

***Day Laborers in Southern California:***  
***Preliminary Findings from the Day Labor Survey***

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### **Acknowledgements and Biography**

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## **Executive Summary**

This report examines data from the Day Labor Survey (DLS). It presents descriptive data on a host of indicators that allow us to empirically assess day laborers and their work for the first time. The data presented are preliminary in the sense that they have not been analyzed more thoroughly and comprise only one part of the larger Day Labor Project. In addition, most of the findings are purposefully presented in this report descriptively. The primary objective of this report is to present original findings about a highly visible yet relatively unknown (at least in the social scientific sense) labor market phenomenon in Los Angeles and elsewhere.

In February and March 1999 we used several novel research methods to randomly survey 481 day laborers at 87 different sites throughout Los Angeles and Orange counties. We utilized standard sampling techniques that allow us to generalize our findings to the overall day labor population in Los Angeles and Orange counties. Each survey was done face-to-face (e.g., interviewer and interviewee), lasted about one hour, was undertaken in Spanish, and involved mostly close-ended questions. A modest (\$25) incentive was offered to each participant for their time. A thorough search of the existing literature leads us to believe that this study breaks new methodological ground in survey development, labor studies, and immigration research.

The report presents findings in five broad areas:

1. Demographic Characteristics
2. Day Labor Earnings
3. Day Labor Work
4. Employers of Day Laborers
5. Other Characteristics

## **Findings**

- Day laborers are overwhelmingly Latino (predominantly from Mexico), young, and are either recent (less than one year) arrivals in the United States or have been in this country for a long period of time (10+ years). In only one instance did we encounter a female day laborer. She did not fall into our sample.
- About half of day laborers are single. However, an almost equal number have a spouse or other family member(s) that they support.
- While we have no firm data at this stage of the study, we believe that a significant proportion of day laborers are without legal documents. Similarly, a significant proportion of day laborers have work permits, resident alien status, or are in a “legal limbo” with regards to their legal status in the United States.
- Day laborers are not uneducated. Their educational attainment ranges from nothing to college plus, with the mean number of years in school hovering around seven. More than a third have over nine years of formal schooling.

- Day labor work is difficult and doesn't pay well. However, the average hourly wage for day labor work is about two dollars more than the federal minimum wage.
- Day labor work is not necessarily a stepping stone to employment in a regular (i.e., 9-5) job. One in four day laborers have been working in this market for over six years, with about five percent of all day laborers having done so for over ten years. Over forty percent have been day laborers for less than one year.
- Day labor work is a full time endeavor. Ninety percent of all day laborers work in this market full time; the other ten percent hold a part time job that on average occupies about 20 hours of their workweek (Monday – Sunday).
- Reasons cited for not working in the formal labor market are varied. About two in five day laborers cited lack of documents as their primary reason. Other factors include lack of English proficiency, poor labor market conditions, discrimination, and lack of transportation.
- Homeowners (private individuals) and subcontractors are the primary employers of day laborers. Each accounts for more than 40 percent of day labor employment opportunities.
- Day laborers are routinely abused at the work place. About half of all day laborers report at least one instance of non-payment of wages. Other types of employer abuses include paying less than the agreed upon amount, bad checks (NSF) in the form of payment, no breaks or water at the work site, robbery, and threats.
- Unlike other industrialized countries (i.e., Japan) the overwhelming majority (94%) of day laborers are not homeless.
- Average monthly wages vary for day laborers depending on seasonal periods and demand. During a good month, day laborers on average earn a little over \$1,000. During a bad month, they earn on average about \$350.
- Despite earning low wages, day laborers assist family members or friends in their country-of-origin in a significant way. The average number and amount of remittances sent by a day laborer last year (1998) was seven and \$2,630 respectively.
- While a significant number of day laborers do not have legal documents, a large percentage (40%) believe they are eligible for legal residency requirements.

This report presents preliminary findings culled from the Day Labor Survey (DLS). The DLS was developed and implemented by a group of UCLA researchers under the direction of Dr. Abel Valenzuela Jr., an assistant professor of Chicano Studies and Urban Planning at UCLA. The researchers worked closely with CHIRLA (Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles) in developing and implementing the survey throughout the Los Angeles metropolitan area, including Orange County. The DLS is one of four components of the Day Labor Project, a groundbreaking, multi-method study that seeks to understand how workers<sup>1</sup> participate in and acquire access to jobs in a public setting (e.g., street corners). This study, which we believe to be the first comprehensive scientific study of day laborers in the United States, also aims to better understand how the day labor market is organized and functions on a day-to-day basis. The data collected from this project will be used to formulate programs and policies to better address many of the complex issues surrounding immigration and work. The other components of the Day Labor Project, currently underway, include:

- In-depth interviews with day laborers
- In-depth interviews with employers
- Case studies of hiring sites

As the other components of the Day Labor Project are completed, future reports presenting our findings and discussion will be forthcoming. The data presented here are purposefully descriptive. Future reports will delve more deeply into analysis, causal relationships, and public policy implications.

