strongest arguments in favor of policies that address valid stakeholder concerns while simultaneously protecting and supporting loncheras are also rooted in these same three categories of urban well-being.

As the discussion below lays clear, the health-related arguments are the most easily refutable of all since there is no difficulty to demonstrating the high level of oversight of health authorities over the mobile food industry in California. The economic arguments against stationary food trucks do require more careful consideration and reviewing of facts. But these ultimately show themselves to be weak as well because they are largely founded in conjecture and misperceptions, in addition to being disproved by strong evidence to the contrary. Finally, the quality-of-life concerns also voiced by some appear to point to more complicated issues having to do with clashing ideologies about urban living and the proper uses of public space.

Health arguments

Although less commonly heard, two criticisms that have been made against the continued existence of stationary food trucks are that they are not regulated by health authorities sufficiently or with the same diligence as fixed-location food retailers and that the nutritious quality of their products may be poor.

As the section on laws and regulations in this paper makes clear, food trucks in California are subject to the same rigorous monitoring and enforcement of health laws as fixed-location restaurants. The number of health inspections of the food facilities per year is the same, for example, and the penalties for any code violations are similar.

Of course, it would be hard to argue that laws designed to protect public health could not be stronger or that enforcement of existing codes is perfect—far from it. But if lax regulations are a problem, it is not limited to loncheras or even to eateries. In recent years, frightening news about contaminated spinach and lettuce making people sick people across the country has highlighted the consequences of a shrinking government and its inability to enforce laws intended to protect the public. In other areas of the economy, commenting on the ongoing oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, President Obama has also pointed to lax regulations governing the oil industry as potential contributors to one of the worst environmental disasters in the country.[29] Calling for increased or better oversight of food-serving businesses as well would be completely reasonable.

It seems unlikely that loncheras would frequently escape enforcement in the manner described by an EHD spokesman, who said that health authorities sometimes face difficulties simply locating those food trucks with lapsed permits (Powell, October 2, 2009). The sedentary nature of loncheras should make it possible for health officers to easily find them, despite the health

[29] SEE "Obama assails oil industry's 'cozy relationship' with government" May 15, 2010 By Margot Roosevelt and Christi Parsons, Los Angeles Times and Tribune Washington Bureau

department's policy of not tracking where they park for business. But to further ensure inspectors' ability to locate the mobile kitchens, a call could be reasonably made for the EHD to note and keep information on the semi-permanent locations of stationary food trucks.

It is worth pondering the reasons for the mistaken impression some members of the public have about the safety of loncheras. One obvious probable cause is that, in Los Angeles County, fixed-location food businesses—but not mobile food vendors—receive letter grades indicating that they have satisfactorily passed an EHD inspection, which they must affix on their front window or another place clearly visible to the public. There is no reason to not extend the letter-score policy to mobile food vendors and extending the policy to them would go a long way in informing the public about a vendor's level of compliance with health laws before deciding whether or not patronize the business. The reason the policy was not applied to food trucks since its creation in 1998 has to do with the relative autonomy of the various internal programs of the EHD bureaucracy. But extending the letter-score policy is an action now being explored.

Another potential cause of some people's distrust of loncheras is more worrisome, as it may have to be based on the ethnic or class backgrounds of the people working in the industry and, to a large extent, its customers. The working-class immigrant element in the trade and the fact that food trucks throughout the US have often served so-called "ethnic cuisine" or, in other words, recipes originating in other countries. "Roach coach," a common term for food trucks in the US has no translation into Spanish and it suggests a generalized view of immigrant food vendors, at best, as mysteriously foreign, as "other"—or at worst, as dirty.

The same perception may, in part, lie behind the distrust others have expressed over the nutritious quality of lonchera fare. A few critics have suggested that the ingredients going into burritos or tacos do not make for healthy food, but this viewpoint is even harder to defend. The popularity of Mexican food in the Southwest is a testament to the widespread acceptance of its promise in terms of nutrition. While one may debate whether consuming lard or heavy quantities of meat is healthful, there is reason to believe that motorized vendors act any differently from other Mexican-food restaurateurs in this respect. In fact, as keen detectors of consumer wants, a large number of lonchera operators report using vegetable oil and making vegetarian options available.

It is important to note as well as that corporate fast-food businesses, like McDonald's or Jack-in-the-Box, are arguably among the chief rivals of loncheras as providers of cooked food affordable to low-income customers. Such fast-food outlets are, like stationary food trucks, also ubiquitous in working-class neighborhoods in Los Angeles. And a casual comparison between the nutritious quality of food served by a lonchera and a meal from one a fast-food giant—food infamously made with ingredients that are not fresh or locally purchased, but over-processed and shipped from long distances—should leave no doubt that customers are getting a good deal in terms of nutrition for their dollars.

Economic arguments

The most commonly heard economic argument is that loncheras could hurt fixed-location restaurants financially and possibly cause them to close. The anger seems to be also fueled by

the perception that loncheras "have no overhead" or that it is too small, enjoying them to enjoy an "unfair advantage" over geographically anchored food businesses.

