The Social Geography of Day Labor: Informal Responses to the Economic Downturn

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Introduction

The roots of the recent global financial crisis, popularly known as the "Great Recession," are firmly entrenched in the United States housing market and in the financial techniques invented to drive growth in that sector from the late 1990s through the mid-2000s. The housing boom of the early 2000s did not create an equivalent formal-sector growth in construction employment. Rather, the construction industry underwent a large-scale reorganization that can be generally understood as "flexibilization" within the neoliberal context (Theodore 2007, 251). Informal day labor, a type of low-wage contingent employment, grew considerably during this time period as a result of increased demand for labor in residential construction (Valenzuela et al. 2006; Doussard 2013). This was certainly the case in the San Diego Metropolitan Area (SDMA), where forty-five informal hiring sites were used by approximately one thousand men looking for work each day. The nature of day-labor work requires these men, known as day laborers or *jornaleros*, to adapt quickly to changing employment circumstances. During periods of high employment, they may work for five different employers in a week on five or more different projects. The Great Recession, however, caused profound shifts in labor market circumstances, and fundamentally restructured day-labor markets in the SDMA.

The macro-scale problems caused by the Great Recession are well documented (Harvey 2008; Elsby, Hobjin, and Sahin 2010). There is a disconnect, however, between the macro-level analysis in these studies, and an engagement with the grounded effects of the downturn on individuals, families, and communities. Macro-level analyses are weakened by their inability to link discussions of structural economic issues with the grounded effects of those issues in a meaningful way. This disconnect between macro-level analysis and intensive qualitative research is a common and unnecessary weakness,

in critical geographic research (Fairbanks and Lloyd 2011). In this paper, I draw on data collected during a five-year research project to demonstrate how a mixed-methods approach can generate a more-robust understanding of the impacts of the Great Recession in the SDMA.

My first and most important goal is *to highlight the role that day labor spaces play as part of the survival strategies employed by individuals who were perilously poor even before the "Great Recession."* By telling their stories and highlighting their individual and collective agency, I connect empirically grounded accounts of people's economic struggles to structural processes that generate inequitable social and economic outcomes—both across the globe and on the street corner. It is my hope that these connections strengthen the growing body of ethnographic research that situates observations within critical analysis of neoliberal ideology (See Fairbanks 2011; and Fairbanks and Lloyd 2011). The research should further demonstrate the effectiveness of mixed-methods research for scaling findings up, from the microgeographic to the regional scale. Drawing on more than five years of mixed-methods research on day labor in the SDMA, I present a qualitative typology of day-labor sites in the SDMA, and use that typology as a framework to analyze the effects of the economic downturn on day-labor markets in the region.

Background

Day labor is one type of low-wage contingent employment that has grown in the past thirty years as neoliberal economic reforms have become entrenched in the North American economy (Theodore 2007; Valenzuela Jr. 2003a). That undocumented immigrants comprised roughly seventy-five percent of the United States day-labor population in 2004 reflects the fact that undocumented immigrant laborers, primarily from Mexico and Central America, were and are the preferred workers for employers hoping to cut costs through wage reductions and "flexibilizing" their work force (Theodore 2007, 251). Employers often accomplish further cost savings by avoiding health and safety regulations, violating labor law, and in some instances simply failing to compensate employees for their labor. In the pursuit of profitability, employers in a variety of sectors take advantage of undocumented immigrants' unwillingness to report labor abuses and violations for fear of deportation (Harvey 2005; Theodore 2007). Labor and human rights violations are quite common in the contemporary day-labor market, regardless of documentation status. The systematic rollback of labor protections that grew from the

mid-twentieth century up to today is but one aspect of neoliberal economic policy that shapes the contemporary day-labor markets of the United States.

The growth of the day-labor market over the past twenty years is also intimately tied to the growth of housing markets in the United States (Sassen 2000; Theodore 2007). Investment in housing, combined with all-time high levels of mortgage refinancing, "boosted the United States domestic market for consumer goods and services," further increasing the domestic demand for cheap labor—primarily provided by undocumented immigrants, many of whom settled in nontraditional immigrant destinations where new consumer demand existed (Harvey 2008, 29; Smith and Winders 2008; Winders 2012). It should come as little surprise, then, that day-labor activity increased during the same time period and, similar to transnational immigrants, located hiring sites in areas where demand for labor was greatest (Crotty 2007). According to David Harvey, housing is an industry where excess capital could be "disposed of" during periods of economic stagnation, thus stabilizing the U.S. economy and, by virtue of the intense connectivity of global capital markets, the global economy in the short term (2008, 29). As Harvey and others argue, the processes by which capitalism braces itself against its inherent instability are directly tied to processes of urbanization. And yet the processes of capital investment in the urban environment serve to extend inequality in terms of access to capital, opportunity, and even urban space itself. Inequality is, thereby, "etched on the spatial forms of our cities," which include highly segregated neighborhoods, fortress architecture, gated communities, and privatized public spaces kept under constant surveillance (Harvey 2008, 32). The extreme disparities in income that are characteristic of the neoliberal capitalist economy are in sharp relief in contemporary day-labor markets as well (Harvey 2005; Theodore 2007), where wealthy homeowners are the second-largest employer of *jornaleros* (Valenzuela et al. 2006).

Ethnographic accounts of the lives of day laborers from the past decade uniformly demonstrated the social and economic struggles of *jornaleros*, as well as their ingenuity and resourcefulness in adapting to periodic shifts in labor demand (Crotty and Bosco 2008; Malpica 2002; Turnovsky 2004, 2006; Wakin 2008; Walter et al. 2004). The economic crisis caused by global financial institutions engaging in exceedingly risky investments generated severe shifts in labor demand and extraordinary circumstances to which *jornaleros* in San Diego had to adapt.

