Introduction

*Working with la Familia*

Martha’s alarm rings at six o’clock every morning. During the week, she wakes up early in order to make it to her private Catholic high school on time, but every Saturday and Sunday, she wakes up at dawn to sell corn on the cob, cut-up fruit, churros, and shaved ice, commonly known in Spanish as *raspados*. Martha, now eighteen years old, began street vending with her undocumented parents when she was seven. At first, she and her younger sister Sofia sold food outside their local church with their mother. Later, when Martha turned thirteen, she and her sister started street vending by themselves. I met Martha during the summer of 2008 while she was street vending at a park. By then she had been street vending for eleven years, five of which were on her own. I bought and ate a diced mango on a stick that Martha cut—with great agility—in a way that resembled a flower in bloom dressed with lemon juice and sprinkled with powdered chili and salt. As I nibbled on the mango, I told Martha about my study and she agreed to an interview for the following Friday after school. The interview took place in the backyard of her parents’ house. After the interview, she challenged me to street vend with her so that I could get a real sense of her life, and so I did.¹

The first time I went street vending with Martha, the weather forecast had promised a typical sunny summer day in Southern California. I arrived at her house at six o’clock in the morning. Martha’s mother, Lourdes, greeted me at the door, and the warmth from a large pot of freshly steamed corn permeated the house with an earthy aroma. Lourdes told me that Martha and Sofia had helped strip off the leaves from the ear of corn the night before. They had also placed the corn inside the large pot, ready for Lourdes as she turned on the stove early the next morning before the day of street vending. While Lourdes continued explaining their evening routine, she offered me a cup of coffee. I
enjoyed the coffee and Lourdes’s story while we waited for her daughters to wake up and get dressed. When Martha exited her bedroom, I was sitting on a tall stool near the stove drinking my coffee. She glanced at me with her intimidating side look and said with a smirk, “Is that what you are wearing?” Holding my mug with my two hands, I discreetly scanned myself, noticing my sandals, blue jeans, and a spaghetti strap turquoise blouse. “You’re gonna get burned, girl,” she exclaimed. She was right—that day I got the worst sunburn of my life, and I actually think Martha enjoyed telling me “I told you so” at the end of the day. In contrast, Martha dressed appropriately with a flannel shirt, blue jeans, tennis shoes, and a Dodger hat that protected her from the sun and kept her long wavy black hair in a ponytail off her face and away from the food she will sell. Her younger sister Sofia wore something similar.

For the next hour, I saw the entire family prepare for their long day of street vending work. Both Martha and Sofia took turns carrying crates full of mangos, boxes of canned soda, small bags of peanuts that they bagged the night before, and several plastic milk containers now full of colorful concentrated syrups for the raspados. Meanwhile, Martha’s father, Javier, hooked a small trailer onto the truck containing three street vending carts: one for him, another for Martha, and the last one for Sofia. This has been a typical weekend morning routine for Martha and Sofia since they were little girls.

Linger around the streets of Los Angeles and Boyle Heights and you will notice, as I did, that many children like Martha and Sofia are vending with their immigrant parents. These children are full-time students, but they are also economic co-contributors in the household. They relax, play, and socialize when business is slow, but for the most part, they are busy charging customers, taking food orders, heating up tortillas, running errands to the store, and translating for parents. I also saw them do work at home at different times of the day and night, as they cut, bag, sort, and cook the food they will later sell. For example, fourteen-year-old Leticia is in charge of making seven types of sauces, sixteen-year-old Sofia bags peanuts and the churros she makes at home, and twelve-year-old Salvador cooks goat meat in his backyard while his mother and sister Norma make the sauces and dice onions in the kitchen.

The role of child street vendors in the United States remains largely uninvestigated. The children of immigrants experience additional adult
responsibilities that are often taken for granted or are rendered invisible. For example, children of immigrants play key roles in their families’ social integration into their adopted communities. We know how children serve as cultural and language brokers for their parents. Scholars have also demonstrated the collective agency of undocumented immigrant youth to organize for their legal and social rights. What these scholars have missed, however, is the quiet, quotidian economic agency of the children of undocumented immigrants, who, through their work with la familia, are helping their families achieve economic incorporation, and simultaneously improving their own economic futures and life chances.

