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THE POLITICAL  
ECONOMY OF INFORMAL  
FOOD VENDING IN  
KINGSTON, JAMAICA

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## Abstract

Small-scale food enterprises occupy a critical space in the food system of Kingston, Jamaica. While small-scale food retailers serve the entire population, they are disproportionately relied on by poor urban households. The nodes and networks of retailers play an important role in the value and commodity chain by providing access to comparatively cheap food but are often affected by economic vagaries and state-level regulation, among other factors that potentially challenge the sustainability of trade. These issues are potentially offset by a highly dynamic system where entry into the trade is maintained by the high levels of unemployment and limited alternatives. While the challenges are probably the result of state-level deficiencies, it is possible that these problems are both alleviated and exacerbated by the various strategies used to claim space and negotiate food-based livelihoods in the city. This paper attempts to fill a conspicuous gap in the literature by examining the pathology of the urban food system as it relates to the characterization, challenges and experiences of small-scale food retailers. It is based on a combination of questionnaire surveys and interviews with small-scale food retailers in the city. They indicate that deficiencies in state support are compensated by high reliance on inwardly focused networks. Small-scale entrepreneurs face additional challenges that may be addressed through the development of policy initiatives that specifically target this marginalized group.

## Keywords

neoliberalism, informality, small-scale retailers, food system

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## Introduction

Small-scale food retailers occupy a critical space in the economy and society of Kingston, Jamaica. They comprise a combination of formal and informal enterprises, but are more commonly informal. The significant role of the informal sector is conditioned by widespread urban poverty, which is exacerbated by economic instability. The island of Jamaica and, by extension, its capital city Kingston, has a long history of economic challenges which were arguably initiated and intensified by globalization and the implementation of neoliberal economic policies (Munroe and Blake 2017). These policies have resulted in several consequences including a reduction in formal sector employment and concomitant growth in the informal sector (Anderson 1987, Clarke and Howard 2006). At the same time, the dismantling of trade barriers led to more open markets and a reduction in agricultural subsidies (Munroe and Blake 2017). Both conditions have significant implications for the local food system, which has seen a significant rise in the volume of cheaper imported foods and an associated decrease in local agricultural productivity. The combined influence of these factors, along with rising unemployment in the formal sector, has contributed to an increase in the number of small-scale enterprises, which often engage in informal trading.

These enterprises comprise a substantial portion of Kingston's urban food system but, despite their critical role and apparently significant numbers, there is a conspicuous dearth of research on this group. Public and academic discourse has treated Jamaica's informal sector as a homogenous entity, paying limited attention to subgroups such as informal food vendors. There have been several studies of the informal economy in Jamaica (Bennett 1995, Vuletin 2008, Witter and Kirton 1990). All reported on the informal sector in the country as a whole and have not referred specifically to the situation in the city of Kingston.

The lack of up-to-date baseline data on informal food retailers compounds existing data deficiencies that affect the monitoring of Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, progress towards a more inclusive society is likely to be enhanced by the availability of data on marginalized or excluded groups. This paper represents an attempt to compensate for deficiencies in the literature on small-scale food retailers in Kingston by examining their characteristics, the factors influencing entry into the trade, and the strategies used to navigate the various challenges that may be linked to the state or components of society. By examining the strategies utilized by this group, important insights may be gained into the ways in which the social capital embedded in informal networks could represent a counter force to some of the consequences of neoliberal economic policies and, by extension, be an important tool for resilience. Additionally, this social capital could also be positioned as vital raw material that could bridge the gap between the state and informal actors, thereby presenting viable pathways for sustainable planning and management.

Much of the public and academic discourse on vendors in the city of Kingston has provided, at best, only anecdotal accounts that specifically characterize this subset of the retail sector. Despite their unique and important function in the urban economy, small-scale informal enterprises in the food system have been largely overlooked by policy and legislative frameworks, which generally fail to disaggregate this as a specific focal point for attention. The characterization of these vendors is also a highly relevant starting point for the development of intervention initiatives that may seek to reduce inherent vulnerabilities emerging from structural vagaries, marginalization in the face of urban renewal programmes, and limited access to needed facilities and services.