Housing and Construction Market Collapse in the San Diego Metropolitan Area

The San Diego Metropolitan Area is, unfortunately, a good location to examine the impacts of the recent economic downturn. The economic history of San Diego is one of repetitive housing crises, dating back as far as the 1800s (Davis, Miller, and Mayhew 2003). Similar to the situation in metropolitan areas throughout the United States, a combination of hyper-inflated housing prices and subprime mortgage financing created a highly unstable real estate market, which began to collapse in early 2007. In the first quarter of 2007, there were 1,183 residential foreclosures in San Diego County, a nearly seven-hundred-percent increase from the previous year (Bouton 2007). Even in 2011, the ratio of homes in foreclosure to the entire housing stock was 1 to 237 (data from http://www.realtytrac.com/home/, and citation available from http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=111494514). Families who were able to remain in their homes were still affected, as property values fell by roughly forty percent from 2006 to 2008 countywide (Bennett 2010; Toscano 2010a, 2010b) (see Figure 1). The housing crisis intensified as the effects of the downturn spread from real estate and banking industries

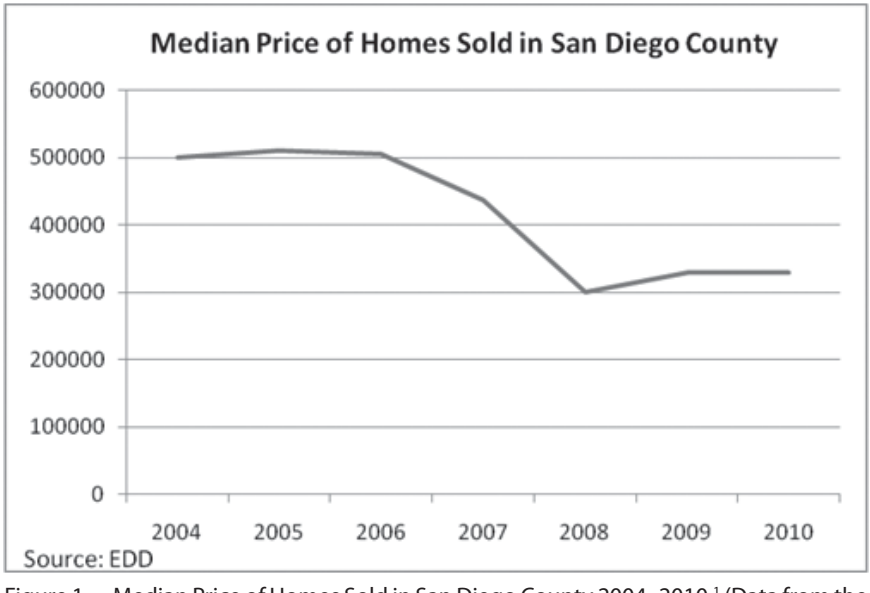

Figure 1.—Median Price of Homes Sold in San Diego County 2004–2010.[1] (Data from the California Employment Development Department [EDD].)

to virtually every sector of the economy, increasing unemployment rate in the county from 4 percent in 2005 to 10.5 percent in 2010 (Bennett 2010).

Though the downturn negatively impacted most sectors of the local economy, the effect on the construction industry was immediate and has worsened over time. As credit dried up for new and ongoing construction projects throughout the region, the number of residential construction permits approved fell by nearly twenty-five percent per year from 2006 to 2008 (State of California EDD).[1] Much of the overall decrease in construction permits is the result of a massive decline in multi-unit housing projects, as investors abandoned apartment-to-condo conversion projects throughout the city. The number of permits for multi-unit housing construction fell by ninety-five percent, from 8,273 in 2005 to 448 in 2008 (Figure 2). Apartment-to-condominium conversions were primarily undertaken by the types of small construction firms and specialty contractors that most frequently hired day laborers (Poitevin 2005). Therefore, the near-total elimination of condo-conversion projects in the region was particularly bad for day laborers' employment opportunities.

The decreased employment in construction was not limited to the informal sector. More than 20,000 total construction jobs were lost in 2008

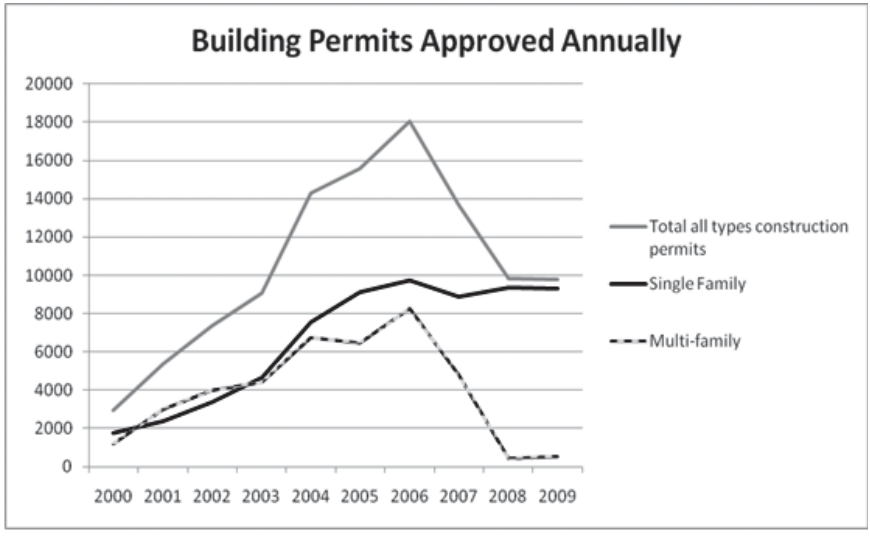

Figure 2.—Total building permits approved annually in San Diego County, 2000–2009. (Data from EDD.)

and 2009, roughly one-third of the full-time industry employees (Toscano 2010a) (Figure 3). Two particular types of construction work were hit hard-