This phenomenon is not unique to street vending families in Los Angeles. As we zoom out to other Latinx occupations, we can see that Latinx children and adolescents working alongside their immigrant parents in informal sector occupations are both ubiquitous and seemingly invisible. We see this pattern not only in street vending, but also paid domestic work, gardening, garment production, and seasonal farm work. All of these occupations are part of the informal sector of unregulated or semi-regulated income-generating jobs. In this book, I use “informal sector” and “informal economy” interchangeably, and I define this concept as “all income-earning activities that are not regulated by the state in social environments where similar activities are regulated.” In this sector, these children and their work experiences remain invisible in the already invisible occupation of their parents.

In Kids at Work, I bring the stories of these children to light. This is the first book to look at the participation of child street vendors in the United States. The children portrayed in this book are the children of undocumented Latinx immigrants who are relegated to street vending because their parents lack opportunities to work in the formal sector of the economy. On the streets of Los Angeles, California, they help their parents prepare and sell ethnic food from México and Central America, such as pozole, pupusas, tamales, champurrado, tacos, and tejuino (a corn-based drink).

Shedding light on the experiences of children in this occupation highlights the complexities and nuances of family relations when children become economic co-contributors. This book is primarily based on the point of view of street vending children, and it is complemented by my interviews with their parents. I spent three years with various
street vending families and conducted formal sit-down interviews with children and their parents separately. To be candid, gaining their trust was not easy. At first, parents thought I was a health inspector, a police officer, or a social worker; some even thought I was their competition trying to steal their recipes in order to open my own street vending stand. I conducted a total of sixty-six interviews with the youth and their parents. I recruited the children and their families while they worked on the street. After I spent time with one family, moreover, they usually referred me to friends who also sold food on the street with their children.

This snowball method of recruitment was very effective for meeting new families, but it was still difficult to gain their trust after the initial introduction was made. When I first met the families, I told them about my study while I purchased and ate their food. I also told them about my experience working as a young girl, and sometimes that helped gain their trust. One mother told me that she agreed to an interview only because I ate her food. She assured me that a police officer or a health inspector would not have eaten the food she and her daughter sold.
The children I interviewed were between the ages of ten and eighteen. I also interviewed fifteen mothers and three fathers. In addition to interviewing parents and children who work together, I have also included a small comparative sample of five street vending families whose children are not involved in the street vending business.

Most of the time, I spent with families or on my own conducting field observations at two different street vending sites I call La Cumbrita and El Callejón, in Boyle Heights, a small neighborhood in Los Angeles.

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where 95 percent of the population is Latinx. I conducted observations in three different arenas of social life: (1) the work site while children worked alongside their parents or on their own; (2) at various social events; and (3) in their homes. At first, I blended in with the customers and stood along the sidewalk eating food from paper plates or comfortably sat on a folding chair in front of a small television provided by one of the street vendors. Later, I helped the families by running errands to the store. I also cut fruit and assisted customers while the children took bathroom breaks or socialized with their cousins and friends. Some families also street vended outside these two sites. For example, a few families sold their food at local parks, near freeway entrances, and outside churches. I also conducted observations in these locations. I shadowed five families for two months at a time in many social settings.

Because I spent time in these two street vending sites for three years, I kept in touch with the children and their families at different times and
saw little kids turn into young teenagers and some teenagers turn into adults. This gave me opportunities to see how their involvement in the family business shifted and evolved over time. For disclosure, the interview data I present in this book are from the time the interview took place. All of the quotes are presented in English, but I tried to maintain their original tone and voice when possible. The quotes translated from Spanish to English are in their original form in the endnotes of each chapter.

Why Focus on Child Vendors?