The Lonchera Economy section of this paper makes clear that the motorized vendors actually do have business costs and that they are not insignificant. At $27 a day for a parking space at a commissary—the cheapest price found in Los Angeles County during this study—a lonchero pays nearly three dollars per square foot of real estate, a rate comparable to retail rents paid in Los Angeles. They also pay taxes—business and sales taxes—at the same rates as all other food businesses in the same jurisdiction. And as do all commercial and residential tenants, they pay property taxes, if indirectly, when they pay rent on real estate.

While loncheras may indeed incur a smaller overhead per customer or meal served, they also provide simpler services than those offered by brick-and-mortar restaurants, like indoor seating, air conditioning and a paid employee that waits on customers. Also, while their menu items may include rather involved preparations at times, loncheras are most sought for by their patrons for their *antojitos*. As a number of customers reported, they also sometimes enjoy dining at restaurants, depending on how much money they have to spend or the formality of the occasion. Clearly, opting for the simpler product a stationary food truck offers makes sense for many a patron when they have no time, desire or the disposable income to pay for additional comforts. Notwithstanding a degree of *indirect* competition that mobile and immobile food retailers may present each other with, that kitchens on wheels serving people on the street do not necessarily have any "advantage" over other food sellers—they are providing a different service that is also demanded by consumers.

The supposed unfairness of any potential advantage food trucks may have over other food businesses is also worth discussing. That an attack would be launched against any entrepreneur who has found an economic or marketing advantage over his or her rivals in any industry while breaking no laws and enjoying no public subsidies is odd and surprising in a capitalist society. Of course, it is good policy to think it conceivable that a currently permitted economic activity could actually be detrimental to society in one way or another and ought to be the subject of tough restrictions in order to protect the public or eliminated altogether, if need be. Examples that may come to mind are the tobacco industry, whose products kills thousands each year, or unrestrained advertising that encourages unrestrained consumerism. Other phenomena also infamously hurt the economic health of societies—like disinvestment in working-class communities of color or the widespread landlordism in many of those same neighborhoods, perpetuating systems of inequality in well-being among a city's population.

However, to target the sale of food on the city's sidewalks as potentially bad for a neighborhood or city's economy seems impulsive and unreflective, perhaps the result of other food business owners' frustrations stemming from the national recession. It is not unreasonable to assume that brick-and-mortar restaurants would sell more if loncheras disappeared. Likewise, it is quite possible that an increase in the number of food trucks in the City could hurt the sales of other eateries. Particularly in these hard times, it is easy to understand the fears of some restaurant owners who may complain about mobile vendors. And it is conceivable that an anchored food business could fail to survive in the face of any competition coming from its mobile counterparts,

causing it to close its doors and leave a commercial space vacant. And as is well known, vacant spaces in a neighborhood may contribute to blight.

But such an occurrence cannot responsibly be blamed on loncheras. The high rate of commercial vacancies is clearly the product of the nation's economic crisis. As well, as described in the Inner Workings section, stationary food trucks are generally parked away from other retailers of similar fare, minimizing any direct competition.[30] And while they may do no favors for brick-and-mortar restaurants, loncheras play a vital role as the direct and indirect sources of income and livelihood of many workers and their families, either because they may operate a food vehicle or because they are its suppliers. Further, with rising unemployment and stagnant or falling wages, the number of residents in the city with little money to spend is means that the need for cheaply provided meals of decent quality may be growing.

The assertion made by the police officer in Woodland Hills that many of the vendors live in neighborhoods other than where they operate, taking away profits earned there (unlike the owners of fixed-location restaurants, according to him), contradicts a key observation of this research: that lonchera operators appear to mostly live and work in the same geographic areas.

Most lonchera operators indicated home addresses that were either in the very same communities of where they habitually operated their businesses—sometimes within a few blocks—or their commute was within ten miles. Aside from making many of their family's expenses in the same neighborhood—for housing, groceries, transportation—they also frequently reported using suppliers in the vicinity of their usual spots. Indeed, theirs are economies of local living, keeping profits in their neighborhoods to a degree that other retailers, whose owners live elsewhere—from food businesses like McDonald's to Food 4 Less Supermarkets and CVS Pharmacies—do not.

Mobile food-vending enterprises also represent a grassroots solution to joblessness, a product of the initiative and ingenuity of persons with scarce financial resources, limited skills and education and membership in socially marginalized communities. Like many small, family businesses, a lonchera does not generate high-paying jobs or hire many people beyond its operator's relatives, but it can support several persons and keep them out of unemployment lines. Also, because they are family operated, the microenterprises are also good for many operators' children, particularly inner-city teenagers, who so frequently face a lack of opportunities for the productive channeling of time and energy that may help them build useful skills and further their education. So when calls are made by elected officials and other critics for tougher restrictions that could hurt the ability of loncheras to continue operating, it begs the question that more than a few loncheros have made: Would it be better for them to close their businesses and go stand in the welfare line?

Finally, as mentioned earlier, the low prices available from food vendors on the street help better feed people who may not afford to buy as much otherwise. These include workers with little

[30] It would be good to remember that loncheras and Twitter trucks operate quite differently in this respect and that it appears to be mostly the practices of the newer, trendier mobile kitchens—parking to serve customers in close proximity to fixed-location restaurants—that has provoked the ire of many restaurateurs.

time to cook or people whose homes have no kitchen. These include homeless persons as well, including day laborers that may not qualify for any government assistance. Especially in today's tough economic times, loncheras' affordable food services in struggling communities are also healthy for the local economy.