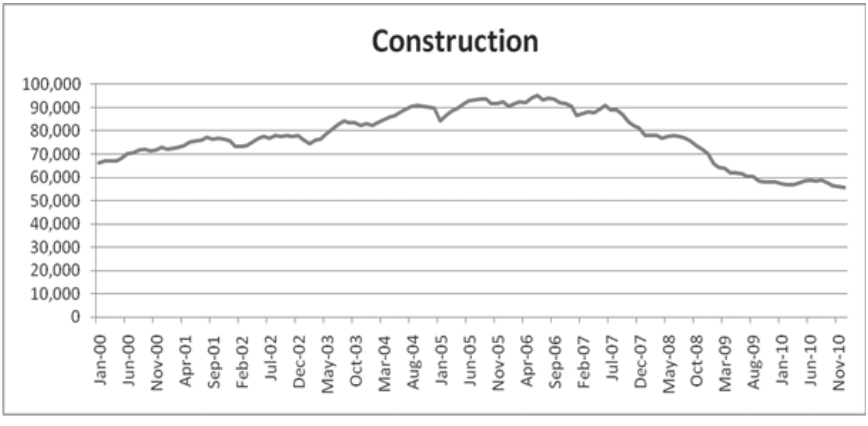

Figure 3.—Total Construction Employment San Diego County, 01/2000–11/2010. (Data from EDD.)

est: residential building construction and specialty trade contractors (Figure 4). These two are some of the most common types of construction work for which day laborers are hired (State of California EDD; Valenzuela Jr. et al. 2006). Considering the high rates of informal or day-labor employment within the construction industry, it is safe to assume that the actual decline in total economic opportunity has been much greater than thirty-three percent. The combined effects of the collapse of the construction industry and the decreasing level of disposable income available to individual homeowners generated considerable effects in day labor markets throughout the region.

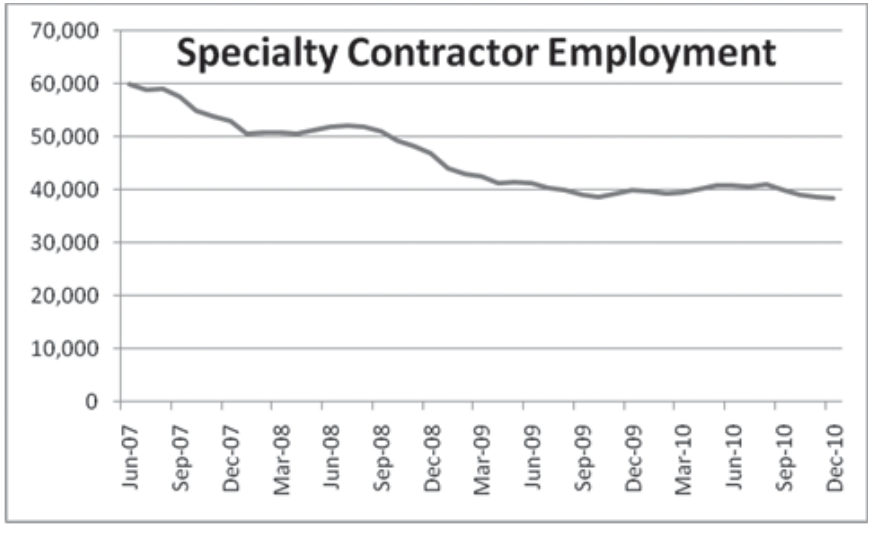

Figure 4.—Total Specialty Contractors in San Diego County, 06/2007–12/2010. (Data from EDD.)

Geography of Day Labor in San Diego

The San Diego Metropolitan Area (SDMA) is comprised of eighteen municipalities covering nearly 4,200 square miles and containing 3.1 million residents. There are a number of place-specific characteristics of the San Diego Metropolitan Area that generate substantial differences between the forty-five day-labor spaces in the region (see Figure 5). First, the day-labor population in San Diego is considerably more diverse than national-level survey data indicate. This is partly the result of the military presence in the region. Many veterans stay in San Diego after completing their service. For some disabled veterans, day labor provides a means of generating income with relatively low repercussions if their disability prevents them from completing a job. These veterans tend to look for work at sites that are accessible via public transit and located near "big box" home-improvement stores such as Home Depot. Sites located adjacent to retail outlets that typically serve the industries in which laborers are employed are known as "connected sites" in day-labor literature (Valenzuela 2003). This includes stores that sell moving supplies, paint, gardening and landscaping supplies, and general home-improvement supplies. Connected sites create a "one-stop shop," where one can purchase the supplies he/she needs for a particular project and hire the workers to get it done efficiently.

Whether a day-labor space is connected or not is important to understanding the types of laborers who are likely to use the space. However, the production of day-labor spaces is the result of many overlapping processes, so analysis of the geography of day labor must incorporate other local attributes. In this case, proximity to public transit and position within urban landscapes prove important. Therefore, in this analysis, I refer to these types of sites as "Urban-Informal-Connected" sites. The geography of public transit accessibility in the SDMA leads to a concentration of these types of hiring sites in the central and eastern parts of the region.

Second, there is an informal day-labor site connected to the current or historical commercial center of nearly every municipality on the rural-suburban fringe of the metropolitan area. The sites at these suburban commercial hubs may or may not be "connected" to a retail outlet that serves the industries in which day laborers are most often hired. The locational logic for these sites, which I refer to as "suburban-commercial-hub" sites, is fairly simple. Where population density and employment opportunities are low, sites must be convenient to the primary activity centers of each small town. As suburban growth has continued in the region, many of the neighborhoods that were once located on the rural-suburban margins of the SDMA became more extensively developed. The process often diminishes the economic centrality of the historic town center, as population density increases and new commercial hubs are built throughout the city. Despite the decreased economic centrality of the town-centers, day-labor hiring sites remain active in those locations.

Finally, the physical geography of the SDMA is fairly rugged, and despite massive development of suburban housing over the past thirty years, there remains a considerable amount of undeveloped open space in the region. Some relatively new migrants to the United States use that undeveloped space to their advantage, in ways that create demographic concentrations at several shape-up sites in the region. Day labor is one of the easiest pathways into the formal economy for recent immigrants without familial or social connections in the United States, many of whom enter the country with little or no financial resources. Camping in undeveloped open spaces allows new immigrants to survive on considerably less income than would be the case in a more-formal housing arrangement. Laborers throughout the region refer to this type of housing arrangement as "living in the mountains." The men who live in these canyons are slightly more likely to be undocumented immigrants than the national average for day laborers. I refer to hiring sites

where a large number of laborers live in improvised campsites nearby as "canyon-adjacent" sites.