I began this study with a personal interest in the subject of children and work. As a young girl, I worked with my parents in both México and the United States. I saw working with my family as something normal and as my responsibility to help my parents. When I lived in México, during my formative years, I worked at a small, family-owned grocery store, or tienda de abarrotes. While I helped my mother run the store as she taught at a local academy, my father worked as a parking attendant in Los Angeles, California. Later, when I turned seventeen, my father unexpectedly passed away from a stroke. My mother, along with my brothers and me, decided to move to the United States due to our financial dependence on my father’s remittances. Ironically, my father earned more as a parking attendant in the United States than my mother did as a teacher in México. Once in the United States, I also worked with my mother temporarily when she cleaned houses before she landed steady employment at a factory, where she worked for almost eighteen years. Aside from working with my mother, I always held other jobs, and sold my own artwork to help cover some of the household costs as well as my own educational expenses.9

Furthermore, when I was a college student at Long Beach City College and later at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), I became interested in topics related to immigrant families. Yet my story was conspicuously absent from the many books assigned in my sociology and Chicana/o studies courses. Some readings, however, did stand out as important correctives to this oversight. Doméstica, by Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, allowed me to see the experiences of women like my mother who worked in informal low-wage work.10 Later, the work by
Marjorie F. Orellana on the role of children of immigrants as language brokers began to highlight the contributions of children in immigrant families as translators. Reading their scholarship made me feel as if I also had a place in academia. I fantasized about the day that I too would also share the story of children who work with la familia just like I did.

Now I have a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Southern California and I teach courses on immigration at Arizona State University in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change. I have spent my educational career studying Latinx families with a specific focus on children and their role in the family, including their economic role. My profession as a university professor also allows me to meet students from diverse socioeconomic classes and racial and ethnic backgrounds; I enjoy learning about their childhood experiences when I teach about children and work. During these lessons, I learn that many of my students have worked when they were young. Some worked as babysitters, tutors, and lifeguards, and some interned with their professional parents. For example, in one of my classes, when I asked my students to share about their work experience growing up, James, a White male student from the Midwest, shared how he worked at his family’s farm and how he now owns his own business and helps provide for his dying mother. Holding back tears, he confided with the class that after his mother was diagnosed with cancer, he took on more responsibilities related to the household expenses. Although this was difficult for him, it was most difficult for his mom because she had been accustomed to being the one who cared for her son and not the other way around. James left class early that day, almost immediately after sharing his experience with the class.

Jordan told us that he worked as a lifeguard when he was younger. Jordan recognized that the connections he had with his coaches helped him land this fun and well-remunerated summer job. Similarly, Kathy was very proud of the work she did at a law firm. She too found this job through a personal recommendation from her father. Yet not all students in my classes had these same types of social networks.

Other students cleaned houses with their parents, did farm work, worked in family-owned businesses, helped maintain manicured lawns with their fathers, and sold merchandise at local swap meets; others, such as the children interviewed for this book, sold food and other
goods on the streets. These were typically the experiences of my Latinx students. One semester, my student César, who is visually impaired, stood up to share his experience working as a little kid. He told us that he grew up selling mops and brooms with his parents. From a young age, he learned how to sell. He is now married, has children of his own, and is furthering his education at Arizona State. As he works toward his degree, he continues to sell mops and brooms to help support his family.

My student Isabel, who had recently graduated high school, told the class that she used to clean houses with her mother prior to moving for college. She told us about a time she bumped into her classmate one day she and her mother were cleaning a house in the nice side of town. Isabel and her mother were each carrying a bucket full of cleaning supplies when Isabel’s classmate dashed out of her house with her friends. It was a beautiful sunny Saturday morning, Isabel remembered. A nice day to enjoy out with her friends, but she had to work with her mother instead. “She didn’t even recognize me,” she murmured. “I mean, it’s great that she didn’t”—Isabel laughed and so did the class—“but I felt so embarrassed,” she continued in a low voice, “to know that I was my classmate’s maid and she didn’t even recognize me.” The class’s laughter quickly came to a stop as people recognized the seriousness in Isabel’s voice.

Later, Isabel shared with me that she was one of just two Latinas in her Advanced Placement history class, and throughout high school she continued helping her mother. She graduated from high school with honors and wants to become a professor one day. Another student, Reina, waited for me after class to tell me that she used to street vend with her mom and was planning on studying law after finishing her bachelor’s degree. I usually hear these types of stories from my Latinx students, many of whom grew up poor. I assume that they feel comfortable with me because I am also Latina, but perhaps it is the fact that I am open about my childhood work experience when I teach on this subject.