Quality-of-life arguments

The third category of concerns about loncheras—probably the most strongly felt objections—is related to loncheras' impacts upon the quality of life in Los Angeles neighborhoods. The vendors have been pointed to as responsible for increased litter, noise, parking scarcity and even crime in the communities they work in.

Calling at times the presence of a food-truck operation "visual blight" in itself—due to an apparent displeasure of seeing people enjoy a meal on the sidewalk or due to the physical appearance of the vehicle, or both—and, at other times, saying that the vendors contribute to blighted conditions in neighborhoods, critics have seized upon the term "blight" in their efforts to rid themselves of loncheras. As Kenneth Stahl (49) puts it in his paper regarding a politics of growth and redevelopment in Southern California that is dominated by conservative, white-majority interests:

> 'Blight' is a loaded term that facilitates the condemnation of property in poor, crowded minority neighborhoods that may not necessarily be slums, while insulating low-density middle class neighborhoods…

Indeed, as with loitering laws that have historically been used to chase away those deemed undesirable, it is hard to imagine that neither the Latino nor immigrant nor working-class backgrounds of those who operate or patronize loncheras play a role in arousing opposition to streetvending. In cases where racial or anti-immigrant prejudices are no factors, the proletarian image often associated with mobile vending is still probably of little comfort to those middle-class residents who would rather have little or no contact on the sidewalk with less-affluent workers and families. In the same vein, it is difficult to imagine the same critics complaining, specifically, about the "visual blight" represented by Twitter trucks and the comparatively fashionable crowds that follow them.

<u>Public safety</u>

The idea that stationary food trucks somehow promote crime also raises questions about some critics' underlying presumptions about working-class Latinos. The police officer in Van Nuys who rhetorically asked, "Are those the kinds of eyes you want on the street?" (in reacting to the notion that the presence of lonchera customers might increase public safety) stands out for his bluntness among critics but maybe not in sentiment, which is clearly that the demographic in question is generally suspect.

Even if no bigotry is behind the idea that loncheras and their customers cause crime rates to rise, the mechanisms described by which this may happen are based on other incongruous assumptions. To imply, for example, that fewer (if any) illegal drug transactions or solicitations

for paid sex would occur in Los Angeles if loncheras and their patrons did not inadvertently provide lawbreakers with opportunities to meet leads one to wonder then if, by the same logic, it would not be best to prohibit any pausing at all in the public way. After all, many Angelenos currently sit or stand at bus stops, rest in public parks and stand or walk slowly on the sidewalk—all plausible meeting alternatives for those determined to engage in illegal activities.

Another explanation, provided by a Koreatown-based police officer, for how stationary food trucks allegedly make it easier for crimes to happen is even more absurd. The vendors encourage people to remain in the outdoors, he said, where they expose themselves to being victimized by criminals rather than remaining in the relative safety of the indoors. This view seems to reveal an exaggerated (and tragic) perception of the level of danger in the City that even residents of rather crowded and chaotic old neighborhoods like Koreatown are unlikely to share.

On the other hand, the argument that sidewalk vendors contribute to the public safety could not have gained more credence than by the recent example of the three New York City peddlers at Times Square whose opportune alerting of the police about a suspicious car averted a potentially disastrous bombing and killing of dozens. Even more than pedestrians, workers stationed daily in the same outdoor location are able to notice subtleties that may indicate danger and that could go unnoticed if a city's streets were empty. Moreover, the outdoor presence of average city dwellers has always been known to deter wrongdoing, which is probably one crucial reason (aside from darkness) that the rate of crime and violence is usually higher in the loneliness of night.

Litter

Marquez, the legislative aide to Supervisor Gloria Molina, as well as the former Boyle Heights resident and a number of the police officers interviewed said that increased litter on the streets was also a problem caused or exacerbated by the motorized streetvendors. Yet even those police officers making the assertion acknowledged that the problem does actually appear to be attributable in most cases to the behavior of a lonchera operator, but to customers who may purchase food to take away and then dispose of wastes improperly after leaving. In fact, most residents interviewed said that loncheros are unlikely to perpetrate the nuisance themselves and that they generally leave the areas they work in clean (perhaps partly a function of their vulnerability under the local anti-lonchera laws that have now been invalidated by court rulings).

To the extent that too many lonchera customers fail to put their trash in a trash bin after leaving a truck, it seems hard to reasonably place blame on a vendor for the problem. A more credible complaint may be that there is a scarcity of garbage cans in public ways and, related to this, an underdeveloped pedestrian culture in the City that still fails to encourage a level of consciousness about protecting the commons.

In any case, it is well known that restaurants also frequently offer consumers the option of buying food to go. One would think that if a customer chose to take food to go rather than eat on the spot from a lonchera, it is because they wish to take that food with them. It seems unlikely

that the absence of a food vendor on the street would dissuade a hungry customer short on time or money from placing a to-go food order at a brick-and-mortar restaurant later possibly disposing of the waste in the same manner.

