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# Una mujer y su carrita: The Face of Chicago's Ban on Food Carts

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[Claudia Perez](#) is 62 years old. She was born in Mexico, but came to the United States in 1995.

Claudia has three children - two daughters and a son - ranging from age 18 to 23. Since 2003, she has supported her family by owning and operating a food cart in Little Village, a primarily Latino neighborhood on Chicago's west side. Her business has even enabled her to put one of her daughters through college.

Starting most mornings at 4 a.m., Claudia sells tamales, rice pudding and Mexican hot chocolate. But she's up much earlier than that preparing her daily fare. Her day typically isn't over until 10 or 11 p.m.

Claudia has been selling food out of her cart for 11 years. Many of her customers are factory and construction workers who stop by on their way to work to pick up a tamale. These workers often don't have access to a kitchen or affordable lunch options on the job, and Claudia's food provides much-needed sustenance.

There's just one major problem: Claudia's thriving business is illegal.

In [Chicago](#), it is against the law to sell prepared food out of a cart.

Unlike almost every other major city in the country, more than 1,500 mobile vendors in Chicago are incredibly limited in what they can sell; in fact, they can only offer whole, uncut fruit or frozen desserts.

These rules have forced low-income Chicagoans, primarily immigrants like Claudia on the city's south and west sides, into a shadow market, where they work to meet high customer demand and make a living in constant fear of police harassment and hefty fines.

But street vending should be a boon for the city, creating jobs and providing access to good food.

"This is the most affordable, simple business in the food industry," said Beth Kregor, director of the Institute for Justice's Clinic on Entrepreneurship at the University of Chicago Law School. "Street vending is also an important way for these small businesses to reach neighborhoods that don't have restaurants and grocery stores on every corner."

Kregor and the Clinic on Entrepreneurship are working with many vendors, as well as the [Asociación Vendedores Ambulantes](#), in the hope of [convincing City Council](#) to adopt a new ordinance that would make it legal for vendors to sell in Chicago.

Their [proposal](#), sponsored by Alderman Roberto Maldonado, would expand the city's existing frozen desserts ordinance to include prepared food carts, and would require vendors to prepare food in a city-licensed kitchen. Vendors would be able to acquire a license from the city for \$100.

"For these vendors, being able to sell legally on the streets of Chicago would mean the world to them," said Vicky Lugo, vice president of Asociación Vendedores Ambulantes. "They do this because they have to provide for their families. Many of them have no other option - either they're single parents, senior citizens ... some of them are handicapped."

If nothing changes, these vendors will continue to operate in fear. They could be stripped of their livelihoods at any moment at the whim of the police and City Hall.

When Claudia came here from Mexico, she did so because she believed her life would be better in the U.S. She had faith in the story of the "American dream" and her chance at capturing it. But Claudia has been consistently harassed and threatened by the police. She has been arrested twice. Her children have been arrested too, when they were teenagers helping out with the tamale business. Officials have thrown away her food, calling it garbage.

"I said, 'How can you call food garbage?' I cried hard," Claudia said.

But Claudia's "garbage" is so popular that at one point she had five carts open, selling food around the neighborhood.

"I'll go ahead, I'll fight and thank God that it is possible to achieve everything by working, because we came to do nothing else," Claudia said. "We are in our own work, we try to get ahead, doing what we knew how to do in Mexico. That's why we came here, to demonstrate to people that we can get ahead, not to take away jobs, not to steal; no, we come to work honestly."

Claudia's favorite part of her life in Chicago is her work. She shouldn't have to be afraid to make a living.

"At a time when we have so much violence to deal with, it is perplexing that police are spending time arresting these vendors who are trying to make an honest living and sell good food," Kregor said. "The vendors are traumatized, but they get back out there because this is how they know to earn money to feed their families. They're willing to work in kitchens, they're willing to get licensed by the city, they're willing to take food-safety classes. They are willing to show the city they will do whatever it takes."

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