These may seem like polar examples of childhood work. To some degree they are. However, when we list on the whiteboard lessons from their work, the lists from these two groups are very similar. Students say that they learn time management skills and the value of the dollar, and some say that work keeps them out of trouble. A major difference comes when I ask students what they do with their earnings. Students in my first category usually worked to have extra spending money,
while the students in the second category usually worked to help with the family household expenses. Another difference is deeply rooted in the nature of the work they do. Often, students in the second category do not define the work they do as “real” work; rather, they see it as helping the family. Others, such as Isabel and Reina, see it as stigmatized work that they seldom chose to talk about in public, especially not in a school setting where they take a subordinate class position among their more affluent classmates.

I highlight these personal classroom observations because they mirror the literature that points to one type of work experience as normative in the United States while the other is not. It is more acceptable when children work to gain experience and earn a little bit of pocket money and less so when they do it to help with the family’s economic survival. In the United States, the association of children and work has been paradoxical since the turn of the twentieth century. Sociologist Viviana Zelizer analyzed the transformation of childhood that took place in the United States between 1870 and 1930. She used the term *useful child* to refer to the nineteenth-century child who actively contributed to the family’s economic survival through labor. She notes the emergence in the twentieth century of the productively “useless” yet emotionally “priceless” child. The dominant view is that school and work are antithetical spheres. The notion of childhood that prevails in most postindustrial societies is that children must be educated, “developed,” and “raised.” You might recall my student James and his mother, and how uncomfortable she felt receiving financial help from her son, even though he was already a young adult. In fact, children’s protected, sacred status defines modernity, an era characteristic of order and structure and a movement away from tradition. As one scholar has observed, “The dissociation of childhood from the performance of valued work is considered a yardstick of modernity.”

However, divergent meanings of childhood also coexist in a given time period and in the same location. Academic researchers confirm this observation. Antonella Invernizzi found that in Andean rural communities in Peru, the “work done by children is much valued and seen as a means of taking an active part in family and community life.” In contrast, the middle classes in the urban regions “see the child’s daily life as being geared exclusively to education and play.” Similar to what
Invernizzi found in Peru, anthropologist Tobias Hecht distinguishes between two ways of experiencing childhood in northeastern Brazil. He refers to children who do not work as having “nurtured childhoods” of protected freedom and play. In contrast, poor children, who are expected to work from an early age and contribute to the production and income of the household, experience “nurturing childhoods.”23 Nurturing childhoods are common in developing nations like Brazil, Peru, and México, but they are supposed to be anomalies in postindustrial societies such as the United States,24 where children are still defined as “emotionally priceless” and a child is expected to have a nurtured childhood.25 Today, the general consensus is that in the United States, children and teens require parental protection and economic support, and if children do work, the normative view is that it should be for their own pocket money or savings and not to help support the family.26 What happens, however, when many of us cannot meet these normative childhood standards?

The reality is that these normative childhood standards have been difficult to uphold for struggling American families as well. History shows us that in times of economic crisis, American children also work with la familia. The Great Depression of 1929 is a quintessential example of this paradox. Sociologist Glen H. Elder Jr. shows that despite the social expectation that American fathers should be the sole breadwinners, extreme unemployment rates during the Great Depression made it difficult for most men to uphold this role. This reality often had repercussions for the rest of the family, as wives and children worked outside the home to help make ends meet. In his book *Children of the Great Depression*, Elder sheds light on how American children juggled school and part-time jobs such as “newspaper carrier, baby sitter, janitorial assistance, store clerk, and delivery agent.”27 The wages for these types of work were low, but the extra earnings helped supplement the family income.28 Since then, some children in the United States have continued to do work outside the home.