Parking

It has also been said that stationary food trucks may contribute to the problem of parking scarcity in some neighborhoods, not so much because vendors themselves may take up a spot but because their customers may show up in cars. It seems difficult, however, to imagine that this is a significant or widespread problem. Operators generally have an interest in staking out spots where they can count on easily stationing their kitchen every day and where they are unlikely to forego making a sale because any patron arriving by car cannot find parking. In the case of the resident who complained about the parking problem on his street, which he partly attributed to Griselda and Ramon's customers, the longest distance he said he has ever had to walk to his home from wherever he found parking was one and half blocks. In truth, in a growing and increasingly dense city like Los Angeles, to some extent we might choose to address the problem of parking scarcity with a readjustment of our expectations around the amount of walking versus driving we do on a daily basis.

Neighborhoods of above-average density, like Koreatown—where a chronic parking shortage is a given but where some loncheras are present nonetheless—may be an exception to the situation described above. But it may actually be possible to learn something from the situation there, too, since the pedestrian culture of the district is such that a larger proportion of residents, workers and visitors opt for walking and using mass transit for transportation.

Pedestrians

Changing the local transportation culture, of course, will be a steep challenge, as suggested by the most laughable point raised by any critic: the Koreatown officer's remark about lonchera-induced "pedestrian endangerment" because customers may be motivated to recklessly cross a busy street in order to buy *antojitos* from a mobile kitchen. Such a comment sounds more like an argument against walking in general because any person accessing any fixed-location eatery on foot could potentially make the same mistake of crossing a street unsafely. And it is much more imaginable that, if loncheras were forced to move every 30 or 60 minutes as the nullified ordinances required, customers would be in greater hurry to get to a truck—like people running after a bus that comes by too infrequently—and potentially put his or her life at risk in the process.

However, streetvendors in general are doing much to facilitate locally the cultivation of an incipient pedestrian culture by bringing basic services closer to consumers' homes and workplaces and, by so doing, making life without a car possible. Not only do they serve the needs of many who cannot drive—impeded by tight budgets, disability, age or undocumented status—but it can be argued that they are helping to lead the way in the formation of a smarter, more practical urban way of life that may be the solution to some of the biggest transportation problems currently facing Los Angeles.

Residential areas

On the other hand, transitioning to a new urban regime will hardly be automatic and requires an understanding of the nuances of such conflicts as the debate over streetvending. Some complaints that have been made about them do have some merit and need consideration, particularly those stemming from their operating in residential areas.

The nearness of a food-preparation and -vending operation to a home, for example, may subject its dwellers to—as the former Boyle Heights resident said—the continual smell of food and oil that normally only kitchen workers and customers making a brief visit are exposed to. Chatter and other noise coming from late-night activity on a residential sidewalk while neighbors are sleeping may also indeed reach intolerable decibels.

The question here is how to combine the availability of a valuable service that residents need, want and should have easy access to while working to ensure the livability of a neighborhood. Currently, loncheras, responding simply to market forces, appear to mostly choose locations that are accessible to those residents that want them while maintaining healthy distances from households that could potentially be overexposed to the unpleasantness of a commercial kitchen. For example, residential areas with stationary food trucks are often populated with multistory apartment buildings whose setbacks or whose heights shield most of their inhabitants from the most direct impact of odors and noise. Loncheros have also frequently shown themselves to be mindful of not parking too close to single-family homes and generally stay away from neighborhoods where they are not wanted, given that few customers may be found in such places. It may also be true that in those neighborhoods where they operate there exists a degree of tolerance or acceptance of the urban energy of the streets that helps residents override any potential downsides of mixed uses. A policy of micro-zoning—comprehensively identifying spots in residential areas where a lonchera may serve customers while causing the least amount of disturbance—is an answer.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations made in this paper for policy action by the City of Los Angeles recognize that stationary food trucks play an important role in enhancing the quality of life in local communities while also understanding the need to formalize and optimize those services. Any effective policy solutions must, necessarily, reflect these nuances. In sum, among the concrete benefits that Angelenos derive from loncheras are:

- Availability of rapid-service food options satisfying nutrition requirements at affordable prices for people of all income levels in areas otherwise lacking in adequate alternatives

- Direct and indirect employment for thousands of working-class residents and families with limited access to other sources of income

- A force for the sustainable economic development of low-income communities through family-operated microenterprises that keep profits local

- Leadership in a movement to make Los Angeles a more comfortable city for everyone, desegregating land uses and making non-automobile transportation viable

The previous section refutes several of the charges against the food trucks, but there are indeed legitimate concerns about public nuisances and other neighborhood issues that food vending can negatively affect if not dealt with adequately. These include:

- Some households' exposure in residential areas to odors and high noise levels deriving from the preparation and serving of commercial food at excessively short distances

- An unmet need for restrooms for food-truck patrons (as well as members of the general public) who may resort to relieving themselves in the public way or on private properties

- An unmet need for garbage cans on City sidewalks that may leave lonchera patrons (as well as members of the general public) with few or no options for the responsible disposal of waste

- Possible overconcentration of food trucks in certain areas that could undermine their fixed-location counterparts as well as add to public nuisances in commercial or residential areas