The fourth and final type of hiring site in the SDMA is the formal workers' center. These spaces are designated for day-labor activity by local governments or community organizations. Workers centers provide important resources for *jornaleros*; however, due to the formal mechanisms

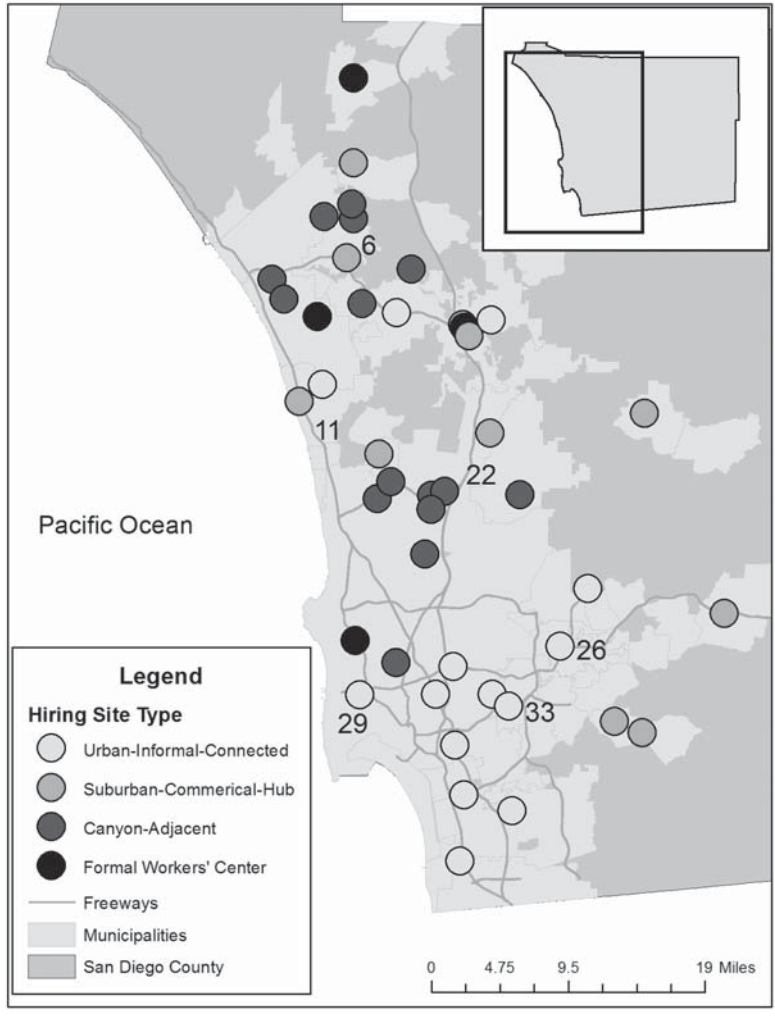

Figure 5.—This map shows all of the day-labor hiring sites in the SDMA by site type.

required to legally designate a space for day-labor activity, workers' centers do not follow a consistent spatial pattern.[1] As such, the three workers' centers in the SDMA figure less heavily in the following analysis.

Taken together, these regionally specific characteristics mean that the overall demographic composition of *jornaleros* in the SDMA is less Hispanic than in national trends, but that the demographic composition of *jornaleros* varies even more substantially between sites within the region. Furthermore, the demographic variations observed between sites follow consistent spatial patterns that relate to neighborhood characteristics and accessibility. Therefore, it is possible to use the regional typology of Urban-Informal-Connected, Suburban-Commercial Hub, Canyon-Adjacent sites, and Formal Workers' Centers as a framework for understanding the effects of the Great Recession on the day-labor community.

Grounded Effects of the Downturn

Employment data at the regional scale demonstrate the severity of the economic downturn for the entire county. However, these data do little to shed light on the spatialized effects of the downturn on day-labor markets throughout San Diego County. In order to better understand the effects of the downturn on particular sites and individual laborers, I draw from the qualitative data collected from 2006 to 2011. The findings presented are drawn from data collected from regular surveys of hiring sites throughout the region, as well as participant observation, interviews, and archival research. Site mapping and surveys took place from 2008 to 2011, and during this period I identified and regularly surveyed the majority of hiring sites in the region.

Six of the forty-five total sites were analyzed further because these sites exhibited particular site, situational, and relational characteristics that were identified as common to many of the sites in the SDMA through visual surveys and landscape analysis. The selected spaces represent the three general types of day-labor sites in San Diego: urban informal connected, canyon-adjacent, suburban commercial hub. At each site, participant observation was conducted for two to four weeks, depending on the circumstances at each site and the effect my presence had on laborers and area stakeholders.

Effects of the Downturn on San Diego Area Day-Labor Markets

Survey and interview data indicate that the number and nature of day-labor work in the SDMA has changed as a result of the economic downturn. Laborers throughout the region have experienced a severe drop in total employment opportunities. During the height of the housing boom, many reported finding three to four full days of work in a good week (Crotty 2007; Seymour 2008; Valenzuela Jr. et al. 2006).[2] Though there is some variation between the different types of hiring sites, by 2010 few laborers reported finding more than one full day of work per week on average. At nearly every hiring site, I encountered laborers who experienced jobless spells of a month or longer (Fieldnotes 2009–2010). The economic challenges posed by the reduction in total jobs are exacerbated by the changing nature of the few jobs that remain. Historically, day laborers sought work in the early morning hours, waiting to be picked up by employers for jobs that lasted a full day at a minimum. Many laborers found employment that would last the length of a construction job, which could be months at a time. Full-day or multi-day jobs have almost completely disappeared. The majority of employers today are individual homeowners who need help with jobs lasting less than half a day. These are the types of jobs that laborers would not have accepted during periods of high employment, especially early the in the day, when the potential to find a full day's work remains.