The report is organized as follows: I first present some background information on day labor work in general. I then describe the procedures for collecting the data on which this report is based, including a brief discussion of our sampling frame, site selection, and interviewing techniques. I then present findings on several key topics with a brief discussion of each. I conclude the report with a brief discussion of the findings and the future directions of this research project.

## **BACKGROUND**

An early morning drive through almost any community in Los Angeles will usually provide a glimpse of two or three street corners, empty lots, or home improvement stores filled with groups of men standing, sipping coffee and patiently waiting. If you were to observe this group of men more closely, you would notice that most are wearing work clothes for performing often difficult and dirty manual labor, both skilled and unskilled. You would probably also notice that most were speaking Spanish and appeared to be Latino. Every morning at more than eighty seven sites throughout Los Angeles and Orange counties, hundreds of workers and their employers converge at empty lots, busy intersections, home improvement stores, and at sites sanctioned and sponsored by local cities and community-based organizations to exchange labor for individually negotiated wages.

The day labor market in Southern California acts as an extremely effective device for bringing together prospective employers and seekers of work. For many workers, day labor is a chance to gain a foothold in the urban economy. For others, it is a first job in the United States,

or a last chance at securing some type of employment. For still others, it represents an opportunity to earn some income when temporarily laid off from a job in the formal economy, a viable alternative to wage employment in a formal economy that pays poorly and requires legal documentation. As a result of these and other factors, many workers, including non-immigrants and U.S. citizens, and a host of different employers rely on this type of labor market.

Day labor sites and the workers they attract are not limited to the Los Angeles area. Indeed, this type of labor has existed for centuries throughout the world. In fifth-century Athens, for example, a special part of the agora was set aside specifically as a place for unemployed men to congregate and participate in the day labor transaction (Glotz, 1965). In his classic book *Open Markets*, Vernon Mund (1948) documents that construction workers in London in 1827 stood at the market place with the intention of procuring employment. According to his research, workers would assemble at five or six in the morning with their appropriate working tools and solicit work, much like what happens at day labor sites of today. The Roma in Hungary are well known for their temporary work, much of which is recruited through day labor sites in different parts of Budapest and throughout Hungary. Polish workers seeking employment in Germany's highly regulated labor market solicit temporary work at sites close to the border with Poland or in the high growth construction market in Berlin. Finally, Mexican agricultural workers have a long history of involvement with temporary day work, chiefly very small landholders and landless peasants who work on a daily or seasonal basis (Vanackere, 1988).

In the United States, temporary day workers have been chronicled since 1834. Martinez (1972) notes in his work on New York City that a "place was set aside on city streets where those seeking work could meet with those who wanted workers." This exchange worked for both men and women, with employment for women (primarily African American) concentrated in the domestic labor market sector. In California, agricultural work has historically been the principal form of day labor. Traditionally, agricultural workers were drawn from urban centers, including areas known as "skid row" or "wino row" (Harrington, 1962). As urban centers grew and agricultural work became less appealing and less accessible, skilled and unskilled urban workers became more common and gathering sites proliferated. Camarillo (1979) documents that in Santa Barbara in the years before the 1920s, "a ready pool of Mexican surplus labor was always available to any contractor who merely went to the vicinity of lower State Street and Haley. Here the informal labor depot – an area where unemployed Mexicanos desirous of work assembled – provided the various contractors with all the labor they needed at low wages." Further attesting to this historical growth of temporary urban day workers, Romo (1975) documents that labor recruiters would often gather at the center of downtown Los Angeles near the plaza to hire day laborers between 1910 and 1914. He argues that a concentration of Mexican businesses, the Catholic Church, and inexpensive boarding houses in what was then known as "Sonoratown" attracted Mexican immigrants to this part of town in search of temporary work.

Day labor markets function differently in other parts of the United States and elsewhere in the world. For example, within the greater Los Angeles and Orange metropolitan area, worker characteristics (e.g., national origin, nativity, citizenship status, and other human capital characteristics), site location, hiring procedures and other forms of day labor activities and norms can vary widely from site to site.



Why do so many workers, so many sites, and so many employers exist? Certainly, the abundant supply of inexpensive and hard-working workers plays an important role in the resurgence of this unique labor market. But this simple supply and demand formulae does not adequately explain why this market has grown so rapidly, why immigrant Latino workers predominantly undertake this type of employment, and why such a robust and expanding economy does not absorb this type of labor in formal markets. These and other questions drive the Day Labor Survey.

## **DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES**

Any scientific study of day laborers, a highly mobile, highly visible, yet largely unknown population requires creative research approaches. In addition, other unique factors come into play when attempting to study mostly Spanish-speaking men attempting, seemingly haphazardly, to secure employment for the day or week in an open and public space. As a result, this study forges new methodological ground in survey development, labor studies, and immigration research.