This study demonstrates how the benefits that Angelenos reap from mobile kitchens far outweigh any unintended side effects. Thus, there is every reason to seek and implement innovative, comprehensive policies that can minimize any problems while protecting the vendors' ability to continue providing their services to the City's residents. Toward this goal, City officials should consider adopting the following proposed policies:

Creation of a mobile-food industry commission

The social and economic importance of the mobile foodservices in Los Angeles necessitates the creation of a commission by the City Council capable of dedicating special attention to this vital but complex industry. A mobile-food commission could play a crucial role in the formulation of comprehensive policies related to this segment of the local economy, whose particular characteristics touch upon issues of city planning and affect the lives of Angelenos in a multiplicity of ways. The commission's overarching goal would be to help improve the industry by providing informed guidance that leads to superior services and greater success in meeting the multiple demands that have long been the stimulus of mobile eateries.

Provide food trucks opportunity to formalize parking spaces for annual fee

An innovative measure that would go a long way in recognizing the value of mobile kitchens in the community while also generating public revenue would be the creation of a regulatory permit process involving an annual fee for the opportunity to operate a food truck in the City. Along with the business permit, the motorized vendors would be exempted from most time limits and parking-meter obligations on public streets.

The policy would merely formalize the long-established institution of stationary food trucks in Los Angeles, whose semi-permanent locations in commercial and residential zones have

served the public well. The payment of fees to the City combined with the special designation of their parking spaces would dispel any doubts about the legitimacy of a mobile kitchen's presence in a residential or commercial neighborhood. The measure would also provide current (and prospective) area residents, merchants and developers with reliable information about vendors' locations when making plans to live, work or invest in a nearby property. Additionally, the difficulty that health officials purportedly face in finding the vehicles for code enforcement would also be likely solved with the assignment of official business addresses to the wheeled eateries.

Commitment to work with the Human Relations Commission

The complexity of the mobile-food industry sometimes raises questions of importance to the diverse communities in Los Angeles, which call for direct involvement of the City's Human Relations Commission. Whether food trucks actually negatively contribute to such neighborhood problems as crime, litter or other public nuisances, or are merely perceived to do so, such issues point to the age-old challenge of realizing harmonious coexistence among the various urban stakeholders. Rather than responding with well-intentioned but indelicate measures leading to win-lose outcomes, these intra-community disputes would be best addressed by broadening the avenues of communication between and among residents, merchants and public officials.

Fostering mutual understanding between the multiple parties and improving everyone's knowledge and understanding of each other's circumstances promises to produce better, more democratic and longer-lasting solutions to disputes among neighbors. The Human Relations Commission of the City of Los Angeles is aptly suited to facilitate this communication, invested with the ability and respect to act as mediator between the communities of a diverse metropolis.

Improve communication and access to information

In order to address common and injurious stereotypes about sanitation levels on board stationary food trucks and to further incentivize compliance with health codes, the policy of assigning letter grades to anchored restaurants after passing an inspection ought to be extended to the mobile vendors. This change in policy, which appears to already be in the works, would do much to assure the public of safety of the various food options in the City.

Although loncheros seem generally well-informed about health codes and food-safety practices, the interviews revealed that some operators did not always understand other laws that affected them, including the difference between recently invalidated ordinances and other parking restrictions that apply to the general public. Improving communication between authorities and loncheros and making such important information easily available is very important. This would probably be most effectively achieved through the cultivation of a close working relationship with food-truck associations, distributing easy-to-understand informational material in Spanish as well as English and hosting meetings with the vendors during which they may be heard about the needs and challenges they deal with on a day-to-day basis.

Also, part of changing course in local authorities' disposition toward stationary food trucks should be better informing all parties with information about laws and regulations governing the vendors. Therefore, it is imperative that the general public and—even more so, persons with disproportionate power, such as police officers and public officials—be better informed about regulations governing food-truck operations.

Expand availability of public restrooms and waste containers

Redoubling efforts to expand the availability of publicly accessible toilet facilities and waste containers would go a long way in minimizing those public nuisances that stem from the lack of these services. Food trucks and other responsible and law-abiding streetvendors cannot reasonably be blamed for the problem resulting from this situation; indeed, fixed-location retailers frequently do not provide their customers with restrooms either. Ensuring the feasibility of the growing pedestrian culture that the vendors are helping to promote in Los Angeles requires that residents have much easier access to these facilities while away in the urban outdoors. New efforts should be made for increasing the availability of public restrooms, such as those few that have appeared in recent years in a handful of locations in Los Angeles. An alternative solution worth exploring may also be to devise incentives for fixed-location businesses with toilet facilities to make them available to the general public during their business hours for free or at a low cost.

As well, tackling the problem of litter on the streets is a collective responsibility and is not to be charged solely to mobile vendors. Loncheros already place trash bins on the sidewalk next to their vehicles for their customers to dispose of their wastes. If increasing the number of public waste containers on the City's sidewalks is not an option, other strategies ought to be explored. One idea might be to incentivize all retailers to join in the effort to reduce litter by conveniently locating waste containers where they may be easily accessible to all pedestrians and not exclusively to their customers.