There are classic examples everywhere you look. For example, Shirley Temple, Elizabeth Taylor, Drew Barrymore, the Jacksons, and Selena Gomez are iconic celebrities of different generations, but they are also popular examples of child workers. Today, major television networks such as the Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, Sprout, and PBS provide
entertainment not only for children, but almost strictly by children as the main actors, whereas adults merely appear in the periphery of certain shows.\textsuperscript{29}

As a polar opposite, we can also find other not so visible examples of child workers. The literature on the ethnic economy has shed light on the experience of children in businesses owned by ethnic minorities. The majority of these studies have focused on the role of children in Korean and Chinese family-owned businesses in the formal economy, such as restaurants, Laundromats, and liquor stores.\textsuperscript{30} In contrast to Korean and Chinese immigrants that have high rates of business ownership and are hailed as entrepreneurially oriented groups, other immigrant groups, such as Mexicans, exhibit low levels of entrepreneurship in the United States.\textsuperscript{31}

Self-employment has been an important avenue for the economic advancement of immigrant groups such as Cubans and Koreans and has been a key factor in the educational success of the second generation.\textsuperscript{32} Current studies reveal that family-owned businesses can serve as springboards for the children of Mexican immigrants as they have for Koreans and for immigrants in the past—including Italians, Jews, Asian Indians, and Middle Easterners.\textsuperscript{33} However, as sociologist Zulema Valdez points out in her book \textit{The New Entrepreneurs}, it is not at all clear whether ethnic entrepreneurship among disadvantaged Mexican-origin immigrant parents provides a similar prospect of economic mobility and success among their second-generation children.

When compared to the Chinese and Korean children of quintessential ethnic entrepreneurs, the Latinx children in this study are at a disadvantage because their parents are more likely to experience a negative reception within the larger society and a vulnerable social location associated with lower levels of education, undocumented status, low English language proficiency and high poverty rates. Operating under these intersecting disadvantages, many first-generation Latinx immigrants and some of their children have turned to street vending as an economic strategy. The Latinx children in this study are intricately involved in their families’ street vending businesses, performing work on the street that has been deemed inappropriate or dangerous for most children. According to Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht’s study on the use of Los Angeles sidewalks, “children were common participants in sidewalk
activities, but their presence became an indicator of disorder and neglect, which allowed the state to intervene in their care.”34 The common opinion was, and is still today, that the streets are not the proper place for children. However, the children in this study work in these highly visible spaces and are exposed to customers, urban traffic, and government officials, such as the police, health inspectors, and social workers, and they sometimes confront anti-immigrant xenophobia and racism. So, what can we learn from street vending Latinx families?

Mutually Supportive Children and Parents

I invite the reader to understand the children in this book and their family work dynamics beyond static idealized notions of what childhood and families—specifically, immigrant families—should be. This study challenges the dualistic view of children as economically useful or emotionally priceless or as experiencing “nurturing” or “nurtured” childhoods. The childhood period of the children in this book is fluid, situational, and context-based. The children in this book are in the intersection of these two polarized forms of childhood ideals and are mutually protective and supportive. The children’s role in the family shifts depending on gender, age, need within the family, and the needs of children themselves. These families remind us that childhood is socially and culturally constructed and its definition continues to vary not only over time and geographical location, but also within one time and in one geographical location.35

Childhood is not static; it is constantly challenged, renegotiated, and transformed as structural, economic, and familial needs also change. Let us recall my classroom experience once more, where in one time and place, my students shared with each other different types of childhood work experiences. Should I have said to my students that one childhood upbringing was better than the other? Of course not. Rather, this exercise helps us understand how an intersectionality perspective is useful to seeing how different aspects of our identities, such as our race, class, and gender, can take greater or lesser salience in different contexts, situations, activities, relationships, and even stages of our lives.

For the last thirty years, intersectionality theory has helped us understand the life chances of people who are disadvantaged by race, class,
and gender. Before 1980, the experiences of women of color were misrepresented, marginalized, and often ignored in the feminist literature dominated by highly educated White women. Similarly, in studies of race, women of color were just as marginalized since “men of color stood as the universal racial subject.” Intersectionality has also proven useful in the analyses of other systems of domination such as sexuality, immigration status, and racialization of first- and second-generation immigrant children and adolescents.

The children in this book experience compounded disadvantages stemming from their parents’ marginalized social location. First, classic intersection—race, class, and gender—added to unauthorized status, informal enterprise, and the stigma associated with street vending, presents parents with many challenges as they seek to raise a family in the United States. Second, vending children experience their own set of hardships associated with race, class, and gender, in addition to unpaid or low-wage family labor, informal work, stigma, and limited childhood freedom and safety. Last, the experience of children in this study highlights their own agency, resilience, and self-made resources in the context of street vending work in Los Angeles. Street vending children cannot be boxed in as emotionally priceless children as Zelizer once noticed, but their childhood is not defined as “nurturing” as Hecht observed with working-class children in Brazil.