Conversations with most *Angelinos* regarding immigration and/or temporary workers will invariably lead to a discussion of day laborers. In anecdotal discussions of my work, I've yet to meet someone from Los Angeles or Orange County who has not seen or heard of day laborers who congregate at street corners or home improvement stores to hire themselves out for work. *Jornaleros* have become ubiquitous, found in almost every municipality in the Los Angeles and Orange County metropolitan area.

Despite their ubiquity, day laborers are not a population that is easily defined. This in turn makes them a difficult population to research.

- Day labor work is not an easily defined occupational category. It does not exist in the Standard Occupational Classifications (SOC) or the Standard Industrial Classifications (SIC) used by the United States Bureau of the Census and other government agencies that monitor labor statistics, such as the Department of Labor.
- Day laborers are employed by many different employers for a variety of jobs ranging in length from several hours to several weeks. As a result, the status of a worker in the day labor market constantly fluctuates from looking for work (as a day laborer) to working in the formal or informal market (employed). This means that hiring sites, depending on the season, the current demand for day labor work, and the time of day may not provide the most accurate count of day laborers.
- Hiring sites, while quite visible to most, are nevertheless difficult to keep track of in their totality. New sites emerge, old sites disappear, and some sites are difficult to find. Any attempt at calculating a total population of day laborers (based on a total count of hiring sites) would at the very least require a total or a close approximation of the total number of hiring sites in a given region.

- Day labor may be a temporary occupation. Some day laborers may be doing this type of work as a temporary holdover from a layoff or firing. Alternatively, workers in this market may be holding part or full-time employment in the formal (i.e., 9-5 market) labor market and undertaking day labor work as a supplement to their wages. On the other hand, *jornaleros* may be using day labor work as a stepping stone to regular employment in the formal labor market. The point is that at any given time, who is and who is not a day laborer is fluid.

These four methodological challenges pose serious obstacles to any scientific study of this population. To address these issues, we decided to identify as many day labor sites as possible, develop a random sampling frame, and employ a screening mechanism that would allow us to identify day laborers. Site identification proved to be quite fruitful; we were able to identify at least ninety percent, if not more, of all known sites in Los Angeles County and to a lesser extent, Orange County. Even though we did not survey at all of the known sites<sup>2</sup>, we are statistically confident that our results are representative of all day laborers in the Los Angeles and Orange County metropolitan area.

### ***Site Identification***

Several procedures were employed to identify day labor sites. The first method was undertaken through a “referral” system that in many ways resembles snowball sampling, or rather snowball identification. We approached day laborers at different sites and asked them where else they go to hire themselves out and if they knew of other sites. We then visited the newly identified sites and asked the workers at those sites the same question. Detailed field notes including total counts of day laborers, time of day, surrounding stores, foot and automobile traffic, and labor exchanges that we witnessed were recorded. In this way, we identified close to sixty-five sites throughout Los Angeles and Orange County.

Two other site identification methods were used that increased our site total from sixty-five to ninety-seven. The first sixty-five sites were charted on a large wall map of Los Angeles and Orange County. By visualizing gaps (large geographic areas) where day labor sites had not been identified, we were able to map possible areas where sites logically might be expected to exist. After identifying several large areas on our wall map, we drove through several communities in the early morning looking for day laborers. To our great satisfaction, we were able to identify another ten or so sites. Meticulous field notes at each of these new sites were once again taken. Finally, we identified all Home Base, Home Depot, and other types of hardware/home improvement/painting stores where day laborers might likely gather. We then verified a day labor presence or absence by visiting each of these potential sites. In this fashion we were able to identify about another dozen sites bringing to ninety-seven our total count of known day labor sites in Los Angeles and Orange County. Almost all of these sites were revisited two months later to verify total counts (which would later be utilized in our sampling framework) and to identify possible areas from which to stage our survey.

### ***Categories of Day Labor Sites***

In examining the ninety-seven day labor sites, three basic categories of sites emerged. The first type I call **Connected** which represents those sites “connected” to some specific industry such as painting (Dunn Edwards, Standard Brands), landscaping or gardening (nurseries), moving (U-haul), and home improvement (Home Base, Home Depot). The second type of site that I have identified I call, for lack of a better term, **Un-connected**. These sites seemingly do not have any connection to a specific industry but may very well exist for other reasons such as foot or vehicular traffic, police cooperation, or historical reasons (i.e., site that has existed for many years). Finally, there is a third category of sites I designate as **Regulated**. Regulated sites are those that are formal hiring sites either controlled by a city (e.g., North Hollywood, Los Angeles) or a community-based organization.

The respondents to the survey on which this study is based were found at the following site types in Los Angeles and Orange County.

**Table 1 Day Labor Sites**

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<u>Day Labor Site Types</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>
Connected	45	261
Un-connected	34	150
Regulated	8	71
Total n	87	481

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Valenzuela, Day Labor Project 1999.