CONCLUSION

That food trucks, including loncheras, are an essential part of the social and economic life of Los Angeles is a plain fact, employing thousands of hardworking men and women, providing key services to the general public and enhancing the quality of life of the City. Food trucks' share of the local economy is worth hundreds of millions of dollars any move to undermine the industry would likely have unimaginable consequences for Angelenos, including an exacerbation of unemployment levels, a loss of affordable, accessible foodservices in underinvested neighborhoods and an step backward in the City's effort to promote pedestrianism.

In these hard economic times, the City and the County cannot afford to see any loss of the $75 million and $170 million, respectively, being spent annually in supplies, taxes and regulatory fees. Vast segments of the foodservice industry overall would be deeply hurt by any revival of the spirit to punish mobile-eatery operators as has been attempted in the recent past, particularly those most closely linked to the lower-income demographics of Los Angeles.

For these reasons, the City Council would be wise to draw up innovative solutions to any unintended consequences of the food-truck industry. These solutions should seek not to extinguish but to protect and improve the subsector, minimizing its imperfections and strengthening their ability to succeed in the Los Angeles food market.

The creation of a commission on the mobile-food industry should be an integral part of the solution, recognizing its vitality to the City's economic and social wellbeing. The commission would allow for policymakers to dedicate additional time and energy to learning the facts of a large, complex industry, which is necessary for the creation of wise policies toward it.

A new regulatory permit process would also help address imperfections in the industry stemming from the ambiguous nature of government officials' view of the food trucks, the mixed messages sent by the state and local authorities. By allowing the motorized vendors to pay an annual fee to the City to do business and exempting them from most parking restrictions on public streets, the food trucks' presence would finally be formalized. The public revenue generated by the measure would also assist in paying for enforcement and other City services.

Working with the Human Relations Commission would, of course, also help address any community disputes among the various stakeholders in the City. Such is the Commission's mission and the controversy that has at times surrounded mobile kitchens is a perfect candidate for this body's attention, given that much of it is due to misinformation, distrust among some neighbors and lack of communication.

The City must also commit to improving communication and the distribution of information to the general public about their rights and the laws and regulations that govern the mobile-food industry. And ought to tackle the issue of litter and lack of public restrooms as the generalized problems that they are—as urban problems both caused and suffered by all of the City's residents—rather than allowing for a few segments to be scapegoated, such as loncheros and their customers.

By implementing these solutions, we may be assured that the invaluable contribution of mobile food vendors in Los Angele is saved while the subsector's imperfections are effectively addressed.

APPENDIX A

Methodology

Developing this report required extensive field research—dozens of interviews with lonchera operators and others connected to the industry as well as public servants and other stakeholders—a review of the health laws governing the mobile food retail in California and an analysis of a food truck's revenues and expenses that gives us an idea of the size of the subsector in economic terms.

Obtaining official data from government records has been a difficult task. Requests for data on the number of food-truck business licenses from the City's Office of Finance were simply denied, for example. That which was received from the health department, which issues health permits necessary for the operation of a food vehicle, was incomplete and unclear, leaving more questions than answers: While a total of 4,480 kitchen-equipped food vehicles were shown to operate in the County of Los Angeles in October 2009,[31] for instance, requests for the operators' names and official business addresses turned up data on only 1,136 trucks. The data also did not distinguish between vehicles equipped for the preparation of "soft-serve" ice cream and other dairy-based products trucks and those with kitchens for the preparation of hot food.[32] Nor was any indication provided as to the proportion of these mobile eateries that are used specifically as loncheras (or *stationary* food trucks).

As a result of the limited data from government sources and the insufficient resources for conducting a larger study, we were left with little choice but to work with the available information. Given that 45 percent of the provided business addresses of kitchen-equipped trucks were located in the City of Los Angeles, the same percentage of the total 4,480 in operation was assumed to do be doing business within City limits. Hence, the estimated number of kitchen-equipped vehicles operating in the City of Los Angeles in October 2009 is 2,016.

These figures on the quantity of food-preparing and -retailing vehicles form the basis for the projection of one lonchera operator's total dollar payments in taxes, regulatory fees and supplies in 2009 upon the entire subsector in the City and the County. (Having used the reported revenues and expenses of one of the lowest-grossing lonchera operators interviewed for this study, we believe the dollar contributions of the subsector to the Los Angeles economy calculated in this report is conservative.)

In short, information in this report was collected in the following ways:

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[31] Excluding the cities of Long Beach, Pasadena and Vernon. The Los Angeles County Public Health Department enforces foodservice regulations in all cities and territories within county lines except for these three municipalities, which have their own public health departments. All references to the County of Los Angeles in this report do not include Long Beach, Pasadena or Vernon.

[32] "Soft-serve" ice cream, not to be confused with prepackaged ice cream, is the semisolid form of the frozen dessert that is typically poured (directly from the machine that produces it) into a cone.

