Forced Displacement of People Experiencing Homelessness: Housing and Movement Outcomes after Encampment Clearances

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Introduction

The 2024 *Grants Pass* decision newly emboldens US cities to manage visible homelessness through forced displacement—namely encampment clearances. Proponents argue that these tactics encourage people to accept resources, while officials claim that they prioritize public health, community safety, and inhabitant vulnerability (Herring et al 2020; Margier 2023; Robinson 2019). However, clearances can worsen people's physical security, service use, support networks, and legal involvement. Individuals also often lose belongings and survival supplies during such events (Darrah-Okike et al. 2018; Chang et al. 2022; Goldshear et al. 2023).

Despite ample literature on the harmful impacts of clearances, people's pathways following displacement remain less clear. To address these gaps, this study leverages novel street outreach data from Seattle, Washington to evaluate:

- The size of camp communities following removal;
- People's relocation patterns;
- The likelihood of movement and housing outcomes; and
- The effects of individual and contextual factors.

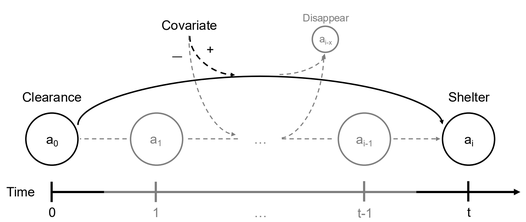
Data and Methods

Utilizing publicly available encampment journals, we identified the largest clearances conducted by the City of Seattle since 2016. Service provider ETS REACH then used outreach data to query clients displaced from selected sites. REACH compiled spatiotemporal data on service providers' encounters with these clients, including information on their living situations, demographics, and health issues (n = 468).

Modeling Outcomes: We employ egocentric relational event models (REM) to predict the risks of a client "disappearing," moving between Census tracts, or entering shelter or housing. We also evaluate the effects of individual covariates, time, and location. All models employ a Bayesian estimator with weakly informative priors (μ = 0, ω = 100, ε = 4).

Descriptive Mapping: The study further examines encampment counts to capture how removal impacts social networks and visibility. We also explore distances traveled by unsheltered clients relative to their clearance locations.

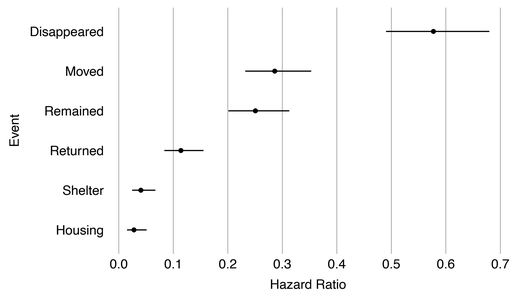
REM Model



Our models estimate the likelihood of an event (a_i) occurring at a given time (t) following a clearance (a_0). Intervening events (a_1 to a_{i-1}) may mediate the risk of a_i, while individual and environmental covariates can moderate this pathway. A client can exit the system by losing contact with service providers.

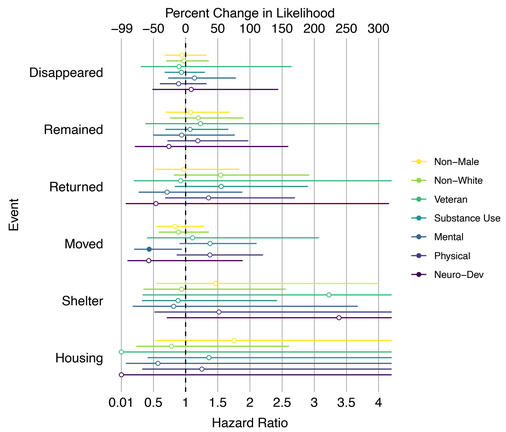
Results

Displaced clients appear unlikely to move indoors. The risk of "disappearing" or losing contact with service providers is 14x higher than entering shelter and 20x that of housing (p < 0.05).



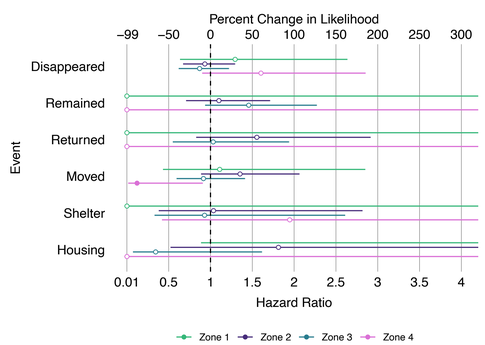
Posterior mode estimates and 95% credible intervals; one-year window. Higher ratios suggest greater likelihoods of occurrence.