Changes to the source and length of day-labor jobs have altered the routine within day-labor spaces. During periods of high employment, sites were active as early as 5 a.m., hiring activities were concentrated from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m., and most day-labor hiring activity ceased by 12 p.m. Due to the nearly complete absence of jobs that last eight hours or more, fewer laborers are arriving at the sites in the early morning hours. George Rodriguez, a labor organizer in the region, believes this is partly the result of psychological depression, which is becoming more apparent among the men he waits with each day (Personal Communication 1/10/2011). Long stretches without employment lower *jornaleros*' inclination to arrive at the site early. The same long stretches without employment cause laborers to be desperate for employment of any kind. As a result, day-labor activity also continues later into the day, often as late as 6 p.m. as increasingly desperate laborers wait in hopes of finding employment for even an hour (Fieldnotes, 01/2009–08/2011).

The serious decline in employment opportunity and quality led many *jornaleros* to leave day-labor work during the downturn. Interviews with laborers and other stakeholders near hiring sites indicate that the overall decline in day-labor market participation may be as high as seventy-five percent since 2005. From 2005 to 2010, the number of laborers looking for work at the *Confia en Ti* workers' center in Escondido fell from more than fifty per day to less than ten; the number of *jornaleros* at the informal hiring site outside the workers' center also fell by eighty percent or more (Seymour 2008; Personal Communication 07/01/2010). Survey and interview data suggest that substantial variability exists in the changes to site size and demographic composition across the research area. In fact, during the research period, a number of sites experienced growth in size, racial diversity, and services offered by laborers. All of these changes took place during a time period that net migration from Mexico to the United States has severely decreased or even reversed as a result of the recession (Gentsch and Massey 2011; Massey, Rugh, and Pren 2010; Cave 2011). Changes in migration patterns affected all sites to some degree, but had the most substantial impact at canyon-adjacent sites.

Shrinking Sites: Migrant Campsites and Construction-Town Center Hiring Sites

Throughout the region, the size of migrant campsites and construction-town center sites has decreased. As late as 2008, fifty or more laborers routinely congregated at site 22, a canyon-adjacent site near the center of the SDMA. In 2010, the average number of laborers at the site was down to twenty. Canyon spaces in San Diego County have long housed recent and seasonal migrants from Mexico and Central America who come to the area to work in local agriculture and construction industries (Eisenstadt and Thorup 1994; Crotty 2007). As such, the laborers who congregate at canyon-adjacent sites tend to have fewer and weaker social connections in the area. Many are working to support their families who live in Mexico or Central America. Their spatial disconnection from familial responsibly allows these laborers considerable flexibility in terms of relocating in search of employment. During the downturn many of these migrants chose to leave the region in search of better employment opportunities or areas where they have stronger social ties and, thus, may be better able to weather the economic downturn (Interview Notes 5/21/2009).

The number of laborers also decreased at suburban-commercial-hub sites. Very few of the men who look for work at these sites are homeless; however, this higher degree of local rootedness does not necessarily protect them from the economic hardships that may push people to move in search of a better job. Interview data suggests that undocumented laborers whose children were born in the United States were among the first to leave the region in search of new employment. The situation for laborers with families was explained by Juan, a long-time resident of suburban North County: "For those with children, it is harder because they need more space, they have to pay more rent" (Fieldnotes 9/06/2010). The increased financial responsibility that comes with supporting children reduces the amount of time that a laborer can survive without finding work. The reduction in service-sector employment during the economic downturn generated a secondary push factor for migration decisions. Under better economic circumstances, laborers could weather the downturn in the construction industry by taking a job in the lower end of the service economy, but today even these types of jobs are scarce (Toscano 2010b).

The decline in laborers using canyon-adjacent sites and suburban-commercial-hub sites cannot be attributed entirely to shifting economic circumstances. Even before the housing market collapsed in San Diego, there was considerable pressure on canyon residents to relocate. In 2005, a number of evictions were carried out in one of the largest migrant camping areas in Northern San Diego (Raferty 2010). In the short term after the evictions, laborers were forced out of the canyons where they had collectively lived for more than thirty years. The threat of deportation is not limited to canyon residents, however. Since 2005, the United States Border Patrol has increased its surveillance and policing of day-labor spaces in the region (Chacon and Davis 2006; Theodore 2007). In addition to harassment by border patrol agents, residents in Escondido, California, must regularly pass through police roadblocks ostensibly intended to verify license and vehicle registration, but which often lead to verification of Hispanic residents' citizenship status and deportation if they cannot show proof of residency (Ibarra 2009). Deportations as a result of traffic stops have divided families in the region, as mothers and fathers of American-born children are sent to Mexico while their children remain in the United States. Obviously, this stress is not limited to immigrant day laborers. It is shared by the entire Hispanic community, regardless of documentation status (Hiemstra 2010).

San Diego County Day Laborers in 2010

Despite the significant social and economic challenges that *jornaleros* faced in San Diego County, a substantial number remained by 2010. Even at suburban-commercial-hub and canyon-adjacent sites where the pressures for laborers to relocate or try an alternative means of employment-seeking are the strongest, there are still *jornaleros* looking for work. So who are the remaining laborers? At canyon-adjacent sites, there are two distinct groups of laborers. The first group is composed of undocumented migrants from Mexico who arrived recently, have no local networks, and are trying to establish themselves in the United States. They are not necessarily tied to the San Diego region and may relocate to places where they believe there are better employment prospects (Personal Communications 01/2009–08/2011).

The second group of laborers still using canyon-adjacent sites are undocumented migrants from Central America. In San Diego, these migrants are most commonly from Guatemala and El Salvador. Many of the Central American laborers have resided in the United States for a year or more and have considered returning to their home countries. Those who remain view the return trip through Mexico as substantially more dangerous than their current situation (Personal Communication 01/10/2011).