- Twenty interviews with lonchera operators[33]—five of which are in-depth and personal and form the basis of five "lonchero" (lonchera operator) profiles—identified via a combination of methods, including walking up to the mobile eateries, through the author's personal acquaintances and through an association of food-truck operators, Asociación de Loncheros, LA Familia Unida de California

- An overview of the regulatory framework governing this branch of the local mobile food industry

- Dozens of interviews with other stakeholders—including community residents and merchants and public, police and school officials as well as advocates for vendors' rights—about their opinions on the issue

- Multiple phone conversations and email exchanges with health department and other public officials

[33] All loncheros' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

APPENDIX B

Additional data on food vehicles

In October 2009, there were 6,213 such conveyances with active health permits from the EHD (Powell, October 29, 2009, email message to author). Another 9,496 were considered to be in the total inventory of vehicles overseen by the department but with inactive permits, amounting to 15,710 food vehicles.[34]

One subtype of MFPUs is the "soft-serve vehicle," furnished with machinery for the production of soft-serve ice cream, yogurt and other dairy-based products. The more common sort of MFPU is the what has been informally known as a "hot truck," which features a full kitchen equipped for the preparation of hot meals (e.g., loncheras, Twitter trucks, industrial lunch trucks, etc.).[35]

EHD officials do not know the number of kitchen-equipped vehicles used as loncheras or in any other activity branch of the hot-truck inventory.[36] However, additional data received from the health department on MFPUs shows that in the 2008-2009 fiscal year a total of 1,810 active permits were held specifically by hot-truck operators countywide, an unknown portion of which are the stationary food trucks that are the subject of this study. Another often used in media reports (2,423 vehicles) reflect all MFPUs with active permits, including hundreds of soft-serve trucks. Yet other figures have sometimes also appeared to include licensed food vehicles in entirely different categories—counting even popcorn-vending carts at Universal Studios as "taco trucks."[37]

Active versus inactive permits

Additionally, the EHD distinguishes between *active* health permits for MFPUs and *inactive* ones—those that have not been renewed for the new fiscal year, which runs from July 1 to June 30 each calendar year. While "the total inventory" of MFPUs assumed to be in operation in October 2009 was 4,480, nearly half had expired permits and were, as a result, believed by EHD officials to be operating illegally (Powell, October 2, 2009). According to department records, there were 2,056 permitees who had neither reported to the agency that they were taking their vehicles out of operation nor had renewed their permits.[38]

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[34] See related discussion and chart in "Active versus inactive permits" below.

[35] "Hot trucks" first appeared in Southern California in the 1970s, when they began to overtake "cold trucks," which were only equipped to store prepackaged meals. SEE Supervisors OK Cooking on Trucks Despite Objections ROBERT WELKOS *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File);* Nov 1, 1978; AND Catering Trucks Find That Most Like It Hot HERBERT J VIDA *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File);* May 3, 1982; ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881 - 1986) pg. E1

[36] One blog, LAist.com, holds that Twitter trucks in the Los Angeles area number about 90. (See http://laist.com/2010/04/03/89_twittering_mobile_eateries_count.php.)

[37] In "Putting the breaks on East LA's tacos," (*Los Angeles Times* April 14, 2008), Jean-Paul Renaud reports on an EHD official referring to "nearly 14,000 taco trucks registered with the county -- and there may be as many as 28,000 more that operate illegally."

[38] Of the total expired MFPU permits in October 2009, no breakdown was available showing the proportion held specifically by hot-truck operators and those issued for soft-serve vehicles.

Table 1: Breakdown of food vehicle health permits by status and MFF category in October 2009 (Source: EHD)

TYPE OF FOOD VEHICLE	ACTIVE	INACTIVE	TOTAL
Produce Vehicle	509	837	1,346
Limited Food Vehicle	103	85	188
Food Vehicle Retail	39	52	91
Mobile Food Preparation Unit (MFPU)*	2,423	2,056	4,480
Ice Cream Vehicle**	900	1,536	2,436
Food Vehicle Wholesale Industry	31	39	70
Unpackaged Food Cart Pretzel	124	158	282
Food Cart **without** Plumbing	1,383	2,897	4,280
Fresh Fish Vehicle	4	5	9
Food Cart **with** Plumbing	697	1,831	2,528
TOTAL	**6,213**	**9,496**	**15,710**

*Includes "Hot Trucks" as well as "Soft-Serve Vehicles."
**Prepackaged ice-cream bar retailers, not to be confused with vendors of soft-serve ice cream.

To the extent that there may indeed be a significant number of vehicles in operation with lapsed health permits, insufficient data on the various business modes of hot-truck operators makes it impossible to know how many of the delinquent vendors are loncheros. Nonetheless, there is reason to believe that the share of loncheras being operated without valid permits is smaller than, say, that of the continually moving industrial lunch trucks. EHD officials' purported difficulty in finding the delinquent MFPUs (Powell…) suggests that the vehicles may not be easy to find, unlike the average *stationary* food trucks, whose economic survival is based on the predictability of its whereabouts.

There are grounds to believe that the number of loncheras has increased over the last several years. The number of hot trucks legally operating in the 2008 – 2009 fiscal year, a total of 1,810, represented 661 more than in 2000 – 2001 fiscal year, when the figure was 1,149, a 58 percent jump over eight years.