In Los Angeles and Orange counties, regulated (hiring) sites vary widely. They include sites that offer only partial shelter to sites that have a broader mission such as training and educating day laborers in a host of skills (e.g., English, citizenship, health) and labor market issues (e.g., rights, claims, occupational safety). Most regulated hiring sites have been established by the City of Los Angeles, Home Depot (One-Stop Deployment), municipalities within Los Angeles or Orange County (i.e., Brea), and contracted to community based organizations (CBOs) such as the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) and *Instituto de Educacion Popular del Sur de California* (IDEPSCA – Institute of Popular Education of Southern California).

### ***Sampling Framework***

The Day Labor Survey adapted conventional survey sampling techniques, and supports statistical generalizations regarding:

- Day laborers found at the 87 sites on a typical day.
- Day laborers found at all sites in Los Angeles/Orange counties on a typical day.
- Persons in Los Angeles/Orange counties who seek work as day laborers.

Utilizing the data (i.e., field notes, counts of day laborers) from our site identification research carried out during the summer of 1998, we were able to establish “selection” counts for each site. Selection counts (a predetermined set of numbers) were based on the total number of

workers identified at each site prior to the survey conducted in February and March of 1999. Upon arrival at a given site at 7 a.m. a count of all workers was taken. The count was continued until 10 a.m. and included laborers who arrived after the initial count had been made. For consistency and comparability purposes, the total count of day laborers at each site was always undertaken between seven and ten in the morning. Included in the count was a general description of each worker (usually based on physical features and/or clothing attire). After all the workers had been counted<sup>3</sup>, the selection count was administered and potential survey participants identified. Each worker who fell within the selection count (a random number) was then approached and asked to participate in the survey.

A total of 481 surveys were completed. All but 10 surveys were administered in Spanish; each survey was done face-to-face with an interviewer and a respondent. The survey was undertaken during a continuous six-week period (February 2 – March 16, 1999) in which no days were missed due to inclement weather or for other reasons. During this time period, we did not survey on Sundays. Our refusal rate (day laborers unwilling to participate in the survey) was very low (.06) particularly in light of what most survey experts regard as a difficult population to approach and convince to participate in a major research study. This rate is useful only in measuring how well the interviewers performed and/or whether the nature of the survey was off-putting to potential respondents. Each interview included more than 250 questions including charts, extremely detailed questions, and skip patterns (i.e., questions asked only if the respondent had a specific trait or answered another question in a specific way) and took an average of 71 minutes to complete.

### *Interviewing Day Laborers*

Approaching *jornaleros* in a public setting as they attempt to secure a day's labor is not easy. Day laborers, in general, are suspicious people. One becomes weary of outsiders after experiencing many instances of employer abuse, police harassment, merchant and public complaints, and other travails suffered from seeking employment in this manner. In addition, most of these men are immigrants. Being an immigrant in any context is difficult. In California, being an immigrant, especially in recent years, is strenuous, political, and frightening. As a result, convincing day laborers to participate in a UCLA study proved challenging.

As a result, we employed some unique and some standard research methods. First, through the assistance of CHIRLA we hired a group of current and former *jornaleros* to be part of our interviewer team. Each of these men (about a dozen) was put through a rigorous 3-day survey-training program, including subsequent reviews throughout the survey. They were taught basic interview techniques including how to follow skip patterns carefully, how not to lead a respondent, and how to properly administer a complex survey with many detailed questions. They, together with a group of students (graduate and undergraduate) and non-students (who also attended the rigorous survey training sessions) administered all 481 surveys over a six-week period.

To convince day laborers that our study was legitimate, worthwhile, and not a ruse for some government agency trying to round them up for some other purpose, we developed a process that we called "reconnaissance" field work. We arrived at a site (unfortunately in a

white official “UCLA” van) at or before 7 a.m., parked nearby, and then approached groups of day laborers. At the same time, a “counter” (usually one person who also served as a site leader/trouble shooter) would begin doing her or his job of counting all the workers at the site. The reconnaissance team would pass out flyers in Spanish which explained our presence at the site, the objective of our visit (i.e., to recruit respondents for our survey), and that the selection procedure to participate in the survey was undertaken through a random process. We also explained verbally the objectives of the study, the fact that we were from UCLA (not the INS), and that their participation was purely voluntary and that if they were selected and chose to participate, their responses would remain confidential. That is, there could be no way that a completed survey could be traced back to them at some future time.

Finally, because the possibility of missing work for the day as a result of partaking in our survey was real, we offered an incentive of \$25 for each worker’s participation. Of course, we also hoped that the modest monetary incentive would compel reluctant day laborers to participate in our study. We estimated that \$25 for a little more than an hour of their time, even if they didn’t get hired for the day, was a reasonable payment. In many instances, we observed that those who did participate in our study were still able to secure employment for the day.