These trends hold regardless of individual demographics. Though we predict a 57% decrease in the relative risk of moving tracts for clients with mental illness (p < 0.05).

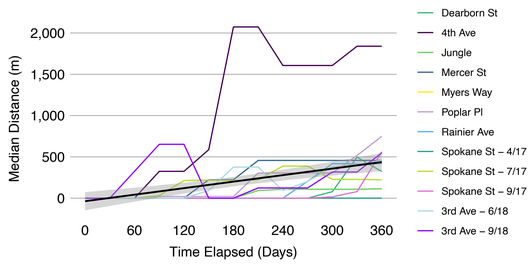


Credible intervals that span 1 suggest no significant difference.

Neighborhood context may matter. People are less likely to relocate tracts in non-residential areas (Zone 3) and more likely to experience "churn" in mixed-use districts (Zone 2) (p < 0.1).

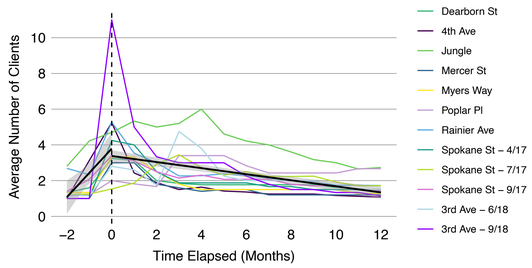


Clearances do not displace clients far, and people quickly return. REACH encounters most clients *at* their initial encampment location within 30 and 60 days of removal. After one year, staff still engage with the median client within 380m of their displacement sites.



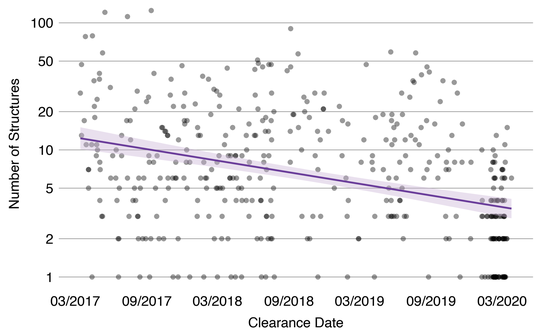
Median distance traveled relative to original location, per removal event. Black ribbon represent a LOESS smoothing curve with a 95% CI.

Removals still disrupt the growth of encampments and sever camp networks.

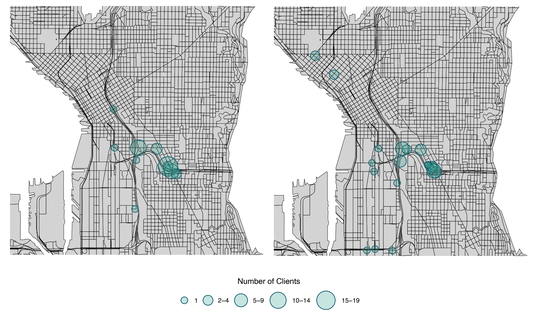


Mean number of clients at a point location by shared removal event.

Forced displacement may reduce the spatial concentration of unsheltered residents. The average size of encampments cleared by authorities has steadily decreased, despite the city's unsheltered population remaining stable.



Number of encampment structures at inspection by clearance date. The purple line and ribbon represent a robust linear trend and 95% CI.



Number of Jungle clients at coordinate locations upon displacement (left) and after one year (right).

Maps also suggest stability in encampment locations but declines in population size.

Discussion

The likelihood of moving indoors following a clearance appears low, and clients typically do not relocate far. Such findings highlight the geographically constrained nature of unhoused travel (Jocoy and Del Casino 2010) and residential mobility in (Crowder et al. 2011), as well as people's strong place attachments (Beckett and Herbert 2010; Darrah-Okike et al. 2018). These patterns moreover reflect other processes of forced displacement, such as eviction, whereby state action circulates poor tenants between disadvantaged neighborhoods (Desmond 2016). Nevertheless, clearances may still "invisibilize" homelessness—echoing a historic theme of US poverty governance.

Conclusion

Our paper helps clarify the trajectories of displaced residents. Although we do not assess the causal impact of removals on housing pathways, future studies could control for exposure to displacement (e.g., across sanctioned and unauthorized sites). Nevertheless, our findings still support critiques that removal does not bring people indoors and may instead serve to manage urban aesthetics. Communities must continue interrogating such tactics that fail to reduce homelessness, while advocating for those evidenced to increase housing equity.

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