The experience of child street vendors bridges intersectionality theory, social capital theory, and the socialization of childhood and brings to light the hidden resources that are overshadowed by segmented assimilation theory, the leading theory that has been used to understand the experience of post-1965 immigrants and their children.

Segmented assimilation theory builds on classic assimilation theory, which emerged in the early 1940s. Classical assimilation theory, developed by sociologists in the Chicago School, was once seen as forward-thinking because it challenged the racist ideologies in the eugenics movement, which portrayed race as deterministic and biologically fixed. Eurocentric in nature, assimilation theory advanced a progressive idea that European immigrants who were at one point not considered White could become part of the American mainstream. This theory was myopic about the life chances of immigrants who came from non-European countries. Segmented assimilation theory, first
developed by Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, was groundbreaking because it provided a theoretical framework to explain the incorporation experience of immigrants of color, especially those from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{43} Segmented assimilation theory brought a much-needed analysis to the context of reception, such as the U.S. racism against immigrants of color, and the level of co-ethnic ties in the receiving country. Portes and Zhou also highlight the importance of the changing structure of the economy. For example, they contrast the factory and industrial jobs once available for European immigrants, which offered ladders for upward mobility, to the growing service economy, which does not offer a living wage or job security. The assumption is that informal sector jobs are always exploitive. However, a new body of literature has shown how seemingly impoverished jobs can be viable platforms of social mobility.\textsuperscript{44}

Measuring “upward” or “downward” mobility is beyond the scope of this research.\textsuperscript{45} This study shows the processes by which children and parents who work together as street vendors develop strategies that buffer against downward mobility. This research challenges the top-down or parent-to-child acculturation model consistent with normative American beliefs of how children should be socialized. Children are normally thought to be dependent, socialized recipients of “cultural capital” from their parents.\textsuperscript{46} In the immigration literature, as Barrie Thorne and Marjorie Faulstich Orellana have indicated, children are often framed as dependent “luggage,” or something that parents simply bring with them.\textsuperscript{47} Children are not viewed as full social actors and continue to be relegated to separate spheres of family and school that are largely excluded from paid work. This top-down, passive model is also present in segmented assimilation theory, which is problematic because it overlooks the resources that exist in working-class Latinx families, especially those resources that come from children.

This study looks at the role of the family and children in the context of family and work and sheds light on these hidden resources. These hidden resources shine through when we use an intersectionality approach to understand the lives and experiences of child street vendors in Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{48} Rather than framing the work that child street vendors are doing as an indicator of deficiency or pathology, though, my analysis reveals
that these young ethnic entrepreneurs play a key role in their families’ economic integration into the United States. Their work enables them to help provide food, clothes, and shelter to all of their family members, while it also enables them to pay for their own school supplies and in some cases their tuition-based, private Catholic education.

My goal is to highlight the agency of the children and parents who made this book possible by sharing their life stories with me at the micro level, while also zooming out to see how the narratives of these street vending families fit into a larger narrative about immigration, incorporation, and race relations in the United States. Instead of asking, Why do these families choose to street vend?, I ask the following questions: (1) What social conditions did these families encounter in the United States that enabled or constrained them to do so? (2) What role do children play in the street vending family business? (3) Does children’s work in the family alter parent-child relations in the household? (4) How do immigrant families navigate integration into the United States when their work places them so publicly and visibly in opposition to the country’s laws and their social expectations?

We can think that street vending and child labor are anachronistic and that those are economic strategies that were supposed to disappear with modernization. However, their existence points to social problems that have systematically failed these immigrant families. The fact that a preindustrial form of economic family organization has emerged in our postindustrial Los Angeles makes this study so interesting. School, work, and play are not antithetical spheres for working-class children from México and Central America whose parents immigrated in the late 1980s and early 1990s and have remained undocumented and in the shadows of the U.S. economy. The children in this book must take an active role in family reproduction activities because their own labor contributions are what make it possible for their families to survive the structural economic and employment barriers they face in the lower sector of the economy.