Below, I present some of the preliminary findings from this unique survey. Please note that the small number of missing responses, as is customary, have been omitted from the tabulated data. In addition, all data findings are weighted to represent the overall day labor population in Los Angeles and Orange County.

## FINDINGS

### Demographics

As most would surmise, the overwhelming majority of day laborers are Latinos, with Mexicans comprising the single largest group of day laborers. Mexicanos make up 77% of this population, approximately the same figure of their total Los Angeles County proportion of all Latinos. About three percent of day laborers are either U.S. born or of a non-Latino background.

**Table 2 Country of Origin (n=479)**

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	Percentage
U.S.	1.3
Mexico	77.5
Central America <sup>4</sup>	20.1
Other <sup>5</sup>	1.1

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Valenzuela, DLS 1999

More than half of day laborers have been in the United States for less than five years, and almost 30 percent immigrated to this country during the previous year. Surprisingly, almost one quarter

(22.8%) have been in the United States for more than eleven years, with about nine percent having been here longer than twenty years.

**Table 3 Years Living in the United States (n=470)**

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	<u>Percentage</u>
Less than 1 year	29.4
1 – 5 Years	22.9
5 – 10 Years	24.4
10 – 20 Years	13.4
20+ Years	10.0

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Valenzuela, DLS 1999

Day laborers are a unique and diverse group of workers. They range in age from 18 to 71<sup>6</sup> and on average comprise a relatively young work force with a mean age of 34 and a median age of 33. Given the difficulty of day labor work, its seeming instability, and competitiveness in securing jobs on a daily basis, it is surprising that almost 15 percent are over the age of 48 with several workers on the verge of reaching and surpassing the U.S. official retirement age of 65.

Consistent with their overall youthfulness, a large number (48%) of day laborers have never been married. An almost equal amount (45%) of day laborers are either married, living with a partner or widowed. These data suggest that day laborers are supporting not only themselves but also contributing to a larger household.

The educational attainment of day laborers is predictably low. However, our survey found an educational polarization of workers with many at the low-end of the educational spectrum and many at the relatively high-end of the educational ladder. More than half either have one to six years of education or none whatsoever. At the other end, more than one-third have between nine and twelve years of education – the equivalent of some college in countries such as Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

**Table 4 Day Labor Characteristics**

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<u>AGE (n=479)</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
18-27	37.9
28-37	28.4
38-47	20.1
48-57	10.2
58+	3.5
Median Age	33
Mean Age	34
Min Age	18
Max Age	71

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Table 4 (Cont.)

**Marital Status** (n=480)

Never Married	47.9
Married	37.3
Separated	4.8
Widowed	0.1
Divorced	2.0
Living w/Partner	7.8

**Educational Attainment** (n=481)

No Education	5.1
1-6 Years	51.5
7-8 Years	4.9
9-12 Years	34.4
13+ Years	4.2
Mean	7.0

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Valenzuela, DLS 1999

Less than 6 percent of all the day laborers surveyed for our study had the appropriate legal documentation when they first entered the United States. Over time, for those immigrants who returned to their country of origin and then came back to the United States, 21 percent had eventually acquired legal documents.<sup>7</sup> Because of the wide range of ages and years spent in the United States, it is difficult to estimate the percentage of undocumented immigrants among the day labor population. For example, close to 40 percent of day laborers interviewed in this survey believe they are eligible to obtain legal resident documents. Of these, 86 percent intend to apply for permanent residency.

Day laborers, similar to other low skill workers and recent arrivals, are in a constant state of transition. *Jornaleros* likely transition from day labor to regular employment in the formal labor market. Indeed, some of our data below suggests that this is the case for some day laborers. Similarly, they transition from undocumented to resident alien status to citizenship. While our data is limited with regard to this latter point, we do have some insights into this process. For example, our data show that a large number of day laborers are either married to or have children who are legal residents and/or citizens. A large number of day laborers also have siblings who are themselves documented (i.e., have resident alien status and/or citizens). While this does not in itself automatically bestow legal status upon them, it is an important indicator of the transitional nature of their legal status and of course, of their potential to become legalized.<sup>8</sup>

### **Earnings as a Day Laborer**

Calculating an hourly wage rate or monthly income for day laborers is difficult because day labor work fluctuates seasonally and work is rarely with the same employer, or consistently the same type of work. As a result, it is difficult to calculate a mean wage for day labor work. The Day Labor Survey queried day laborers on several different income and wage indicators. I

summarize only a few below that provide us with a general understanding or approximation of a day laborer’s earnings.

