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Entrepreneurship Under Threat: Latinx Vendors in California's Flea Markets

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All names are pseudonyms.

Introduction:

Mari Duarte wakes up before sunrise, packs her van with children's toys and beauty accessories, and begins her 5-hour drive to a Northern California flea market. For over a decade, Mari has traveled across cities, often sleeping in her van to make ends meet.

She separates her personal and business income, reinvests every dollar, and stays ahead of consumer trends.

Yet despite her business experience, Mari remains outside the reach of state support, without access to insurance, loans, or relief.

Mari's experience echoes Latinx flea market entrepreneurs across California.

¹ Every summer, the Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship Program sends a cohort of ~30 Cal students to Sacramento for an eight-week public service internship. In 2025, the cohort included 11 Diversity & Entrepreneurship Fellows, who focused their research on topics related to POC, immigrant, and/or women-owned businesses.

California, the state with a [large Latinx population](#)², is home to thousands of Latinx entrepreneurs who wake before sunrise, pack their vans with merchandise, drive across counties, and set up shop in the early morning, all without labor protections, insurance, or formal business support. According to the American Immigrant Council, “We know that [immigrants are far more likely](#) than U.S.-born Americans to start their own business.”³

Yet their stories remain largely invisible in public discourse and academic research.

I spoke with Mari during a particularly challenging summer. She shared how [economic uncertainty and intensified immigration enforcement](#)⁴ have shaken her business.

Like many vendors, she navigates not just the business competition but also the threat of ICE raids and the toll of anti-immigrant rhetoric.

When Mari first arrived in California 15 years ago, she didn’t even know what a flea market was. In Mexico, she ran a successful jewelry business, but in the United States, she had to start over. Through friends, she discovered the cultural and economic significance of these markets.

They became her lifeline.

Now, she and other vendors cross counties to sell trending products, build informal support networks, and push through long schedules, often seven days a week.

They endure physical and emotional exhaustion, only to be dismissed as “informal.”

As Mari Duarte put it:

“Let people know about all of us out here in the flea market... we leave our plates behind just to work. We don’t eat sitting down, we don’t even really eat, just standing there with a taco in hand.”

Her story is shared amongst other vendors.

² Public Policy Institute of California. (2024). *California’s population*. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-population/> Accessed 30 July 2024.

³ American Immigration Council. *Fortune 500 2024 Report: Immigrant Entrepreneurs Create Jobs Across the United States*. Accessed 9 July 2024, <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/press-release/fortune-500-2024-report-immigrant-entrepreneurs-create-jobs-across-united-states/> Accessed 14 July 2025.

⁴ National Immigration Forum. (2025). *The first 100 days of the second Trump administration: Key immigration-related actions and developments*. <https://immigrationforum.org/article/the-first-100-days-of-the-second-trump-administration-key-immigration-related-actions-and-developments/> Accessed 30 July 2024.

Like her, many vendors work under busy schedules, often seven days a week, and build informal support networks to survive, enduring physical and emotional exhaustion.

Mari and I spoke in July 2025, a challenging month; like many of her colleagues, she expressed a deep concern about the impact of increased immigration enforcement on her business, particularly under the current Trump administration.⁵

The Negative Impacts on Business:

Mari described how increased immigration enforcement has created a climate of fear for both vendors and customers, leading to fewer people attending flea markets and resulting in drops in sales.

Flea Market sellers have experienced a significant decline in sales due to increased immigration enforcement. She describes how these raids have created a climate of fear among vendors and customers, leading to fewer people attending the markets and resulting in a substantial drop in sales.

While her business is still operating, it only brings in enough to cover basic expenses and survive, rather than allowing her to save or grow.

She notes that even experienced vendors like herself are struggling, and those with less business knowledge are having an even harder time.

Some of her colleagues are now borrowing money just to pay for essentials, and the overall atmosphere among sellers is one of worry and frustration because:

“It is not working like it did before”

She feels that, despite all her hard work and careful management, external forces like these raids and changing government policies can suddenly destroy everything she has built.

Conclusion:

Latin entrepreneurs in California’s flea markets are fighting to survive. Immigration enforcement has scared away customers, decreased sales, and left vendors feeling vulnerable and unsupported.

Despite these struggles, Latin entrepreneurs remain hopeful that these hard times will pass and their efforts will bear fruit once again. With the current immigrant landscape, recruiting participants for this study was particularly difficult.

⁵ Rodríguez, Olga R. “California Immigration Raid at Farm Prompts Fear in Community.” *AP News*, 14 June 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/california-farm-immigration-raid-d58bb572cd1638c2c4b8d3ef26c2b430> . Accessed 14 July 2025.

Luisa notes the emotional toll these past few months have taken on her business, saying that these problems are not due to personal failings, but instead to larger issues that make it impossible to feel secure or plan for the future.

Ultimately, she feels vulnerable and unsupported, emphasizing that the challenges she and other vendors face are the result of systemic problems beyond their control.

These problems are not personal failings but the result of policy decisions, enforcement actions, and a lack of state support that make it impossible for these entrepreneurs to succeed.