## The Informal Food Sector

The slowing down of Caribbean economic growth, especially following the 2008 financial crisis, has led to a decline in formal sector employment (Franklin 2010). Despite a downward trend since 2017, national unemployment levels approximate 10%

(STATIN, 2018). In the years prior to the execution of the survey on which this paper is based, unemployment levels consistently exceeded 12% (Figure 1). Structural adjustment packages embedded in debt repayment strategies inevitably led to higher unemployment levels in the public sector. High unemployment levels were, undoubtedly, a part of the legacy of neoliberal policies which had a lasting impact on the levels of employment and livelihoods within the city. These impacts were exacerbated by rising import bills and the fallout from a high debt to GDP ratio, diminished productive capacity, changing consumption patterns, and the competition induced by globalization and its conduits (Weis 2005). The problem of low educational attainment limits entry to many areas of the formal sector. The reduced alternatives combined with increased competition among the unemployed poor has led to an increase in the number of self-employed and the growth of small and micro enterprises (SMEs), including in the informal sector, and played a potentially significant role in the growth of food retail activities.

Domestically-produced foods flow into Kingston largely through Jamaica’s informal trading or higgler system (Brown-Glaude 2011). Higglers perform many functions as market intermediaries, including trade, harvesting, post-harvest processing, re-distribution and sales. Seepersad and Ennis (2009) suggested the following typology for higglers:

- Type 1 purchase fresh produce from farmers for sale to wholesale markets.
- Type 2 purchase from farmers or other higglers for distribution across Jamaica to wholesalers, supermarkets, hoteliers, or processors.
- Type 3 purchase from farmers and other higglers at Coronation Market for re-sale at the same place or at other locations in the city.
- Type 4 hedge on the time of day consumers prefer to purchase goods; they purchase produce at night and re-sell it during daylight hours, which tends to be safer.

Higglers benefit from large volumes of produce sold at competitive prices and enjoy up to 44% price mark-ups from farm gate to retailer (Seepersad and Ennis 2009). More than 90% of higglers are women.

The most visible activities relating to the informal food sector in Kingston are the retail sale of fresh produce in the form of a wide range of fruit and vegetables either from stationary or itinerant stalls on the side of the road; food production/preparation, sale and catering; and transport associated with the supply side of the informal food sector. Studies have shown that women chiefly own and manage small catering operations and sell street food. They are traditionally skilled in these activities and already

**FIGURE 1: Unemployment rates in Jamaica (2009-2018)**



Source: STATIN 2018

have the necessary cooking utensils at home, while the food they prepare also enables them to feed their families at lower cost (FAO 2003).

The spatial distribution of the informal food retail sector in Kingston shows concentrations of activities at the main centres of commercial activity where there are potential clients requiring food during the working day. Mostly mobile informal food vendors congregate near transport hubs, as well as locations close to schools and offices to facilitate consumer access to food, saving them time and transport costs. Additionally, informal food retailers are to be found in the form of corner shops individually located on streets. These shops are concentrated at major road intersections and dispersed close to, or within, areas of informal and formal low-income housing.

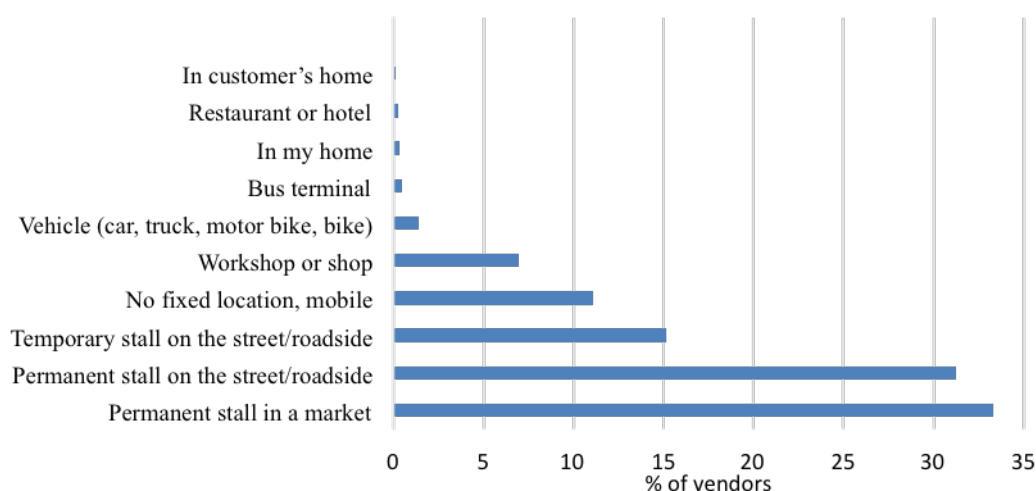
## Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used in the acquisition and analysis of the data used in this paper. Quantitative data were derived from a 2018 sample of 877 small-scale food retail operators (including owners and supervisors) in the Kingston Metropolitan Area. A questionnaire was used to elicit responses and explored demographic characteristics,

economic conditions, motivations for entry, primary challenges, distributive logistics, and other characteristics of the enterprise. Respondents were purposively selected based on age, location, and mode of engagement in the food retail enterprise. The sample was selected from locations across the city and spatially disaggregated into business districts, main roads, and communities. Around 80% of the interviews were conducted with vendors who operated at a permanent market stall or traded on the street (Figure 2). These vendors were based in the main business districts, namely Downtown Kingston, Half-Way-Tree, and Cross Roads.

Various factors potentially influence the decision of the individual to enter small-scale food retail activity. While engagement represents an expression of the subjective experience of individuals, their decisions are connected to broader, structural processes that may have serious consequences for their quality of life and, by extension, social and economic sustainability within urban space. The factors influencing entry to the trade were assessed under four main themes adapted from Peberdy (2016): survivalist/financial benefits, entrepreneurial motivations/intrinsic rewards, social capital/altruism, and employment generation. Mean scores were derived from a five-point Likert scale for 22 separate questions (Table 1).

**FIGURE 2: Place of Business of Sampled Vendors Entering the Sector**



**TABLE 1: Factors Influencing Entry into Small-Scale Food Retail**

			Gender				Age			
	Mean (sample)	No.	Mean (male)	Mean (female)	U	p	Mean (youth)	Mean (older)	U	p
<b>Survivalist motivations</b>										
I needed more money just to survive	4.56	871	4.60	4.54	86,220	0.138	4.57	4.56	60,354.5	0.936
I wanted to give my family greater financial security	4.55	872	4.61	4.51	82,825.5	0.008*	4.54	4.55	60,250.5	0.876
I was unemployed and unable to find a job	3.68	869	3.51	3.79	82,768.5	0.027*	3.38	3.76	52,512	0.006*
I had a job but it did not pay enough	2.31	873	2.29	2.32	91,076.5	0.999	2.35	2.30	59,862.5	0.756
I wanted to make more money to send to my family in my home area	2.31	872	2.27	2.33	88,072	0.404	2.12	2.35	54,957	0.051*
<b>Personal motivations/intrinsic rewards</b>										
I wanted more control over my own time/ I wanted to be my own boss	4.33	873	4.34	4.33	89,570	0.645	4.48	4.29	52,476.5	0.002*
I have always wanted to run my own business	4.21	871	4.23	4.2	88,250	0.492	4.27	4.19	58,723	0.505
I have the right personality to run my own business	4.06	870	4.08	4.04	89,270.5	0.743	4.21	4.01	54,583	0.034*
I like to challenge myself	2.59	871	2.46	2.67	83,202.5	0.032*	2.75	2.55	55,464	0.077
I wanted to increase my status in the community	2.55	871	2.41	2.64	82,699.5	0.022*	2.41	2.58	55,707	0.126
I enjoy taking risks	2.51	869	2.33	2.63	80,305.5	0.004*	2.63	2.48	56,447.5	0.168
I wanted to do something new and challenging	2.38	871	2.22	2.48	81,710	0.011*	2.52	2.34	56,456.5	0.148
I like to learn new skills	2.23	869	2.07	2.33	80,690.5	0.005*	2.34	2.2	56,998	0.263
I wanted to compete with others and be the best	1.97	865	1.77	2.1	77,975	0.001*	1.87	2.00	56,031.5	0.152
<b>Social capital/altruism</b>										
I wanted to provide a service/product to consumers in other parts of this city	2.69	871	2.63	2.73	86,928	0.276	2.69	2.69	60,432	0.967
My family has always been involved in business	2.43	873	2.36	2.48	87,063.5	0.237	2.66	2.37	54,077.5	0.017*
I wanted to provide a service/product to consumers in my neighbourhood	2.42	872	2.26	2.54	81,279	0.005*	2.39	2.44	59,811	0.77

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Support and help in starting my business was available from other people	2.04	872	1.92	2.12	85,281.5	0.092	2.35	1.96	52,404.5	0.002*
I decided to go into business in partnership with others	1.44	873	1.37	1.49	86,360.5	0.066	1.51	1.43	59,608.5	0.595
<b>Employment generation</b>										
I wanted to provide employment for members of my family	1.88	872	1.86	1.89	90,065.5	0.788	2.08	1.84	55,030.5	0.037*
I wanted to provide employment for people from my home area	1.45	870	1.46	1.45	89,946	0.84	1.45	1.46	60,351.5	0.958
I wanted to provide employment for other people	1.45	873	1.52	1.41	86,529	0.092	1.49	1.45	60,066	0.767
*Statistically significant associations										

Survivalist and livelihood concerns represented the most highly cited reasons for entry into the trade and had the highest mean scores (3.48) relative to other themes. A dominant concern was the need for greater financial security for themselves (4.56) and their family (4.55). Others rated lack of employment as having a significant influence on their decision. When these data were assessed in relation to demographic domains, gender and age were found to have some association with motivations. There was a statistically significant difference between men and women as it related to giving the family more financial security ( $U=82,825.5$ ,  $p=0.008$ ). Although the difference was slight, men reported that this factor was of more significant concern (4.61). By contrast, women rated the lack of employment as having a stronger influence on their decision, compared to men. Older entrepreneurs were also more likely to cite the lack of employment as a push factor.

Transitioning into small-scale food retailing may also be positioned as a response to intrinsic rewards, which are more personal in nature and more strongly tied to interest and esteem. These factors may be described as opportunistic and are situated in the literature in contrast to survivalist strategies. The main difference is that survivalist factors generally operate within the context of constraint while opportunistic factors intimate greater levels

of choice and so serve mainly as pull factors (Williams et al 2012). There is some survey evidence to indicate particularly high levels of motivation in Kingston relate to the desire for autonomy through the pursuit of business and the belief that they possess the necessary skills for conducting business. While factors such as the desire for skill acquisition, risk taking, and the embrace of new challenges were far less highly rated as important influences, the gendered domains of this component present interesting insights. Mean scores for women were significantly higher than for men in relation to factors denoting risk taking, skills acquisition, and embracing new challenges. Young vendors also had a stronger proclivity towards the desire for autonomy and the feeling that they had the right personalities for this type of business.

At an aggregate level, the pursuit of intrinsic rewards was generally found to be less of an influencing factor compared to survivalist strategies but was nevertheless important, especially when compared to factors such as social capital and the desire to provide employment for others. The skew towards economic factors is not surprising when understood within the context of a complex political economy characterized by rising levels of deprivation in the city. As Clarke and Howard (2006) note, adverse macro-economic conditions have had significant effects on the urban poor. Specifically,

the significant reference to being unemployed and unable to find a job is a direct response to the country's relatively high level of unemployment.

## Characteristics of Small-Scale Food Retailers

Global estimates of gender distribution among informal sector workers generally indicate that women are more represented than men (Herrera et al 2012, Leon 2011). While this varies based on the type of informal activity, estimates specific to street vending have been more elusive. Women accounted for 60% of the sampled vendors in Kingston, which aligns fairly closely with other studies on street trading in the Global South (Herrera et al 2012, Osei-Boateng and Amaratung 2011, UN-Habitat 2006). Beyond gendered domains, age-based analysis may also provide useful insights that recognise the differentiated needs of vendors. Age has been shown to affect adaptation and livelihood transitions and therefore represents an important analytical pivot given the vulnerability of some informal sector groups to urban planning initiatives which may threaten livelihoods (Dai et al 2013). The sampled small-scale food vendors were, on average, 47 years of age. Approximately 20% of the sample were below the age of 35 and 10% were over the age of 65. Gender-based disaggregation of age data revealed statistically significant differences between the average age of men and women. With a mean age of 49, women, on average, were approximately four years older than men ( $t=-3.91$ ,  $d.f.=678.63$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

In addition to gender and age, marginality was expressed in the generally low levels of educational attainment observed across the sample. Only 5% of the sample attained education beyond high school; and, while 38% had completed high school, 30% had only partially completed secondary education. Although gender-based differences were not statistically significant ( $\chi^2=8.4$ ,  $d.f.=6$ ,  $p=0.213$ ), female entrepreneurs tended to be slightly more educated than males. Approximately 41% of women had

attained high school education compared to 38% of men. Similar patterns were observed for tertiary educational attainment as 7% of women achieved at least some university/college education compared to 3% of men.

When education is assessed relative to age, there are clear differences between youth and older vendors. Those over the age of 35 were generally found to be less educated than younger vendors. Approximately 35% of older vendors had completed high school education compared to 58% of younger entrepreneurs. Similar patterns were evident for tertiary educational attainment. About 4% of older vendors had either partially or fully completed university/college education compared to 11% of those under 36 years of age. Overall, the differences between the younger and older vendors were found to be statistically significant ( $\chi^2=62.1$ ,  $d.f.=6$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

Differences in educational status could have implications for policy, which may need to be adapted to address the needs of the two groups appropriately. For example, a glaring gap in the National Youth Policy is the absence of specific attention to youth in the informal sector – a group extensively composed of young people engaged in food retail livelihoods. The policy makes only vague reference to informality and generally treats the sector as a homogenous entity – ignoring the necessity for nuanced approaches based on variations across subtypes. Statistical characterization of this group therefore represents a necessary foundation for practical policy interventions that are conditioned by available data.

The informal sector provides alternative opportunities where participants often avoid tax nets as a mechanism for optimizing earnings, and many individuals have resorted to this mode of engagement as a response to job scarcity in the formal sector. Reported profits for the previous month were used as a proxy for estimating one component of the economic status of retailers and the results indicated significant variation in profits earned. Average reported profits were JMD36,007 (USD275). While several (17%) said they had earned no profit during the previous month, reported profits were as



high as JMD680,000 (USD5,194). The data were highly skewed towards the lower end of the earning spectrum, with 50% of the sample indicating profits of less than JMD25,000 (USD191).

When these data were assessed in relation to demographic attributes, a clear distinction was observed in the profits earned by men and women. Men typically reported average profits that were about 25% higher than those of women: JMD42,693 (USD334) versus JMD32,153 (USD252). Given the highly skewed distribution of data on profits, however, median incomes were deemed to be a more appropriate representation of general patterns in the data. Median profits for the two groups were JMD29,000 (USD227) for men and JMD20,000 (USD156) for women. These differences were statistically significant when assessed using the Mann-Whitney U Test ( $U=18430.5$ ,  $p=0.011$ ). Retailers under 36 years old had mean profits of JMD42,614 (USD334) and median profits of JMD25,000 (USD196) compared to older retailers who reported mean profits of JMD34,288 (USD269) and median profits of JMD20,000 (USD156). Unlike gender, the differences between younger and older retailers were not statistically significant ( $U=13,232.0$ ,  $p=0.057$ ).

To understand the diversity of items sold and the amount of capital used in the acquisition of these commodities, respondents were asked to indicate the type of food items sold and the amount spent on the acquisition of these items during the previous month. The results indicate considerable commodity variation with local fruits, vegetables and herbs (36%) and beverages (30%) collectively accounting for the majority of purchases. Median expenditure was also highest for local fruits, vegetables and herbs ( $mdn=JMD72,000$ ) and overall estimates indicate that this commodity accounted for over half (52%) of the total amount paid for goods in the previous month. Raw fish/seafood ( $mdn=JMD53,000$ ) and raw meat ( $mdn=JMD60,000$ ) were also commodities on which relatively large portions of money were spent. Although less money was spent on beverages ( $mdn=JMD25,000$ ) on a per capita basis, the significant proportion of persons acquiring these commodities translated to high overall spending

relative to other commodities. They accounted for 18% of the total amount of money spent by the sample to acquire goods. Other commodities, such as confectionery, were commonly purchased by vendors but had very low per capita expenditure ( $mdn=JMD3,500$ ). By contrast, commodities such as cornflakes/cereals, ice cream/yoghurts and oils/seasonings were least commonly purchased and accounted for relatively low proportions of overall expenditure.

Variations in expenditure did not appear to be related to demographic characteristics. There was no statistically significant association between age and expenditure on any of the food items (Table 2). Similarly, there was no significant difference between men and women regarding expenditure (with the exception of beverages). The results of the Mann-Whitney U test indicated that men were likely to spend more on beverages ( $U=4714$ ,  $p=0.02$ ). The hypothesis that men were more likely to engage in beverage sales was tested as a potential pathway for explaining observed differences in overall levels of expenditure. However, this result was not statistically significant.

Purchasing patterns by vendors appear to be slightly different from food consumption patterns of the general public. There is a significant consumer demand for items such as ground provisions, rice, and bread, which are relatively cheap and represent principal components of dietary intake. Ragoobirsingh et al (2006) assert that local consumption patterns are characterized by high levels of carbohydrate consumption, with 77% of the population consuming items such as bread two to six times per week. While more recent studies have also indicated particularly high levels of consumption of bread and rice relative to other foods (Kinlocke et al, 2019), these items ranked much lower in terms of purchases by vendors. This may reflect differences between the type of food accessed at larger entities such as supermarkets and some wholesale enterprises versus the type of food purchased from vendors.