One way to determine a minimum wage of sorts for day laborers is to ask them information regarding what economists call a reservation wage. A reservation wage is the lowest amount (usually per hour) a person is willing to work for. The mean reservation wage for day laborers under normal conditions was \$6.91 per hour. That is, on average day laborers refused to work at a rate lower than \$6.91 per hour, about two dollars higher than the present federal minimum wage. The reservation wage under low demand conditions (i.e., winter/rainy season, and/or consistently bad luck securing jobs) fell to \$6.21 per hour. For purposes of comparison, I listed the federal, state, and Los Angeles (City) Living Wage rates. Clearly, day labor work is significantly higher than both the state and federal minimum wage rates and competes favorably with the City of Los Angeles’s Living Wage Ordinance.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 5 Hourly Wages and Seasonal Work**

	Day Labor Min. Wage	Fed. Min. Wage	State Min. Wage	LA Living Wage
Reservation Hourly Wage (n=476)	\$6.91	\$5.15	\$5.75	7.25
Reservation Hourly Wage (n=476) (Under Low Demand Conditions)	\$6.21			
<b>Seasonal Work</b>	<b>Better</b>	<b>Worse</b>		
	(n=469)	(n=472)		
	(%)	(%)		
Fall	3.0	3.9		
Winter	1.2	90.0		
Spring	11.3	0.4		
Summer	79	.6		
No. Difference	5.2	5.1		

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Valenzuela, DLS 1999

We asked day laborers to recall what they had earned in January, 1999 (the month prior to when the survey was undertaken) and likewise, what they might normally earn during a good month (i.e., summer) and during a bad month. The mean rate of all the responses to this question is tabulated below. I’ve included both the federal and state minimum rates computed at full-time (forty hours per week) for a month (e.g., a good month) and a rate computed at part-time (20 hours per week) for a month (e.g., a bad month). Day labor work is clearly competitive and in some instances better than working under federal and state minimum wage employment. When coupled with other “day labor benefits” such as daily cash payments and non-payment of taxes, day labor work, even under difficult conditions (i.e., poor weather or low demand) may prove advantageous when compared to minimum wage employment.



**Table 6 Monthly Earnings**

	January 1999 n=473 (mean)	Good Month n=462 (mean)	Bad Month n=457 (mean)		\$5.15 Rate @ Full-time per Month (Good Month)	\$5.75 Rate @ Full-time per Month (Good Month)	\$5.15 Rate @ Part-time per Month (Bad Month)	\$5.75 Rate @ Full-time per Month (Bad Month)
Earnings	\$568	\$1,069	\$341		\$824	\$920	\$412	\$460

Valenzuela, DLS 1999

How much one earns as a day laborer is in part connected to how one is paid. In addition, wage preference is important to *jornaleros* because it helps them control and limit to some extent employer abuses of non-payment. As a result, day laborers rarely accept payment for their labor in the form of a check and greatly prefer their payment to be in cash. Table 7 below highlights this preference for cash over checks. In addition, the table shows that day laborers prefer to be paid per hour or by contract. This in part reflects the general perception that being paid per day is the most risky with regard to a potential employer abuse. For example, an hourly or contractual rate is fixed and represents specifically the amount paid for services completed over time or for a specific task. Being paid by the day may be more risky because of the ambiguity of how an employer might define a day's labor. More importantly, there are significant differences in working for a day as a painter's assistant compared to working for a day digging 3-foot deep ditches. Hourly and contract wages provide less ambiguity and thus less risk to a day laborer than does a daily wage.

**Table 7 Wage Preference**

(n=479)	Percent
Hour	43.9
Day	19.4
Contract	30.5
No. Difference	6.1
(n=479)	
Cash	89.1
Check	8.7
Other	2.3

Valenzuela, DLS 1999

### **Working as a Day Laborer**

One of the common public perceptions of day laborers is that these are workers who are desperately seeking work - any type of work. Furthermore, many believe that most of these men are only doing day labor work as a stepping stone to better employment opportunities or as a temporary holdover from a firing, layoff or other work interruption. The table below shows that while a large percentage of day laborers have been doing this type of work for less than one year, an almost equal number of workers have been day laborers between two and five years. A small minority (5%) of day laborers, what we might call *veteranos*, have been working as day laborers for over ten years.

**Table 8 Tenure as Day Laborer (n=479)**

	Percent
Less Than 1 Year	43.0
2 – 5 Years	31.0
6-10 Years	20.3
10 + Years	5.2

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Valenzuela, DLS 1999

A full 90 percent of all day laborers surveyed in this study reported that they did not have a job other than seeking work as a *jornalero*. Those who only worked as *jornaleros* looked for work an average of five days, with close to 70 percent looking for work at least four days out of the week. Of the 10 percent who did report that they had another job besides day laboring, the average amount of hours at this other job was almost 20, with almost 50 percent working more than 20 hours a week. Day laborers live full lives as workers.

**Table 9 Day Labor Work**

	Percent
Hold Other Job? (n=481)	
Yes	9.9
No	90.1
Days Seeking Day Labor Work (n=454)	
< 3 days	42.1
4 days	5.7
5 days	11.3
6 days	24.6
7 days	16.4
Mean Number of Days Looked for Work	4.1
Hours Spent working at OTHER Job (n=45)	
< 10 hours	37.0
10-20 hours	15.8
20-30 hours	22.4
30+ hours	24.7
Mean Number of Hours	19.2

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Valenzuela, DLS 1999

As day laborers, *jornaleros* perform a wide variety of jobs including dirty and/or dangerous tasks that might expose them to chemical wastes and other occupational hazards. They also, of course, perform many typical labor-intensive tasks that drive the demand for their services. The table below lists by rank order, the most common jobs performed by day laborers.