The children interviewed for this book are a small sample of the 5.1 million children under age eighteen—both U.S. citizens and noncitizens—who are growing up with at least one undocumented parent. They are the Latinx youth who are growing up in households where parents have less or no access to jobs that are safe, unionized, and offering a living
wage. The Mexican-origin workforce was once overrepresented in agricultural work, but today it is predominately an urban population. In this urban context, a great number of Latinxs are highly concentrated in occupations such as construction laborers, cement masons, roofers, dishwashers, painters, janitors, gardeners, and sewing operators. Latinas work as packagers, graders and sorters of agricultural products, maids, housekeeping cleaners, and sewing machine operators. For these reasons, it seems unfathomable that even though Latinx people constitute a significant portion of the U.S. labor force, they are also a group with a high unemployment rate. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Latinx unemployment rate in 2010 was 12.8 percent, falling to 5.8 percent in 2016. Nonetheless, Latinx unemployment remains above its pre-recession minimum of 5.0 percent of 2006.

Many new immigrants from México and Central America are relegated to working in the informal sector of the economy or in low-wage jobs because they are undocumented, educationally disadvantaged, do not speak English, and lack the skills needed to find employment in the formal sector. Los Angeles Times reporter Hector Becerra notes, “In the hierarchy of immigrant occupations, street vending is near the bottom. It is for those who can’t find work at a factory or in construction or who think that maybe they’ll do better working for themselves.” Increasingly, more undocumented immigrants are turning to street vending. According to a 2016 report, there are over fifty thousand street vendors in the Los Angeles area—a number that grew exponentially since 1990, when the street vending population was estimated at six thousand.

Roadmap of the Book

Chapter 1, “If I Don’t Help Them, Who Will?: The Working Life,” provides the readers with a clear sense of what is physically involved in this line of work for children and parents. In this chapter, I describe what children do on a typical day, what kinds of jobs children do, how old they are when they start working, and how these different tasks are initiated. I identified three different work patterns for working children: (1) vacation work, (2) weekends only, and (3) school nights and weekends. Some children of street vendors also opt out of street vending altogether. In this chapter, we see that children are nurtured by their
parents and also nurture their parents. Children’s voices and desires for material goods, combined with the structural circumstances that push the families to street vend, inform the ongoing sociological debate on structure and agency through the children’s perspective.

Chapter 2, “Street Vending in Los Angeles: A Cultural Economic Innovation,” situates the study historically in the context of U.S. and Mexican migration and traces the formation of the street vending economy in urban centers in México and in U.S. cities such as Los Angeles and New York. This chapter demonstrates that street vending across the borders is linked to macro structural forces and is not solely derivative of a Latinx cultural practice. This chapter also highlights the historical precedent of street vending in the United States, as opposed to portraying the work as a direct cultural transplant from Latin America. The Latinx street vendors in Los Angeles immigrated to a society where street vending had been an economic strategy since the early nineteenth century. In New York, ethnic groups such as Jews, Italians, and Greeks dominated street vending, and in Los Angeles, Chinese men sold vegetables on the streets. Vendors in the nineteenth century in New York and Los Angeles also experienced great opposition from community members, businessmen, and government. They also experienced discrimination based on their economic activity, ethnicity, and immigration status. This chapter also notes that as a result of political turmoil, organized collective action, and the rise of a foodie culture based on “authenticity,” attitudes toward street vendors are becoming more sympathetic and respectful, leading to the decriminalization of street vending across the state of California.

Chapter 3, “Working Side by Side: Intergenerational Family Dynamics,” uncovers the parent-child relations that result when children work alongside their disadvantaged immigrant parents as street vendors, and the ways children understand their social location and that of their parents in this context. This chapter challenges segmented assimilation theory by looking at parent-child work relations. Unlike the parents in this study, all of the children I interviewed speak English and are familiar with American culture and technology, and the majority of the children are also U.S. citizens. These are resources unique to the children and I call these American generational resources (AGR). I argue that children in street vending families share power in the household because they contribute to their families’ income, and they are involved in business
negotiations and decision-making processes. These children and youth speak English and enjoy legal status while most of their parents remain undocumented and are Spanish monolinguals. Segmented assimilation theory contends that this power imbalance in favor of the children could result in dissonant acculturation. Contrary to what segmented assimilation theory would predict, parents’ authority over their children is not diminished as a result of children’s faster acculturation. Rather, parents who work with their children have more control over them because they spend more time with them. In addition, children’s AGRs are valued resources by their parents and are frequently useful for the family street vending business.