Table 2: Total active permits for "Hot Trucks" in fiscal years 2000-01 and 2008–09, by modal branch

HOT TRUCK BRANCH	2000 – 2001	2008 - 2009
Twitter trucks	0	90?*
Industrial lunch trucks	?	?
Loncheras	?	?
Other	?	?

TOTAL	**1,149****	**1,810****

*Unverifiable. Speculation publicized on LAist.com.
**Data provided by the EHD.

While the EHD does not know how many of these permits are being used for the operation of stationary food trucks or in other modes, the trend in these data coincide with testimony from longtime operators who feel that competition among loncheras has gotten tougher. Some in the hot-truck subsector attribute the apparent growth in the number of loncheras to the decline in manufacturing and construction jobs over the years, forcing some industrial lunch trucks to abandon their routes and staking out semi-permanent spots in the city to avoid going out of business altogether. If true, such changes in the hot truck landscape, combined with the growing number of health permits being issued, suggests that loncheras are becoming more numerous indeed.

APPENDIX C

Interviews

Interviewee	Title/Company	Date(s)	Place
Loncheros			
Alfonso	Lonchera operator	10/22/09	By phone
Alfredo	Lonchera operator	Multiple times between 10/22/2009 and 3/21/2010	By phone and at lonchera in Van Nuys, Los Angeles
Alma	Lonchera operator	3/5/10	A ther home in _____
Armando	Lonchera operator	3/9/10	By phone
Arturo	Lonchera operator	10/2/10	By phone
Elias	Lonchera operator	Multiple times between 10/2/2010 and 10/17/2010	By phone and in person at friend's home in East Los Angeles
Fernando	Lonchera operator	26-Dec-09	In Phoenix, AZ, at lonchera
Florencio	Lonchera operator	29-Oct-10	By phone
Francisco	Lonchera operator	Multiple times between 10/9/2009 and 3/30/2010	At lonchera in Westlake, Los Angeles
Griselda	Lonchera operator	2/27/10	At lonchera in downtown
Jose	Lonchera operator	20-Nov-09	In a restaurant in Pico Union, Los Angeles
Juan	Lonchera operator	10/2/10	At his home in East Los Angeles
Juan Jose	Lonchera operator	11/20/09	By phone
Luis	Lonchera operator	11/20/09	By phone
Mariana	Lonchera operator	2/22/10	In her home in Canoga Park, Los Angeles
Miguel	Lonchera operator	10/22/09	By phone
Pablo	Lonchera operator	10/22/09	By phone
Ramon	Lonchera operator	3/24/10	At lonchera in Boyle Heights

Salvador	Lonchera operator	Twice on 10/12/2009 and 10/17/2009	At commissary where he stores his vehicle
Susana	Lonchera operator	3/12/10	At lonchera in Boyle Heights

Others familiar with the industry	Title/Company	Date of contact	Place/Format
Erin Glenn	CEO, Asociación de Loncheros, LA Familia Unida de California	Multiple times between 10/9/2009 and 3/8/2010	By phone and in person
Hugo	Commissary clerk	10/17/09	In person at commissary
Javier	Commissary employee	11/5/09	In person at commissary
Jesus	Industrial lunch truck operator	Twice on 10/9/2009 and 11/5/2009	By phone and in person at commissary
Laura	Former lonchera operator	4/2/10	At restaurant in East Los Angeles
Manuel	Commissary manager	4/22/10	In Vehicle Inspection Program lobby at EHD
Paul	Commissary manager	11/5/09	In person at commissary
Salvador Reza	Community organizer	Twice on 10/15/2009 and 12/26/2009	By phone and at commissary in Phoenix

Other Stakeholders	Title/Company	Date of contact	Place/Format
Alejandra	Manager, Taco Bell/Pizza Hut	2/27/10	In person in Fashion District
David	Shift manager, Valero gas station	3/24/10	In person in Boyle Heights
Francisco	Manager, 7 Mares restaurant	3/24/10	In person in Boyle Heights
Jose	Owner, Shoe store in front of which a lonchera parks	3/12/10	In person in Boyle Heights

Kuldip Singh	Owner, Ladin's Liquor Store	2/22/10	In person in Canoga Park
Lauro	Owner, La Quesadilla Mexicana restaurant	2/27/10	In person in Fashion District
Mandy	Residential property manager	3/25/10	By phone
Mark	President, Pizza Loca	3/25/10	By phone
Marta	Manager, Sachi Handbags	2/27/10	In person in Fashion District
Nick	Manager, Motel 6	2/22/10	In person in Canoga Park
Oscar	Owner, Ciro's Mexican Restaurant	3/24/10	By phone
Patrick	Owner, USA Donuts	3/24/10	In person in Boyle Heights
Paul	Owner, PJ Handbags	2/27/10	In person in Fashion District
Ricky	Auto repair shop in front of which a lonchera parks	3/22/10	In person in Van Nuys
Roxanne Marquez	Legislative Analyst, Supervisor Gloria Molina's Office		
Sandy	Owner, Yes Importer	2/27/10	In person in Fashion District
Terrance Powell	Director, Bureau of Specialized Surveillance and Enforcement of the Environmental Health Division, Los Angeles County Public Health Department	Multiple times between 10/2/2009 and 11/11/2009	By phone