Each respondent was asked to select which of the following occupations in which they have a specialization.

**Table 10 Job Specialization (n=481)**

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	<b>Percent</b>
Construction	39.2
Painting	29.4
Gardening	27.9
Plumbing	15.8
Carpentry	14.0
Mechanic	5.6
Electricity	3.3
Roofing	3.5
Welding	2.3
Masonry	1.0
Cooking/baking	1.4
Other	16.8

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Valenzuela, DLS 1999

As might be expected, many circled more than one occupation. As a result, the total percentage does not add to 100.

Why do day laborers seek this kind of work? The answer to this question is complex and not easily answered by a survey. However, we can gain some insights into the barriers that help keep day laborers out of the formal economy. The data below lists the primary reasons that most prevent a day laborer from getting a regular (i.e., 9-5) job.

**Table 11 Barriers to Employment in the Formal Job Market (n=419)**

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	<b>Percent</b>
Lack of Documents	40.3
Lack of English Proficiency	21.3
Pay Rate is too Low	9.2
Few Jobs Available	9.0
No Specific Job Skill to Market	3.4
Lack of Transportation/License	1.3
Too Old	2.6
Racial Discrimination	3.6
Employer Abuses	1.2
Other	8.0

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Valenzuela, DLS 1999

While lack of papers was the highest response selected as the most important in preventing day laborers from participating in the formal market, inability to speak English and

poor market conditions also played a significant role in determining a day laborer's employment opportunity choices.

### **Employers of Day Laborers**

The day labor market could not possibly function without the large demand from prospective employers for this type of labor. Indeed, from conversations with day laborers and others who work with this group, the proliferation of sites throughout Los Angeles/Orange County is mostly explained by the increased number of employers seeking this relatively inexpensive, hard working, and trouble-free work force. Below, based on several key questions to all the respondents of this survey, are data that enable us to identify the chief employers of day laborers.

When asked to list, in a typical week, what type of employer hires you most often, private individuals and subcontractors ranked the highest.

**Table 12 Employers of Day Laborers (n=460)**

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	<b>Percent</b>
Private Individual	41.5
Subcontractor	42.7
Private Company	7.6
Factory	1.9
Restaurant	0.44
Other Day Laborers	5.2
Other	.6

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Valenzuela, DLS 1999

A high proportion of day laborers said yes (76%) to the question of whether the same employers hire them repeatedly. Also, generally speaking, 38 percent said they have a 'very satisfactory' relationship with their employer with 45 percent stating that they had a 'somewhat satisfactory' relationship. The remaining 17 percent stated a 'not very satisfactory' and 'not at all satisfactory' relationship. The relationship between poor and good relationships with employers is likely related to abusive and non-abusive treatment at the work site. Table 13 below provides some basic descriptors on the frequency of different abuses inflicted by employers of day laborers.

Clearly a large percentage of day laborers have experienced a variety of abuses from their employers. It is also important to point out that in every abuse category explored, except one (pay less than agreed), a majority of day laborers had not experienced abuses in each category. Non-payment and pay less than agreed had the largest instances of occurrence as did work-place abuses such as no food, water, or breaks. Employers knowingly abuse day laborers because they fear few recourses from their actions. Employers realize that many day laborers may be in a vulnerable position with regard to their legal status and their knowledge of workplace and

immigrant rights. As a result, because day laborers may be less prone to report abuses and/or notify local police enforcement, employers are able to take advantage of their position.

**Table 13 Frequency of Employer Abuses (n=478)**

	Never	1-5 Times	6-10 Times	> 11 Times
Non-Payment	52.2	41.3	4.7	1.8
Pay Less Than Agreed	48.5	38.7	8.0	4.8
Abandoned at Work Site	67.4	27.0	4.3	1.4
Bad Checks (NSF)	72.1	26.1	1.7	.20
No Food or Water <sup>10</sup>	41.4	37.3	6.8	14.5
No Breaks	52.3	29.0	5.7	13.0
Violence	79.8	15.0	.9	4.3
Robbery	86.8	11.7	.42	1.1
Threats	82.0	16.4	.75	.90

Valenzuela, DLS 1999

### **Other Day Labor Characteristics**

- Contrary to some impressions, almost all day laborers are not homeless. In fact, 94 percent responded negatively to the question ‘are you currently homeless?’
- Often, immigrants from Mexico and other parts of Latin America are thought to be cyclical migrants. That is, they return to their country of origin frequently, setting up transnational households. Over fifty percent of day laborers have never returned to their country of origin.