The laborers who remain at suburban-commercial-hub sites tend to be much longer tenured in the United States than the *jornaleros* at canyon-adjacent sites. Many have been in the country for a decade or more, and are well connected into local employment networks. Juan, a thirty-year resident of Vista, California, and a citizen of the United States for the past twenty years, returned from a vacation visiting his family in Mexico to find that the job he held for twenty-five years at a local lumber yard was no longer available. He explained: "They said they were sorry, but they couldn't afford to keep me. If things get better they will give me my job back. If I still want it then!" (Personal Communication 9/06/2010). Fifty-five-year-old Juan chose to remain in the United States and look for work as a day laborer rather than return to Mexico. His decision was based on a long-term goal of bringing his family to the United States legally, which he believed was unlikely if he returned to Mexico for an extended period of time. Juan's case is just one example of long-time residents adapting to economic challenges by looking for work as day laborers.

Informal interviews with other *jornaleros* who were long-term residents in the United States brought to light a more troubling reason for remaining

in this country. Hispanic laborers who have lived in the United States up to thirty years repeatedly expressed fear that they or their loved ones could be kidnapped by local bandits operating on the misconception that the laborers have become wealthy during their time in the United States (Fieldnotes 09/2010–4/2011). The complex interactions between the regional economy of San Diego, border militarization, and the socio-economic circumstances of the transnational places where laborers are socially connected produce the socio-spatial landscape that each laborer must negotiate in order to maximize his chances for employment and/or survival.

The demographic composition of laborers at canyon-adjacent and suburban-commercial-hub sites demonstrates the complicated and somewhat contradictory nature of socio-economic processes under neoliberal capitalism. At hiring sites near migrant campgrounds, the total number of laborers has shrunk considerably. However, the underlying migration momentum from Mexico and Central America has not ceased completely during the downturn, so a small number of laborers still depend on the canyon-adjacent hiring sites in their daily search for employment (Cave 2011). The effects of the downturn at suburban-commercial-hub sites are even less unidirectional than at canyon-adjacent sites. Many former day-labor market participants have left the market looking for employment in other economic sectors or even resorted to migration to improve their family's economic circumstances. At the same time, long-term residents of the neighborhoods near suburban commercial hubs, many of whom were previously employed in the formal sector, are increasingly turning to day-labor work as a means of income generation. The racial/ethnic composition of new entrants to the day-labor market corresponds quite closely with site type as the new entrants at suburban-commercial-hub sites are almost entirely Hispanic, while those at urban-informal-connected sites are more racially diverse.

Expanding Sites: Urban-Informal-Connected Day-Labor Spaces

The number of laborers seeking work at several urban-informal-connected sites has increased during the economic downturn. According to the manager of the Home Depot location near site 29, from 2008 to 2010 the number of day laborers congregating on the streets adjacent to the store increased at least fivefold from ten or less per day to fifty or more on average (Fieldnotes 6/3/2010) (see Figures 2–7). The racial demographics of the laborers at the

site are also different when compared with the regional averages. While the majority of day laborers in the county are Hispanic, on a given day there may be as many as thirty White and African-American laborers at site 29 (Fieldnotes 5/2010–7/2010). The increased size and diversity of the day-labor population at site 29 can be understood as effects of the economic downturn. As a direct result of decreased formal employment opportunities in construction, an ever-increasing number of unemployed men are trying their hand at day-labor work. Some of these new entrants are formerly full-time employed construction workers who have resorted to seeking work as day laborers as a result of the downturn.

I met Wesley at site 29 in June of 2010. He is a fifty-eight-year-old African-American former marine who served in the Vietnam War. For the past ten years he has worked "off the books" as a handyman and general construction worker. During those ten years he never went to a day-labor site to find work; instead he relied on social and professional networks to maintain consistent employment informally. It was only in 2009 that he began looking for work at day labor sites, shortly after his girlfriend ended their two-year relationship. Wesley went on to explain that the breakup not only hurt him emotionally, but also professionally as well because he had spent the previous year refurbishing her home and yet she was unlikely to recommend his work as a result of their failed romance (Personal Communication 5/27/2010). The desire to relocate in search of better financial and social prospects is not lost on Wesley. During the weeks we talked at the hiring site, he was planning a move to Orlando, Florida. Wesley had never been to Orlando, and unlike most migrants, he wanted to move someplace where he knew no one. It was clear from our conversations that economic circumstances were not the primary basis for Wesley's desire to move. However, without children, family, a substantial number of close friends, or consistent employment in the area, Wesley felt that he had "no reason to stay" and needed a fresh start.

Mobility is a crucial aspect of the search for day-labor employment, and is one way that laborers exercise their entrepreneurial ingenuity in the hiring process (Valenzuela 2001). Every morning, each laborer makes a decision regarding where he will wait for work, in hopes that employers will also be looking to hire laborers at the same site that day. Despite the range of sites that are potentially accessible to laborers, most choose to wait at the same site each day (Crotty and Bosco 2008, Turnovsky 2004, 2006). Some

laborers, however, choose to look for work at multiple sites. Raymond is one such example.

Unlike most day laborers, Raymond looks for work at three sites each week (site #29, 33, and 26) (see Figure 5). Before the downturn, Raymond worked five days a week as a handyman, and looked for work at site 26 only on his days off. He eventually lost his regular employment, and because he was paid off the books, was not eligible for unemployment benefits. Raymond's site-hopping strategy is rare among laborers who more often prefer to wait for work in the same place where they know the other workers, local business employees, and the preferences of local authorities. Raymond views his chances of employment as relatively equal at his three preferred sites, and chooses to look for work at multiple sites mainly to avoid boredom in his daily routine.

Raymond's case also underscores the importance of public transit access for the establishment and maintenance of most urban informal connected sites in San Diego County. All of the sites that Raymond visits during his weekly routine are easily accessible from his home in downtown San Diego via the trolley (Fieldnotes 6/9/2011). The disproportionate increase in the size of trolley-accessible sites during the economic downturn demonstrates the importance of individual mobility for adapting to changing economic circumstances (Walker et al. 1992; Cresswell 2006; Joassart-Marcelli and Alberto 2006; Zenou 2008).