**TABLE 2: Cost of Acquiring Food Items by Gender and Age**

	No. of retailers purchasing item	% of sample	Median expenditure (JMD)	Mean expenditure (JMD)	Standard deviation	Total (JMD)	Age		Gender	
							U	p	U	p
Fruits, vegetables and herbs (local)	314	35.8	72,000	104,901	119,261	32,938,990	6,295	0.23	11,096.5	0.98
Beverages (drinks, juices, water)	259	29.5	25,000	44,282	63,695	11,469,100	4,717	0.02*	7,121	0.13
Ground provisions	181	20.6	48,000	82,229	99,583	14,883,400	1,843.0	0.18	3,283.0	0.92
Packaged snacks and chips	159	18.1	10,000	17,083	22,676	2,716,265	1,815.5	0.39	2,619	0.25
Confectionary (chocolates, candies)	130	14.8	3,850	12,225	29,277	1,589,280	1,255.5	0.79	1,635	0.13
Bread, buns, pastries, biscuits	87	9.9	10,000	18,092	23,404	1,574,040	406.5	0.88	678.5	0.89
Legumes and nuts	46	5.2	27,000	46,785	62,591	2,152,100	135	0.38	176	0.92
Fruits, vegetables and herbs (imported)	38	4.3	43,500	71,968	88,609	2,734,800	86.5	0.41	163	0.70
Cooked meat	31	3.5	50,000	62,539	68,176	1,938,700	69.5	0.20	78.5	0.11
Rice, pasta, flour, noodles	29	3.3	20,000	55,676	82,632	1,614,600	61.5	0.43	102	1.00
Tinned meat	20	2.3	12,000	27,395	37,193	547,900	17	0.37	34	0.76
Dairy products (milk, cheese)	16	1.8	9,500	11,069	9,512	177,100	11.5	0.69	15	0.27
Sugar, salt and powdered seasonings	15	1.7	10,420	19,481	21,282	292,220	15.5	0.72	4.0	0.49
Raw fish and other seafood	12	1.4	53,000	126,250	128,604	1,515,000	0	0.11	10	0.22
Raw meat (chicken, pork, beef, goat)	11	1.3	60,000	124,855	172,214	1,373,400	5.5	0.41	3.5	0.04
Cooked fish	10	1.1	18,200	31,820	24,857	318,200	6	0.60	7.5	0.90
Tinned vegetables	10	1.1	11,000	23,980	30,679	239,800	3.5	0.24	6	0.60
Oils and sauces	9	1.0	15,000	14,722	10,935	132,500	-	-	3	0.70
Cereal and cornflakes	7	0.8	3,000	8,603	10,074	60,220	1.5	0.45	2.5	0.32
Dairy products (yoghurt, ice cream)	2	0.2	31,500	31,500	40,305	63,000	-	-	-	-

Notes: - sample of inadequate size or too homogenous to produce meaningful results  
 \*statistically significant associations

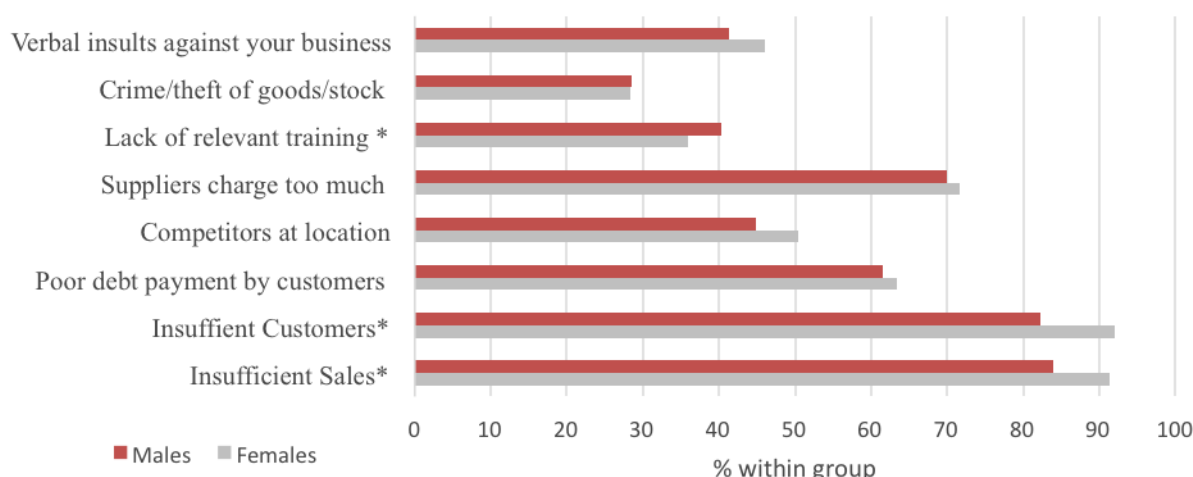
## Challenges Faced by Vendors

The conditions that precipitated entry into the food trade also set the stage for the challenges experienced by retailers. These challenges were primarily economic as small-scale food retailers, particularly those operating within the informal sector, often operated within the constraints of low capital investment (FAO 2003). The survey, along with interviews with vendors, revealed that insufficient sales and customers, competition, poor debt repayment, supplier pricing, lack of relevant training, crime and verbal insults against the business, constituted the major challenges faced.

Vendors cited insufficient sales and customers as the most common challenges. This was often articulated in interviews in relation to seasonal demands

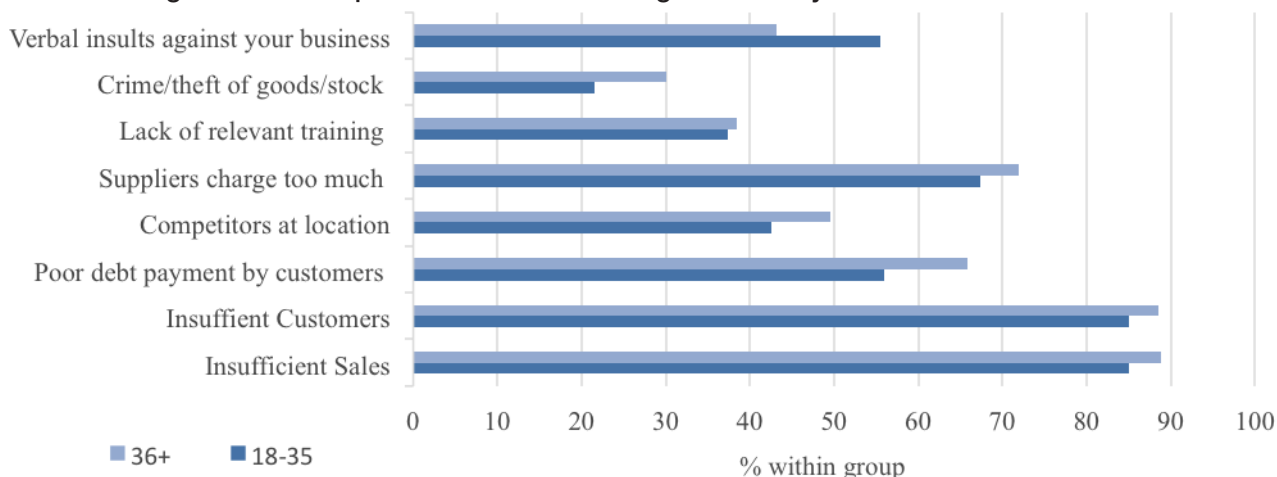
for goods, competition, and limited capacity for purchase by potential customers. Gender-based differences were minor across all categories and only statistically significant in relation to insufficient sales, insufficient customers, and the impact of a lack of relevant training (Figure 3). Women more commonly articulated insufficient sales and insufficient customers as the major challenge, with more than 90% of women citing these challenges. The lack of relevant training was more commonly cited by male respondents. Relative to youth entrepreneurs (18-35), older entrepreneurs (>35) appeared to be more affected by most challenges (with the exception of verbal insults) but were especially impacted by poor debt payment by customers ( $p < 0.05$ ). Vendors anecdotally connected these problems to the perceived poor state of the economy which constricted capital availability among poor urban households.

**FIGURE 3: Gender-based Comparison of Main Challenges Faced by Food Retailers**



\* Statistically significant differences based on Chi-square test

**FIGURE 4: Age-based Comparison of Main Challenges Faced by Food Retailers**



Complaints about suppliers charging too much may relate to how the price of various food items changes the availability or accessibility of food they can purchase for resale. Such changes are a function of extensive droughts or excessive rains that affect the availability of selected crops (Thomas-Hope 2016). The imposition of climatic stresses could explain some of the complaints related to increases in the prices charged by suppliers. The price of goods sold is also affected by inflation. While the inflation rate does fluctuate, it consistently exceeded 5% per year from 2000 to 2014 (Focus Economics 2017). This undoubtedly translates into increased costs of goods that vendors purchase as inputs or as direct resale commodities. Several vendors sold imported food items sourced from local importers. The cost of these commodities may also be affected by currency devaluation, which has characterized much of the island’s economic history.

Almost one-third of the vendors reported crime as a major problem and expressed concerns over the security of stock. These sentiments were echoed during interviews. As one vendor stated, “If I am not paying attention, my goods will go missing.” While the fear of crime might be seen as a reflection of inadequate police protection, the vendors did not see this as the main cause of their vulnerability. In-depth interviews with vendors revealed that a primary concern was their precarious relationship with the police. The police were seen as a major source of vulnerability; a concern shared by registered vendors. Vendors cited problems related to police harassment in the form of removal from vending spaces and the seizure of goods. One noted, “police (take) away our goods so we have to be on high alert” and another said, “we have problems with the police that try to remove us from the sidewalks.” Such statements are common and verified by media reports of frequent removals from public spaces. Tensions of this nature are a direct result of an expanding informal sector, which leads to greater competition among an already marginalized group. This competition serves to exacerbate some of the aforementioned challenges as vendors become locked into a cycle of displacement, debt, and dependency. Given the perceived lack of state

support, vendors attempt to navigate these challenges in various ways.

Informal vendors employ several strategies to overcome these problems. They adjust to the socio-economic circumstances of their clients by selling items in small units, thereby making commodities more affordable to the poor. They also adopt customer-friendly practices to cultivate loyalty by including extra portions at no charge or providing goods on credit (Table 3).

**TABLE 3: Strategies Deployed by Vendors to Address Challenges**

	% of sample
Offering credit for customers	68.2
Extending hours of operation	61.9
Purchasing stock in bulk	44.8
Negotiating prices with suppliers	32.7
Using mobile phones to take orders from customers	21.6
Opening business only during the periods of the day with most customers	21.0
Keeping records of business accounts	17.7
Sleeping on business premises	15.9
Looking for the cheapest prices for goods by calling suppliers	14.9
Looking for the cheapest prices for goods by asking other entrepreneurs	13.9

Another common strategy is to focus on financial self-reliance, demonstrated by the 72% of the sample who had acquired start-up capital from their personal savings. This was a direct response to the perception that banks would not endorse loan applications from members of this trade. Others engaged social networks of family and friends for assistance. Greater levels of self and social group reliance are represented by the family networks engaged to compensate for the deficiencies in support from the state and private financial entities. An even more significant expression of networking are the links between vendors. Interviews revealed that various forms of assistance were rendered through these informal networks. The following excerpts from the interviews reflect a discourse of mutual aid and trust, which constitute the building blocks of social capital (Kinlocke 2016):

*The others (retailers in the vicinity) will give an eye on my goods until I get back from either running an errand or the bathroom.*

*We work together. Like assistance with sales.*

*I ask the old lady there and my friend to sell for me when I can't.*

*Sometimes they would send their goods to us (other vendors in the area) and we would sell for them. And we buy from them also.*

The consolidation of networks and, by extension, the production of social capital, can be seen as an antidote to some of the negative repercussions of neoliberalism. In this way, small-scale food entrepreneurs have built their resilience through reliance.

Neoliberalism has provided other challenges and opportunities for vendors. For example, food imports provide a significant source of cheap food and vendors often sell cheaper imported food as alternatives to locally-produced brands. On the other hand, growing dependence on imported food potentially reduces the demand for locally-produced items, with a detrimental effect on the rural economy and local supplies.

## Conclusion

Small-scale food vendors in Kingston use various strategies to negotiate a precarious terrain. They have been forced to become more inwardly reliant as the state contracts under neoliberal economic reform. This contraction is expressed in the deregulation of imports which affects the price of local commodities, in limited support for food retailers, and in policy development which often does not include specific reference to this important group. Small-scale food retailers are forced to rely more heavily on alternative networks and resources to counter their vulnerability. Overall, these retailers display high levels of resilience, partly driven by motivations based on economic need. Possible ways in which an enabling policy environment could support the resilience of the retailers include

providing greater access to financial support and a more relaxed regulatory regime that would reduce some of the challenges currently experienced, providing greater protection for property and for the sites in which the vendors operate.

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