**Table 14 Cyclical Migration to Country of Origin (n=463)**

	Percent
Never	48.1
1 Return	15.2
2-5 Returns	24.9
6+ Returns	11.8

Valenzuela, DLS 1999

- Day laborers assist other family members and friends in their country-of-origin by sending them remittances in the form of cash. In calendar year 1998, day laborers sent remittances on average, seven times. The mean amount sent was \$2,630.

**Table 15 Remittances**

<b>Frequency (n=468)</b>	<b>Percent</b>
None	24.2
1-6 Times	43.7
7-12 Times	19.8
12+ Times	12.3
Mean	7.4

  

<b>Amount (n=359)</b>	
< \$500	10.4
\$500 - 1,000	24.8
\$1,100 - 3,000	38.0
\$3,100 - 5,000	15.5
\$5,100 - 10,000	10.5
\$12,000+	.85
Mean	\$2,630

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Valenzuela, DLS 1999

## **Conclusion**

The preliminary findings presented in the preceding pages paint a complex picture of day labor practices, livelihood, and employment. These findings describe, for the first time, day laborers and their experience as workers selling their labor in a public setting. The richness of the Day Labor Survey will allow for more detailed analysis and more conclusive generalizations and findings in future reports. More importantly, through the use of multi-methods such as in-depth interviews and case studies, the findings presented in this and subsequent reports will allow us to tease out some of the nuances and particulars not easily explained or described through conventional quantitative survey data. Nevertheless, the data presented in this report represent an original first look at a highly visible though relatively unknown labor market.

While relatively little is mentioned in this report regarding the legal status of day laborers, one can assume that a significant proportion of these workers are without documents. Ascertaining legal status is a particularly difficult task, especially in a study of this nature in which most respondents are reluctant to discuss this information in an open manner. Nevertheless, there are different ways to get to this question and our survey attempted to collect a variety of data on legal status that will be presented in fuller detail in a subsequent report.

Day labor, its processes, and its day-to-day activities are varied and rich in information. This report just scratches the surface. Equally complex and detailed are the larger factors that induce the burgeoning of this market and fuels the demand among private individuals and subcontractors. Subsequent reports and publications will similarly capture and discuss in greater detail these processes as well. Part of planning and instituting policies on behalf of different segments of a populace is an accurate portrayal of that population in question. This of course requires meticulous work, painstaking studies, and careful data collection. The work presented

in this report represents in part an attempt at understanding day laborers and accurately portraying their life and labor market experiences in an accurate and thoughtful way.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report I use day laborer and *Jornalero* interchangeably. *Jornalero* is the Spanish equivalent of day laborer. For the Day Labor Project, we define a day laborer as someone who gathers at a street corner, empty lot or parking lot of a home improvement store (e.g., Home Depot), or an official hiring site, to sell their labor for the day, hour, or for a particular job.

<sup>2</sup> We initially identified ninety-seven sites through a rigorous procedure that we describe under “*Site Identificaiton*.” The total number of sites from which our survey is based is eighty-seven. The discrepancy comes from initial sites that we had earlier identified having disappeared (7-8) and/or sites that were not surveyed (1-3) due to limited resources.

<sup>3</sup> Counting day laborers at different hiring sites was difficult. At most sites, a basic strategy was to begin the count of a group of men from left to right or visa versa, from right to left. Counting groups of men proved even more difficult than counting for example, men lined up along a wall. With practice, counting day laborers at different hiring sites became easier and more thorough. The point here is that no particular order or method was utilized in counting men at different sites. As a result, the listing (counting) of men for our study was done randomly. Thus, when the selection count (predetermined set of numbers) was administered, we had a group of men who had randomly fallen into our count.

<sup>4</sup> Includes day laborers from El Salvador (7.2%), Honduras (2.9%), and Guatemala (10%).

<sup>5</sup> Includes day laborers from Zimbabwe (.1%), Morocco (.3%), South Africa (.2%), Peru (.2%), and Columbia (.3%).

<sup>6</sup> Due to methodological and human subject constraints, we limited participants for our survey to age 18 and over.

<sup>7</sup> These men may have procured the necessary documents for permanent residency in the United States during their trips back to their country-of-origin. The point here is that over time, between travels to and from their country-of-origin, a significant number of day laborers were able to obtain documents to be in the United States legally.

<sup>9</sup> The Los Angeles Living Wage Ordinance (No. 171547) requires that nothing less than a prescribed minimum level of compensation (a "living wage") be paid to employees of service contractors of the City and its financial assistance recipients and to employees of such recipients. As a result, not all workers in Los Angeles qualify for the Living Wage.

<sup>10</sup> Under normal (formal) labor market conditions, food and water are readily available either at a factory cafeteria, or close by. Often, day laborers work in residential or isolated places where food and water is not easily available. Coupled with lack of transportation, the inability to get food or water for a day laborer my be heightened. Under these conditions, lack of food or water is an employer abuse.