The importance of mobility for laborers is poignantly demonstrated by Jose. Jose is a fifty-five-year-old Hispanic-American, legally residing in San Diego for the past twenty-six years. He is married and has two adult children who live locally. For most of his life he worked as an off-the-books painter and roofer, but when we spoke in March of 2011, he had not found work in more than forty-five days and was surviving on less than one dollar per day, which he earned by recycling cans and bottles he collected around the hiring site. The long periods of unemployment put a strain on his familial relationships both emotionally and financially. He was evicted from the apartment he shared with his wife, after which his wife moved in with one of their adult children. Rather than further burden his adult children, Jose chose to live in a canyon near the urban-informal-connected site where he looks for work. For Jose, proximity to public transit that he depends on to visit his family and a local food bank is of critical importance for his survival. Jose is not alone in the canyon, either. Approximately one-third of the laborers who look for employment at the same site as Jose also live in the same canyon.

The economic challenges posed by the collapse of the construction industry are borne by laborers and their former employers alike. A number of the laborers at site 29 and other urban-informal-connected sites throughout the region are contractors who not so long ago hired help from the sites where they now wait for work. Jesus is a contractor who runs a small construction business specializing in outdoor patio and fireplace construction. He was born in San Diego, has lived here his entire life, and is raising his children in the city. For more than ten years, Jesus hired temporary help at the same site where he now waits for work. He was hesitant to start waiting for work at the day-labor site because he felt his time could be better spent networking to find projects for his business. Eventually Jesus decided to look for work at day-labor sites due to his family's increasingly desperate financial circumstances, which already forced his daughter to move because he could not afford to pay for both her dormitory at San Diego State University and the family's mortgage. In spite of the challenges, Jesus has no plans to leave the area. San Diego is his family's home (Personal Communication 11/10/2010).

Some new entrants to the day-labor market have never worked in construction, but are looking for jobs as day laborers to help them survive until they can find new full-time employment. Dwayne is one such laborer. Dwayne is an African-American man in his late thirties. After serving in the military, he worked as a truck driver for ten years, but was let go in 2008 when his company instituted cost-cutting measures to remain in business. I spoke with Dwayne the first day he arrived at site 29 looking for work.

> Author: How long have you been out of work?
>
> Dwayne: I got laid off in January [2010]. Been living off my savings since then, but it's getting real low, you know? It's getting real scary.
>
> Author: So why did you decide to come look for work here?
>
> Dwayne: Well, like I said, this guy I live with downtown who looks like you… he told me this was a good place to find a job. I've been putting in applications all over town, so I figured I'd apply for some jobs driving for the companies over there (points to a street with several warehouse stores), and then check this place out while I'm over here.

Dwayne is from Arkansas originally and still has family there, but he does not believe they could help him find a steady job or support him financially. His desire to stay in San Diego is based on his belief that despite

limited social and economic support network there, his opportunities overall are better than in Arkansas with his extended family.

While the life histories of Wesley, Raymond, Jose, Jesus, and Dwayne are unique, their economic situations and conditions of employment are not. Each of these men is a new entrant to the day-labor market, and began looking for work "on the corner" due to the economic challenges he faced during the 2007–2010 recession (Personal Communication 06/22/2012). These new entrants are not evenly distributed across sites throughout the SDMA, but rather are focused at suburban-commercial-hub and urban-informal-connected sites. The greatest increase in site size during the downturn occurred at urban-informal-connected sites that are both connected to a big-box home improvement store and easily accessible by public transit.

Finally, as a result of the economic downturn, the day laborers who remain at urban-informal-connected sites tend to have greater local resources at their disposal on average. Before the downturn, much of the current day-labor population was employed full time in construction or construction services. As a result, these men also tend to be higher skilled and have more work experience than previous market participants. They offer a wider range of services than did day laborers even two years ago. For example, laborers at site 29 offer hazardous waste disposal services, general hauling, and skilled construction trades such as framing and masonry. These laborers are quite proactive in making contact with potential employers at the site, and utilize marketing strategies not previously popular at day-labor sites. Some laborers use their vehicles to help advertise their particular skills or services offered (Figure 6). These laborers are keenly aware of the importance of making their signs visible, and are protective of the parking spots that are most visible to Home Depot customers. These spots are considered so valuable that the laborers work in teams, and use a second car to "hold the spot" when they (and their truck) are hired for a job. Sadly, many of these laborers also live in their vehicles, choosing to give up their formal housing rather than sell income-generating assets such as their trucks or tools to pay the rent.

Many laborers also have business cards which they give to employers and potential employers. Some of the laborers I spoke with believed that having a business card was one way of distinguishing themselves from other men looking for work on the street. In some cases, markers of social capital like a business card can be used to overcome common employer prejudices based on race or even age. By "social capital," I refer to the understanding of social norms of behavior and interaction in particular environments.

Figure 6.—*Jornaleros* at this site offer an expanded range of services.

Social capital theories argue that economic success is largely the result of an individual's access to networks that provide economic opportunities, as well as socio-cultural experiences throughout the individual's life that train him in the proper behavioral norms to be successful (Mayer 2003). Understanding employers' expectations or preferences in terms of dress, language, and other norms of social interaction is an important part of laborers' strategies for differentiating themselves in a highly competitive labor market.

> Wesley: Well, you know the Mexicans get all the work here.
>
> Author: Really? So how do you get by?
>
> Wesley: Well, I do okay. See I dress nice, real clean. And I got the business cards too. Ain't too many guys out here with cards, so that shows them that I've got myself together. Then if I get a job and they like the work, they can call me and I don't have to mess around here on the street.