Chapter 4, “Making a Living Together: Communal Family Obligation Code and Economic Empathy,” shows the resiliency that results when children experience their parents’ position of oppression, which helps prevent an authority shift in favor of the children. Consequently, the children respect their parents’ work efforts and report feeling closer to their parents. As a result of working together, children become keenly aware of the financial household and street vending obligations. I call this economic empathy and argue that this level of empathy is born when families develop a communal family obligation code. This chapter covers different forms of tensions between children and their parents and how children engage in family bartering with their parents. These street vending children are conflicted between their responsibility to help their parents and their desire to enjoy a “normal” childhood. Overall, though, I saw that economic empathy can serve to buffer against dissonant acculturation.

Chapter 5, “I Get Mad and I Tell Them, “Guys Could Clean Too!”” underlines how gender shapes the way this study’s girls and boys experience this occupation and how the children and the families create gendered expectations as well as strategies for protection. While both boys and girls work alongside their parents on the street, my fieldwork revealed that the daughters of Mexican and Central American street vendors in Los Angeles are more active in street vending with the family than the sons. How do we explain this paradox? A gendered analysis helps explain why girls are compelled into street vending, while boys are allowed to withdraw or minimize their participation. This chapter extends the feminist literature on intersectionality by exploring the world
of Latinx teenage street vendors. The analysis in this chapter takes into account gendered expectations not only resulting from the familiar intersecting relations of race, class, and gender, but also as a consequence of age as well as of the inequality of nations that gives rise to particular patterns of international labor migration.

Chapter 6, “Street Violence: ‘I Don’t Put Up a Fight Anymore,’” turns a familiar story of gendered labor on its head. This chapter adds greater complexity to our notions of male-centered spaces. In this context, women challenge gendered expectations and find the street to be a space of empowerment. The freedom of male privilege leaves men/boys more vulnerable to street violence while vending on the streets of Los Angeles. The presence of women of all ages serves to protect men against violence from other men. As a consequence, families develop gendered strategies to protect sons, which differ from the strategies to protect daughters. The findings challenge the belief that the street is more dangerous for females and more appropriate for males.

Chapter 7, “‘My Parents Want Me to Be Something in Life, Like a Lawyer or a Hero,’” shows that all of the parents in this study want their children to go to school and become professionals. The parents use street vending work as a scaring mechanism and motivation to push their children to excel in school as elements of immigrant bargaining. None of the youth want to be street vendors for the rest of their lives. They talked about their educational aspirations in a social justice framework, explaining that their academic goals were motivated by their street vending experience and the inequalities they and their parents experience on the street. Children and parents alike said that work provided valuable lessons and skills that could be used in school, and I observed how work allowed them to create social networks that increased their social capital. I show how their educational and occupational trajectory is shaped by a collectivist immigrant bargain framework. Street vending also provides valuable material and educational resources for students, most of which remain invisible.

The book’s conclusion, “‘So, Are You Saying Children Should Work?,’” tackles an important and controversial question rooted in our normative and privileged notions of childhood life. Should children work to help support the family? In answering this question, the conclusion shows how the social construction of childhood defined as a period of freedom
and play has been cemented in the minds of many people for almost a century. Even the families in this book struggled to see their family work arrangement as “normal” and fully acceptable by others. This chapter returns to the initial queries about childhood, family work relations, intergenerational family dynamics, and ethnic entrepreneurship, and asks more questions for future research, keeping as a core analysis the role of children as economic contributors in the family beyond the street vending occupation. *Kids at Work*, in a way, also tells the story of many more first-generation college students of diverse racial backgrounds who did not have a “normal” childhood because they too had to work to help the family.

Next, we will see, from the children’s point of view how they decided to work with *la familia*. 