Wesley touches on the most important element in the business card: the laborer's mobile phone number. Almost all the day laborers at the Point Loma Home Depot have a mobile phone, which they use to keep in

contact with employers. Previous research has noted that for day laborers, mobile phone ownership reflects an investment in repeated and long-term employment (Crotty and Bosco 2008). This is still the case today; however, the importance of maintaining contact with recent employers is ever more critical considering the lack of employment opportunities overall. The increased importance and accessibility of mobile phones has altered the nature of day-labor spaces in a functional sense as well. Many day laborers use the hiring sites simply as pre-arranged meeting places for jobs that are arranged earlier on the phone. This allows the laborer and employer to meet their professional needs without providing the opposite party with additional or sensitive personal information such as a laborer's housing status or an employers' home address.

Social Impacts of the Economic Downturn

The economic downturn has caused multiple and complex changes to the day-labor market in San Diego. What the effect of these changes will be is yet to be determined, though the economic downturn has also led to higher level of tolerance for day-labor activities in the region. Specifically, during the economic downturn, two new sites were established at big-box home improvement stores in northern San Diego County. The fact that some of the laborers who use these newly established sites are White generated a series of articles sympathetic to the plight of these non-stereotypical laborers, who were forced into day-labor work by the recession (Berestein 2009). Nearly simultaneously reporters throughout the United States took notice and stories of the day-laboring victims of the recession began popping up in newspapers across the country (Bazar 2009; Costa 2008; Eisenstadt and Thorup 1994; Esbenshade 2000; Varsanyi 2008a, 2008b). These articles fail to mention that there have always been White day laborers, and even more who are citizens of the United States. What is most interesting, however, is that the severity of the economic downturn provided a social context within which laborers could be viewed with sympathy rather than the more typical fearful and anti-immigrant rhetoric that has characterized day-labor discourses of the past twenty-five years (Eisenstadt and Thorup 1995; Esbenshade 2000; Varsanyi 2008). The media coverage has had a quieting effect on community tensions regarding day-labor activity, and, in particular, has led to a decrease in police attention and harassment at San Diego North County hiring sites.[3]

Concluding Discussion

Day-labor markets are an important, if understudied and undertheorized, part of the United States economy. The "Great Recession" of 2005–2011 drastically altered day-labor markets in San Diego County. It decreased total employment opportunities, reduced the average length of the remaining job opportunities, and generated massive changes in the demographic composition of hiring sites throughout the region. These changes are geographically distinct, however, and are the result of each hiring site's situation within the urban environment. In this paper, the stories of each laborer's experiences during the downturn provide important details regarding the way that neoliberal reforms and policies implemented at the federal, state, or municipal scale produce spatialized effects at the scale of the day-labor site. These *jornaleros'* stories begin to illustrate the emotional geography of day labor—how each man's experience of poverty and struggles during the downturn is intrinsically linked to his own life-history and the emotional networks he fights to maintain, as was the case for Jesus, or cast aside as was the case for Wesley. In this way, the effects of neoliberal policy at broader scales are made tangible and mapped within day-labor spaces, and on the bodies of those most affected.

The typology of sites presented provides a tool for better understanding how particular spaces and the people who inhabit them are relationally connected. It is also important to point out that the typology is flexible and should be adapted to local contexts when applied outside of the San Diego region. That flexibility is critical when we consider, for example, the situation of Jose, who lives in a canyon but looks for work at a site designated as an urban-informal-connected site. The basis for hiring site's existence in that location is not due to a historical connection with immigrants living in the canyon, but rather its position within the public transit network and proximity to two major freeways. However, Jose's decision to live in that *particular canyon* was driven by his own socio-spatial needs. He chose a location where he could easily access the site where he waits for work, and by extension the public transit network he uses to visit his family and access social services that he depends upon. It is Jose's social rootedness in the community that limits his "options" for rent-free living spaces. Jose's story also provides a poignant example of the way hard-working, perilously poor residents adapt to rapidly changing, mostly deteriorating economic circumstances. These economic circumstances are not of their own making, but are the result of

structural economic processes that connect places and people across the globe to a degree never seen before in human history.

The locations of prototypical canyon-adjacent sites are based on a historical connection to the local agricultural industry, and the laborers who congregate at those sites have historically lacked local social networks due to the seasonal nature of the employment opportunities available. The nature of those employment opportunities shifted dramatically during the housing boom, during which time a considerable proportion of the productive agricultural land in northern San Diego County was converted to housing, leading one expert on the region to state that "the biggest crop, of late, is housing" (Ford 2005, 209). The increase in employment availability did not result in an equivalent increase in the local social networks of laborers at canyon-adjacent sites. Though demand for their labor obviously existed, neither affordable housing nor efficient public transit was part of suburban development. The laborers who sought work at canyon-adjacent hiring sites are socially isolated and, with few exceptions, fail to develop social networks in the neighborhoods they help to build and maintain (Eisenstadt and Thorup 1994). As a result, the laborers at canyon-adjacent sites remained relatively more connected to their homes in Mexico and Central America than the neighborhoods where they lived and worked.

My findings show that, even when jobs are scarce, day-labor markets act as a thin social safety net for laborers of a variety of backgrounds. Space on the sidewalk is often shared by military veterans, whose pension does not provide sufficient income to survive in San Diego, and small business owners who do not qualify for unemployment assistance due to their self-employment status. Newly arriving migrants congregate on street corners waiting for a chance to work, either to support the families they left behind in their home countries or to build a new life in America. Day labor also supports migrants who have lived in the United States for many years but for a variety of reasons choose not to return to their native homes during difficult economic periods.

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Endnotes

1 Data from California Employment Development Department (EDD), http://www.calmis.ca.gov/htmlfile/county/sdiego.htm. For an in-depth discussion of workers' centers in the day-labor context, see Valenzuela et al. (2006). Fine (2006) provides a broader discussion of workers' centers in the United States.

2 A "full day" of work is defined as eight hours of paid employment.

3 Border patrol officers have increased their presence in northern San Diego County during the downturn. Therefore, the reduction in local police attention to day-labor

sites may also be due to increasing surveillance of the sites by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers.