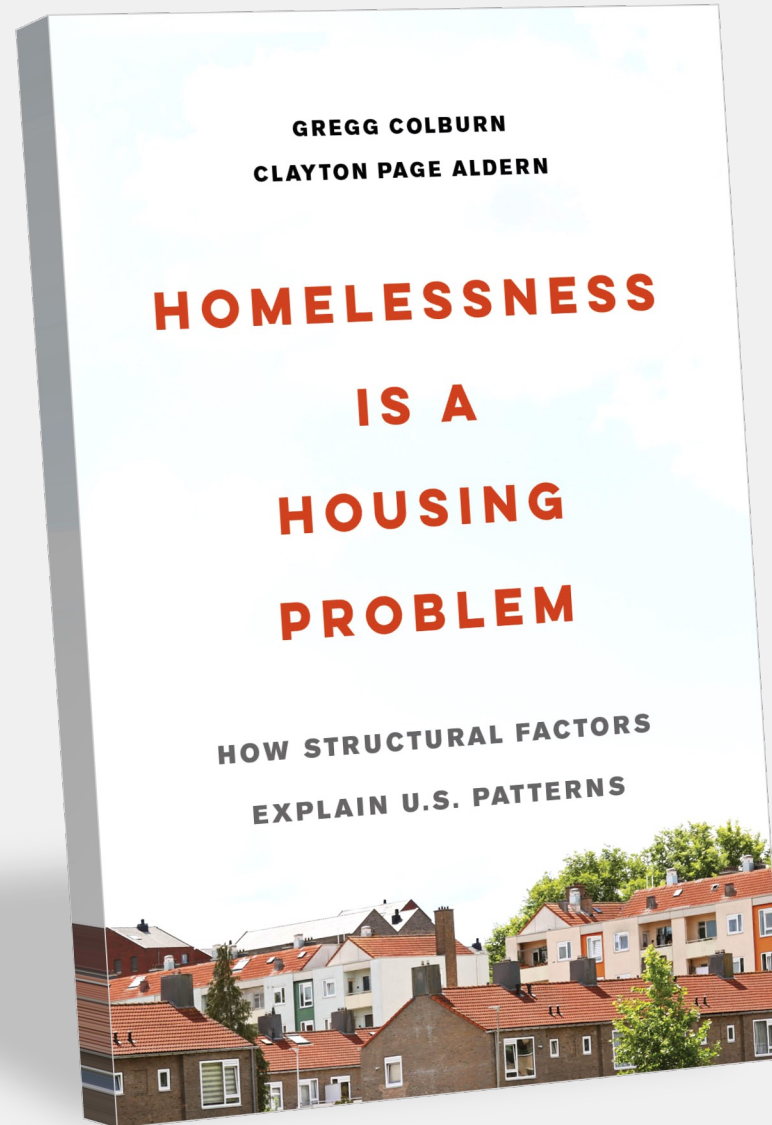


# Homelessness is a **Housing** Problem

The Office of the Vermont State Treasurer:  
Virtual Policy Forum on Homelessness

Gregg Colburn | July 24, 2023  
University of Washington

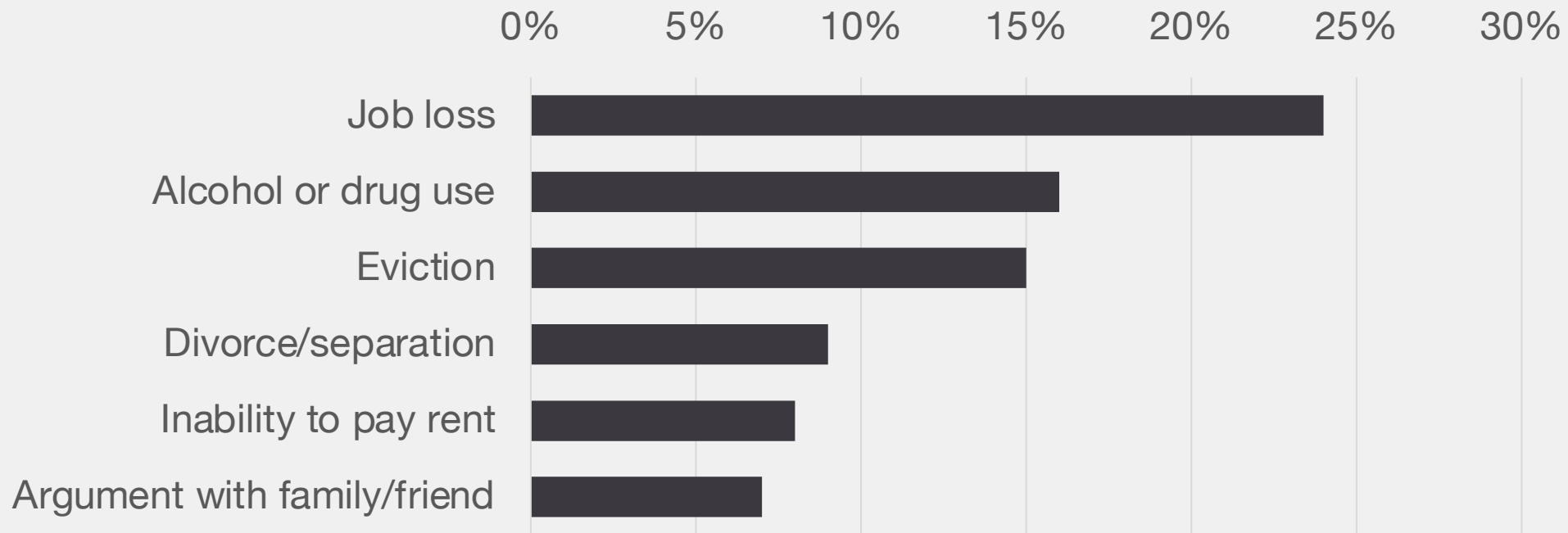




(The book)

# Causes of Homelessness

According to the 2019 Point-in-Time homelessness census in Seattle/King County, survey results suggest the following events or conditions lead to homelessness:



# Causes of Homelessness

Are these conventional explanations of homelessness **root causes** or **precipitating events**?

# Causes of Homelessness

*Ten friends decide to play a game of musical chairs and arrange ten chairs in a circle. A leader begins the game by turning on the music, and everyone begins to walk in a circle inside the chairs. The leader removes one chair, stops the music, and the ten friends scramble to find a spot to sit—leaving one person without a chair. The loser, Mike, was on crutches after spraining his ankle. Given his condition, he was unable to move quickly enough to find a chair during the scramble that ensued.*

What caused Mike's chairlessness?



# Causes of Homelessness

- Research demonstrates that drug use, mental illness, and poverty increase the risk of homelessness at the individual level.
- But why do these conditions produce homelessness in some geographic contexts (Boston) and not others?



# Introduction

- **Why do rates of homelessness vary so widely throughout the United States?**  
Why, for example, does Seattle have between four and five times the per capita homelessness of Chicago?
- Does Los Angeles have a large homelessness problem because it has more people with these individual vulnerabilities?





# Introduction

- This is a book about cities, not about people.
- Understanding who becomes homeless is an important question, but it doesn't help us understand regional variation (i.e. large racial disparities).
- Our thesis: **Tight housing markets accentuate vulnerabilities.**
- Individual vulnerabilities serve as a sorting mechanism in tight housing markets.



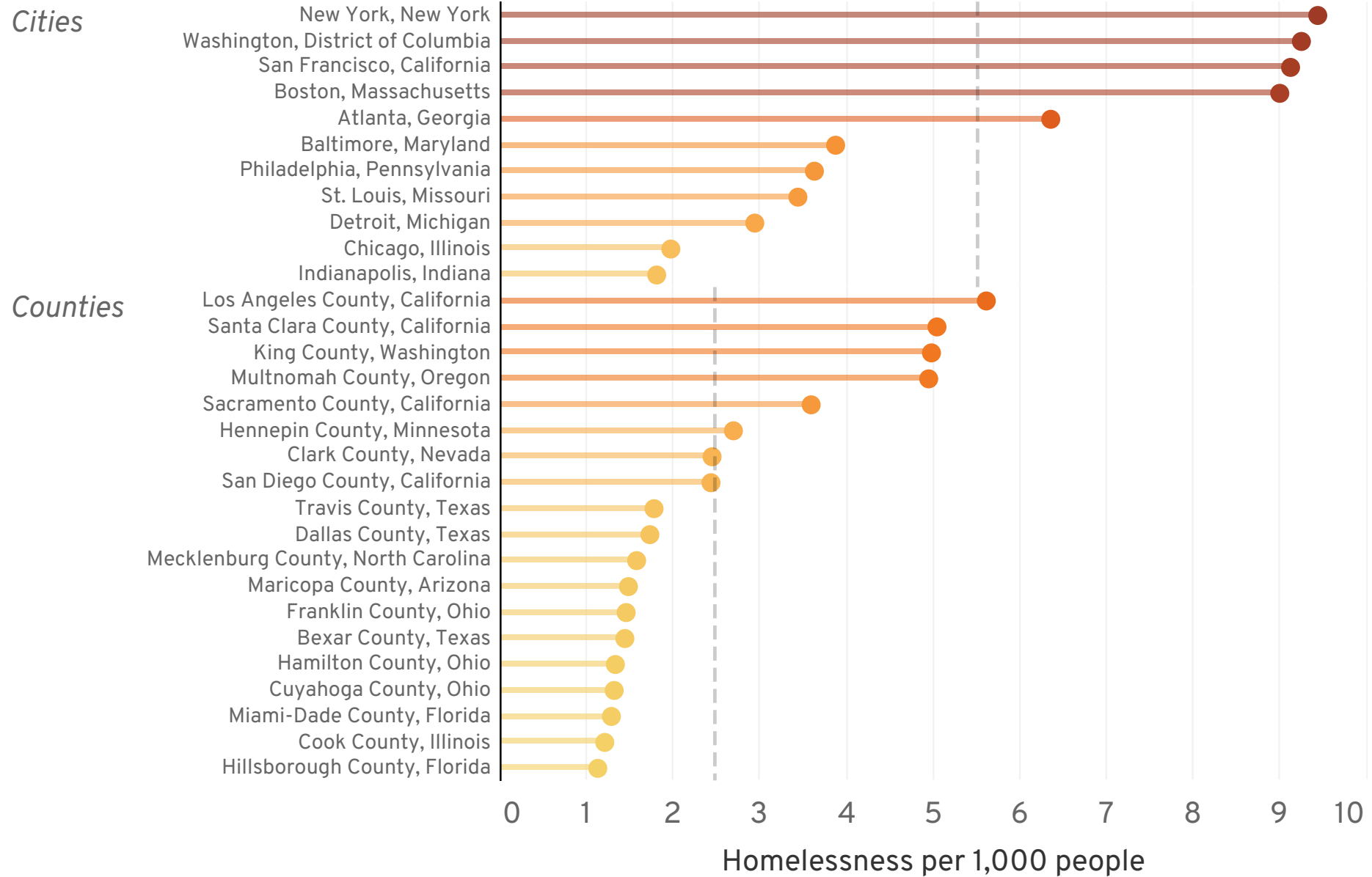


# **Rates** of Homelessness



# Per capita rates of homelessness in select U.S. regions, 2019

*Dashed lines indicate city and county averages of per capita PIT counts*



# Potential explanations:

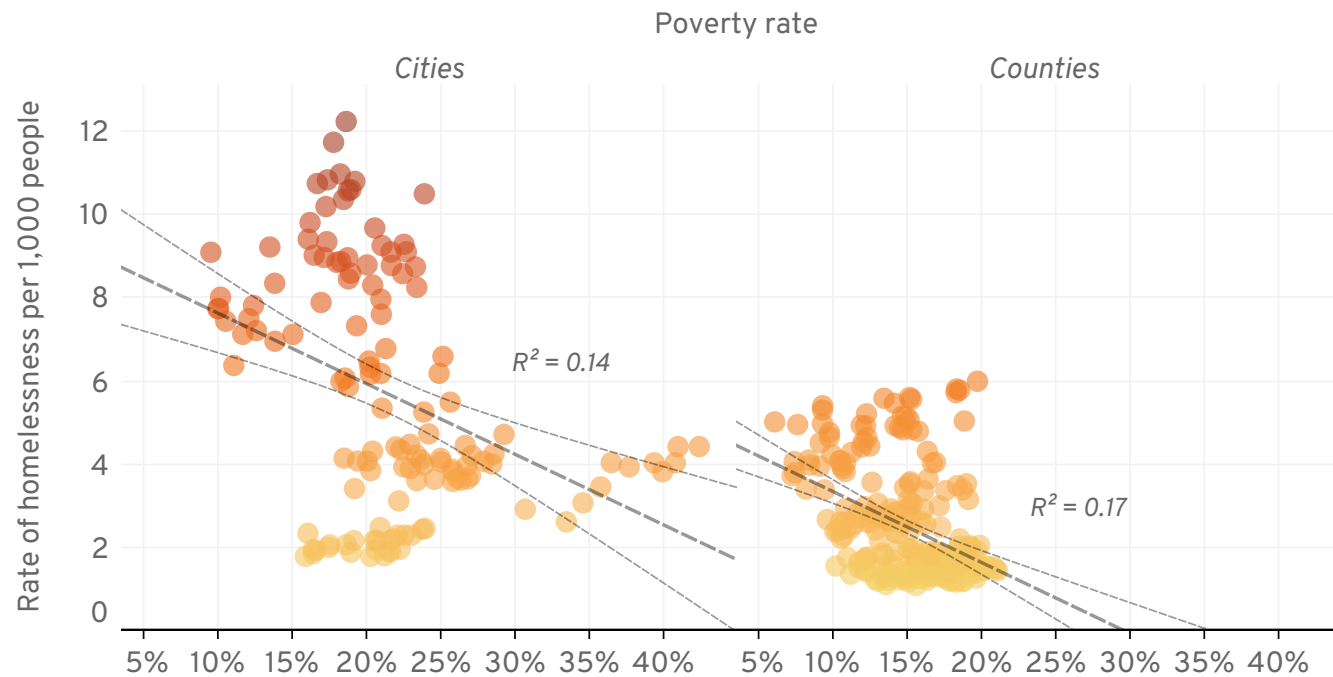
## The individual



# Potential explanations: The individual

## Percent with income below poverty level versus PIT count (per capita)

*Dashed lines indicate a linear regression of per capita PIT counts onto poverty rate between 2007 and 2019 for a sample of U.S. regions.*

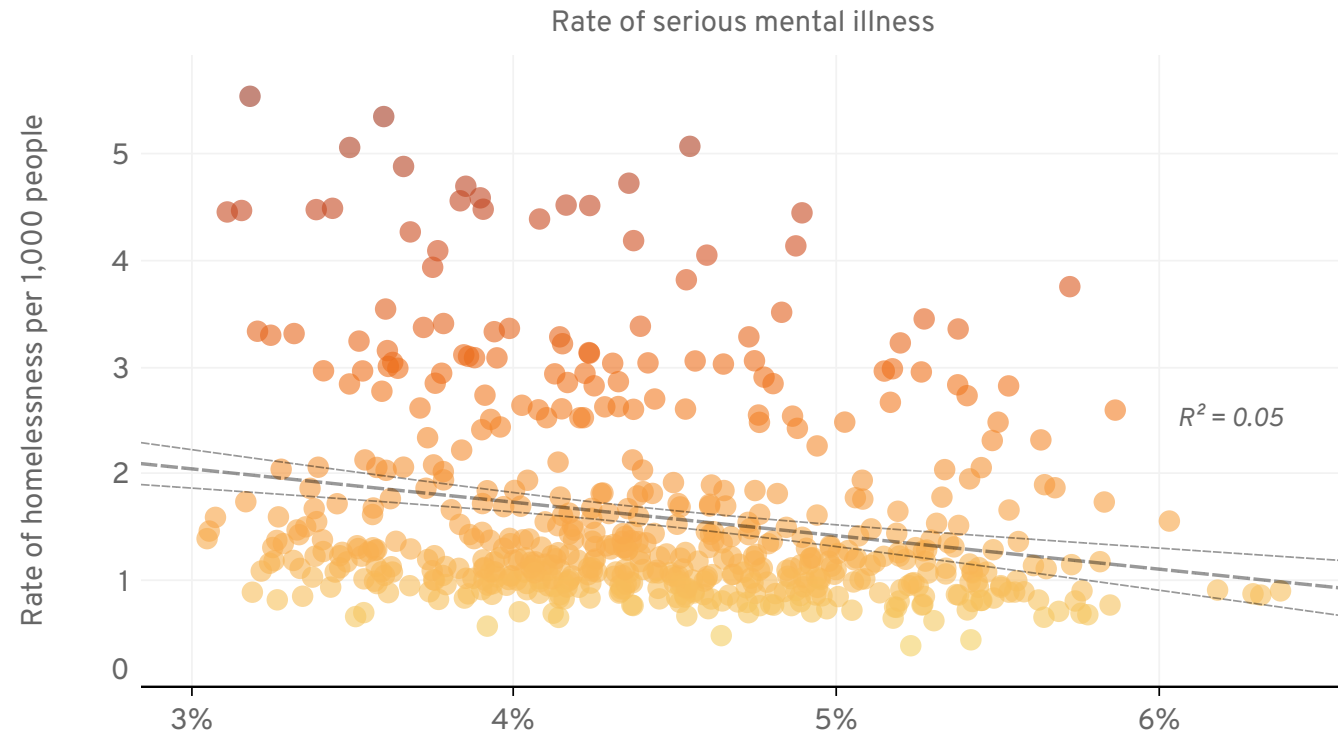


*Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals for the slope of the regression line.*

# Potential explanations: The individual

## Rate of serious mental illness versus PIT count (per capita)

*Dashed lines indicate a linear regression of per capita PIT counts onto rates of serious mental illness in U.S. states between 2007 and 2019.*

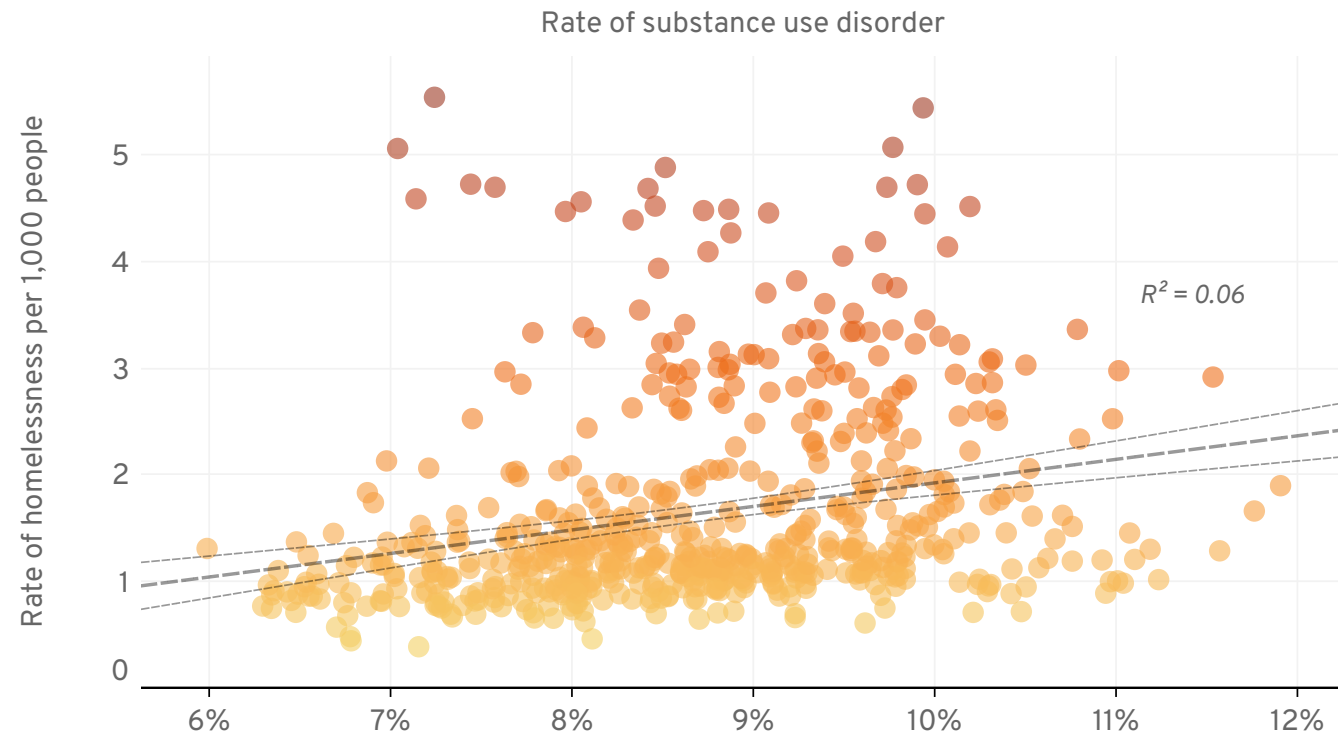


*Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals for the slope of the regression line.*

# Potential explanations: The individual

## Rate of substance use disorder versus PIT count (per capita)

*Dashed lines indicate a linear regression of per capita PIT counts onto rates of substance use disorder in U.S. states between 2007 and 2019.*



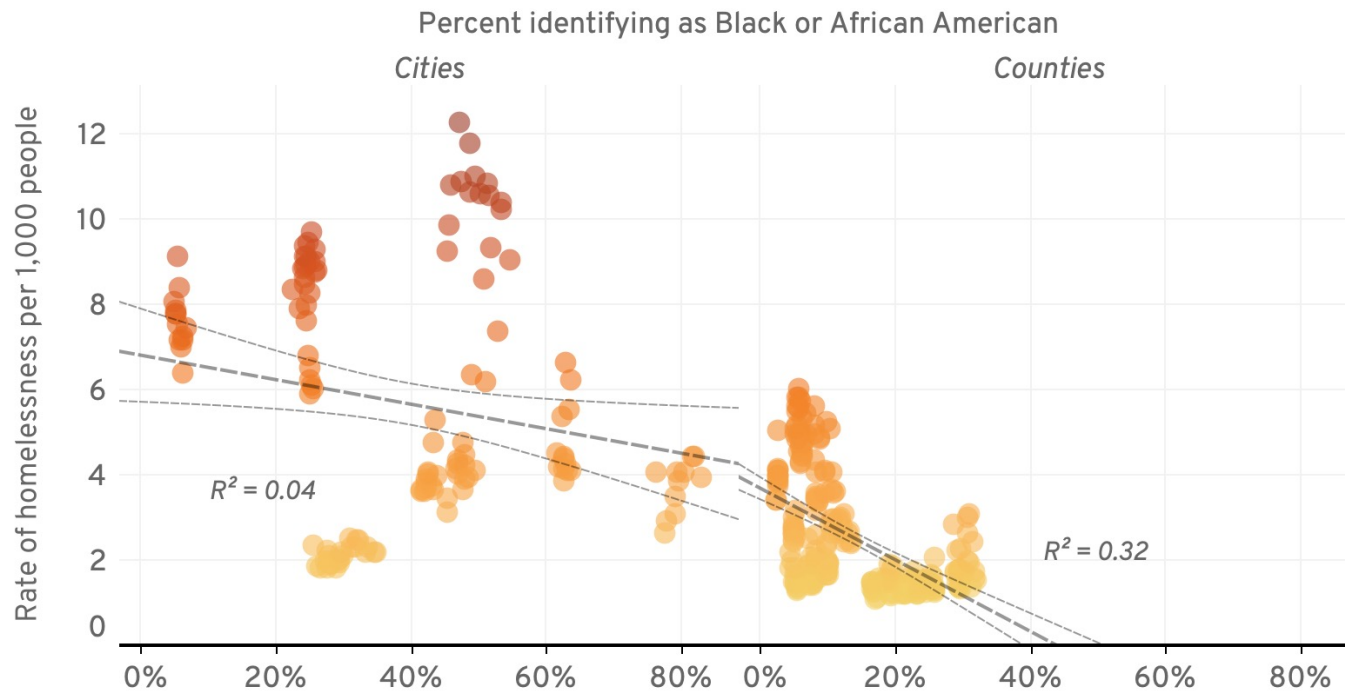
*Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals for the slope of the regression line.*



# Potential explanations: The individual

## Percent Black/African American versus PIT count (per capita)

*Dashed lines indicate a linear regression of per capita PIT counts onto the proportion of persons identifying as Black or African American between 2007 and 2019 for a sample of U.S. regions.*



*Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals for the slope of the regression line.*

# Potential explanations:

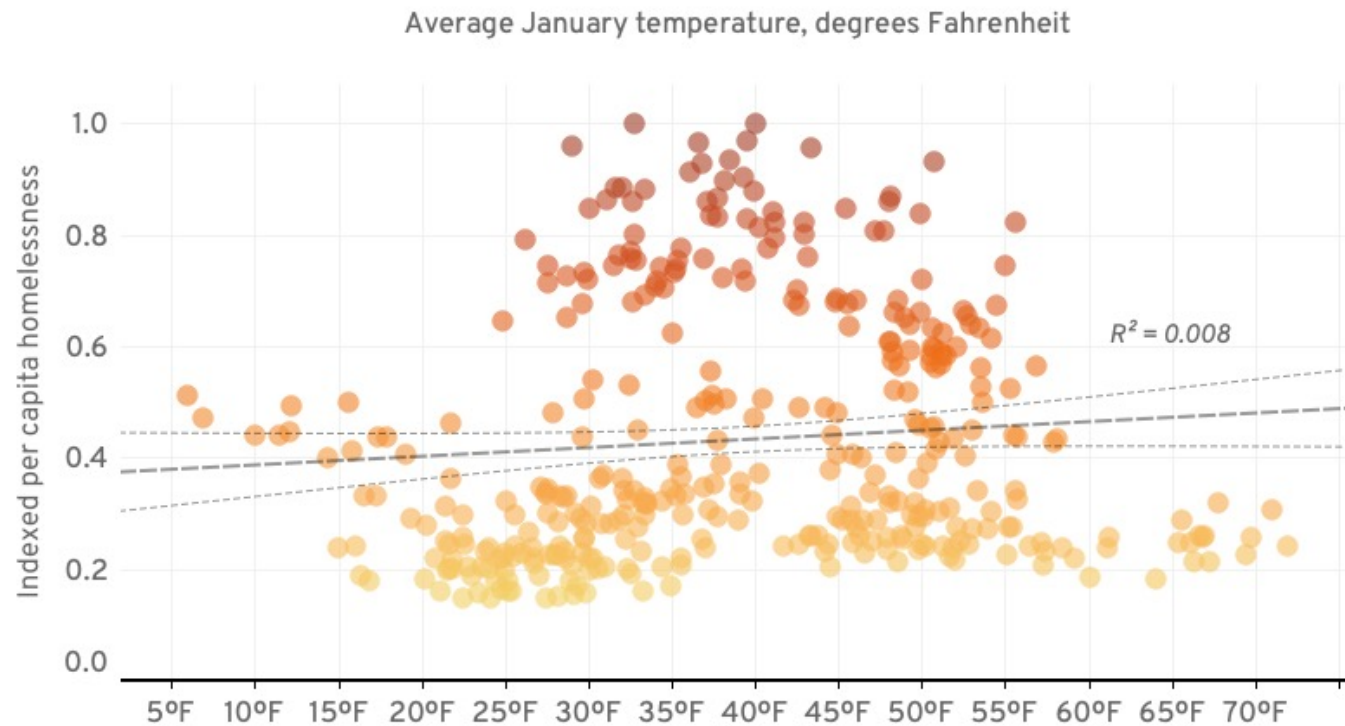
## Local context



# Potential explanations: Local context

## January average temperature versus indexed homelessness

*Dashed lines indicate a linear regression of indexed rates of homelessness onto average January temperatures between 2007 and 2019 for a sample of U.S. regions.*

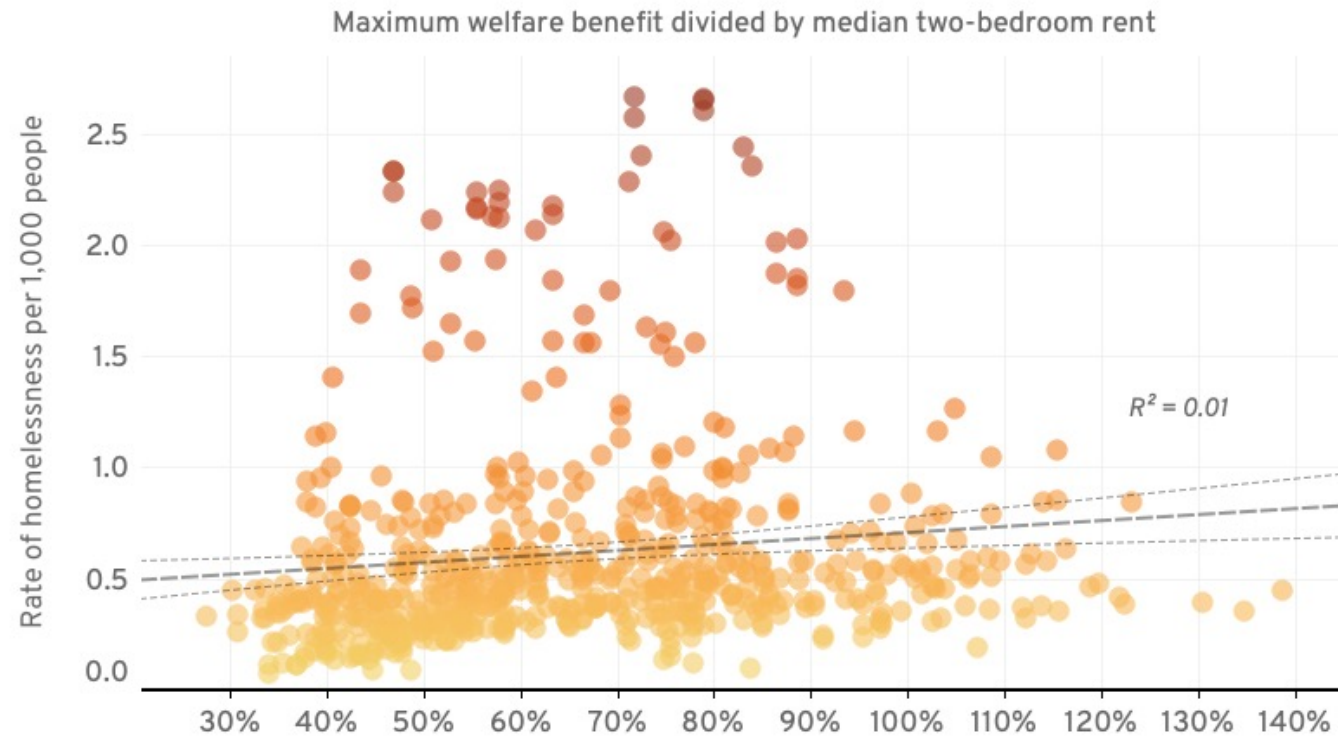


*Indexed rates of homelessness refer to a normalized measure of per capita rates, whereby each region-year pair is scaled with respect to the maximum rate across all cities or counties (over all years). Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals for the slope of the regression line.*

# Potential explanations: Local context

## Benefit/rent ratio versus family PIT count (per capita)

*Dashed lines indicate a linear regression of family per capita PIT counts onto benefit/rent ratios in U.S. states between 2007 and 2019.*

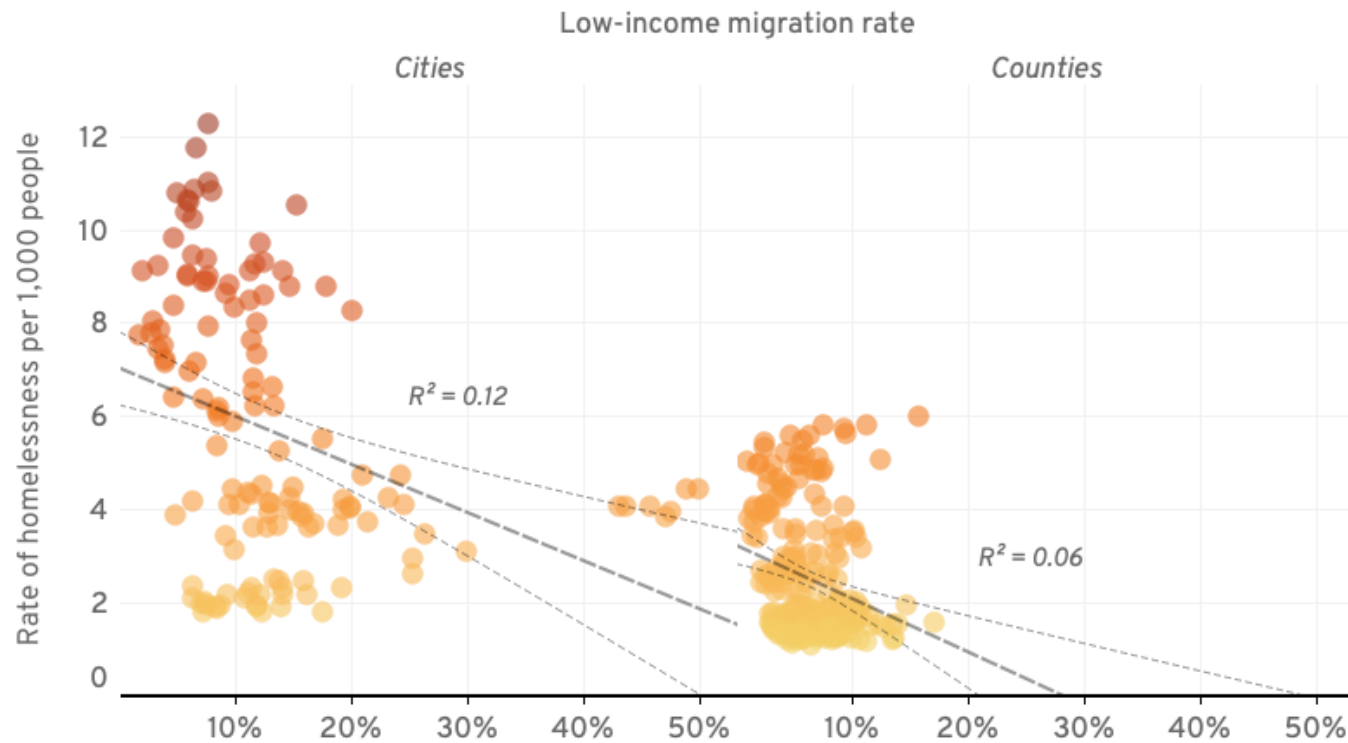


*Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals for the slope of the regression line.*

# Potential explanations: Local context

## Low-income migration rate versus PIT count (per capita)

*Dashed lines indicate a linear regression of per capita PIT counts onto the low-income migration rate between 2007 and 2019 for a sample of U.S. regions.*



*Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals for the slope of the regression line.*

# Potential explanations: Local context

- Observers frequently blame left-leaning local politicians for conditions that encourage or tolerate homelessness. Our sample cities were governed by Democrats 85% of the time (Republicans 8%, Independents 7%).
- If Democrats are to blame, why don't Chicago and Cleveland (Democratic strongholds) have a big problem with homelessness?





# Potential explanations: Housing market



# Potential explanations: Housing market

## Median contract rent versus PIT count (per capita)

*Dashed lines indicate a linear regression of per capita PIT counts onto median contract rent between 2007 and 2019 for a sample of U.S. regions.*

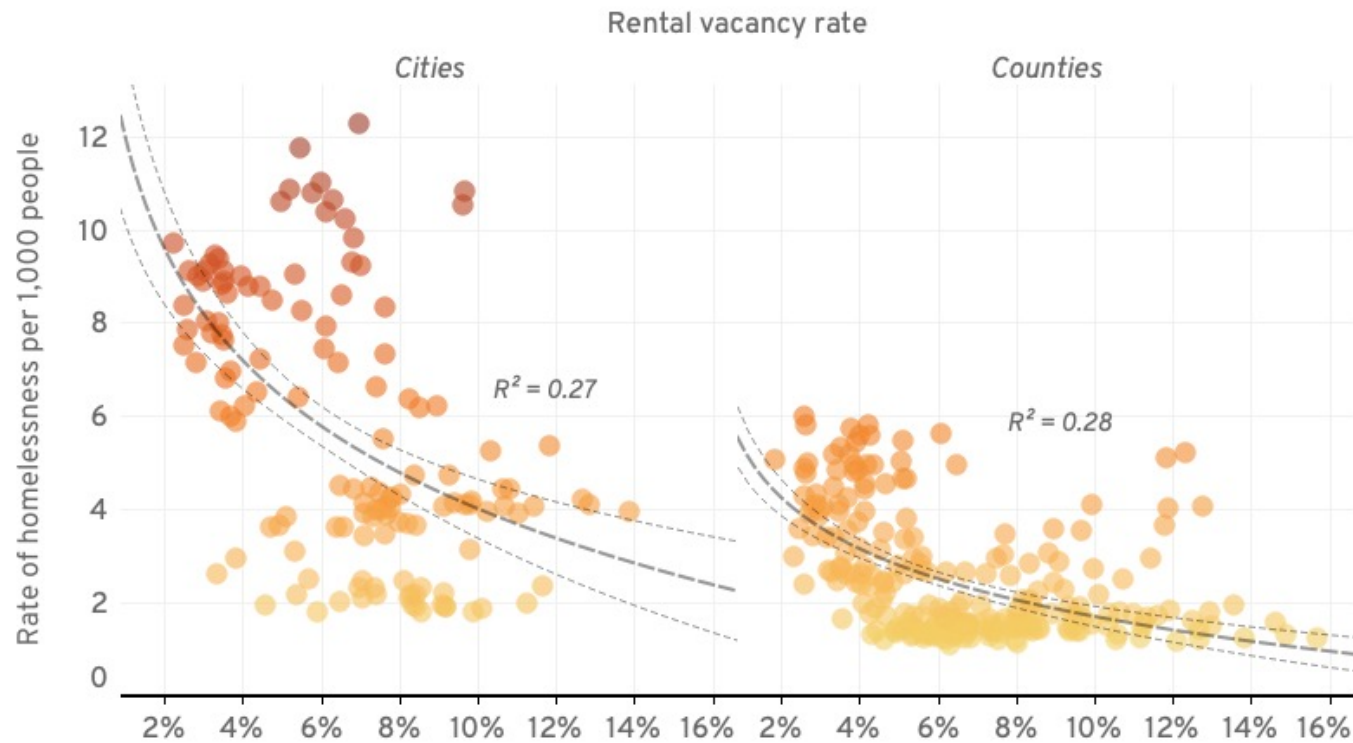


*Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals for the slope of the regression line.*

# Potential explanations: Housing market

## Rental vacancy rate versus PIT count (per capita)

*Dashed lines indicate a linear regression of per capita PIT counts onto the natural log of rental vacancy rate between 2007 and 2019 for a sample of U.S. regions.*



*Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals for the slope of the regression line.*

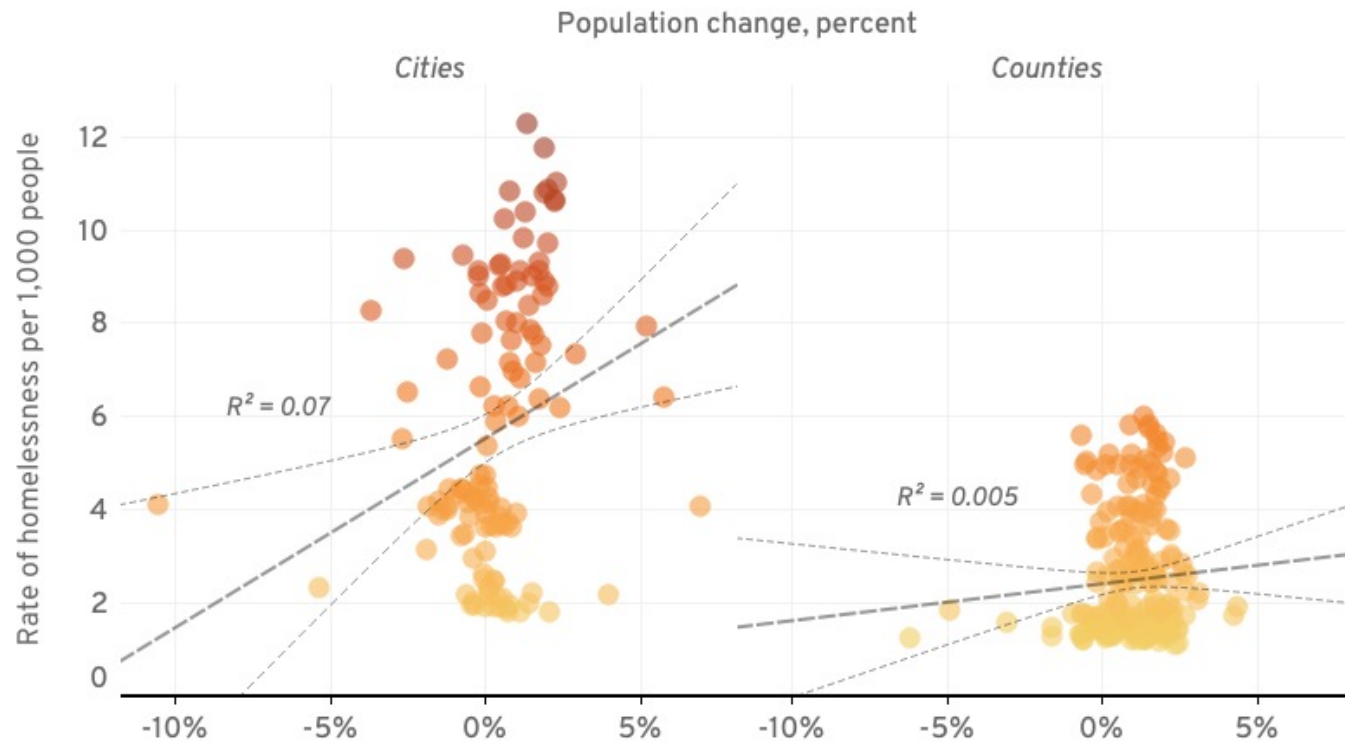
# Potential explanations: **Housing market**

Does homelessness thrive in certain cities because more people are **moving** to those cities?

# Potential explanations: Housing market

## Change in population versus PIT count (per capita)

*Dashed lines indicate a linear regression of per capita PIT counts onto population change between 2007 and 2019 for a sample of U.S. regions.*



*Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals for the slope of the regression line.*

# Typology





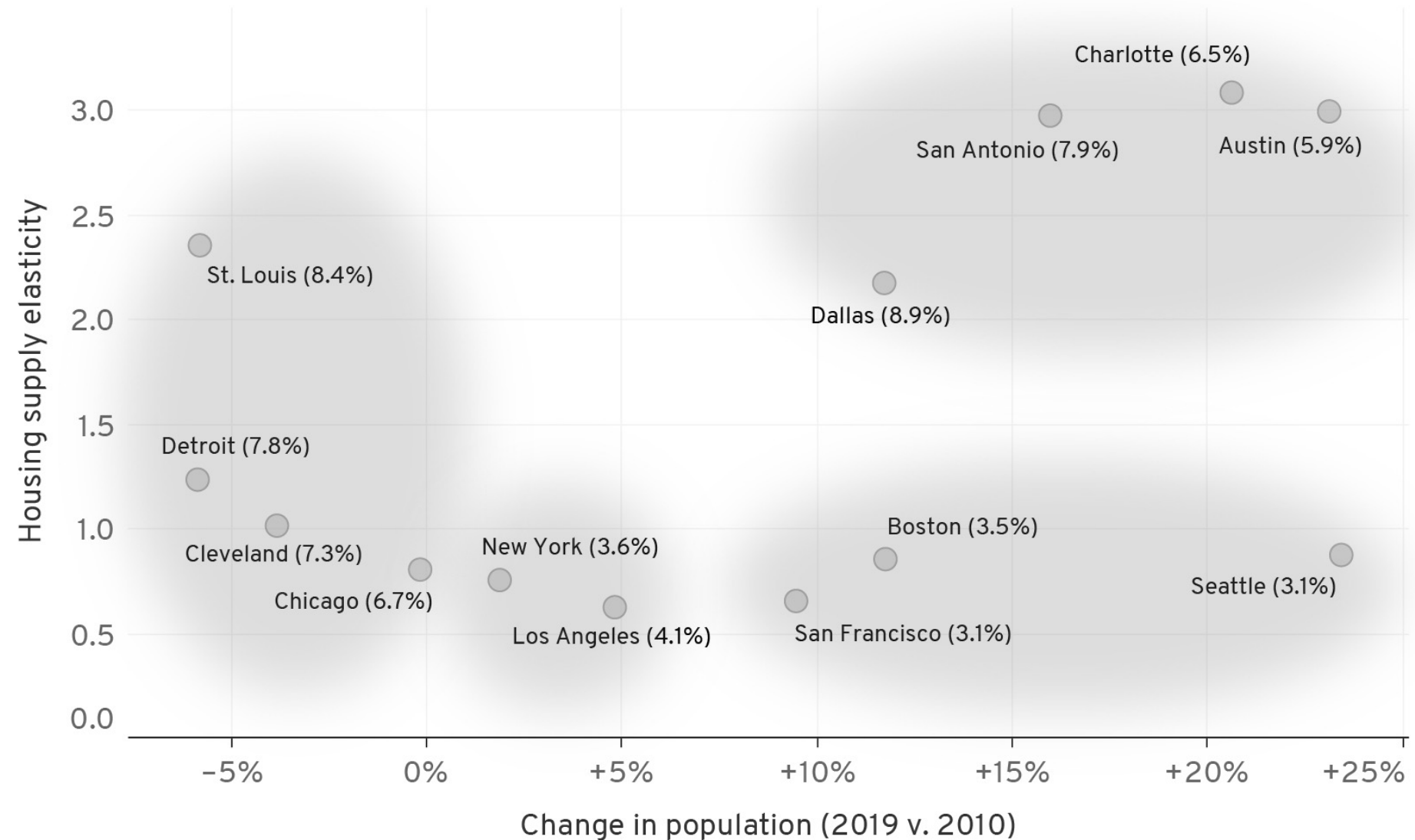
# Typology

- **Housing supply elasticity** measures the change in the supply of housing to a change in price. Supply elasticity is driven by **regulations** and **topography**.
- Price elasticity of supply: 
$$\frac{\% \Delta \text{ in quantity supplied}}{\% \Delta \text{ in price}}$$

# Typology

## Population growth versus housing supply elasticity

*Dots indicate U.S. cities; parentheses indicate 2010–2019 rental vacancy rates.*



*Supply elasticity estimates follow Saiz (2010). Figure forthcoming in Colburn & Aldern (2022).*

# Conclusion



# Conclusion

Regions need two types of investments:

- 1) **Operating investments** to fund housing support, maintenance, and services, and
- 2) **Capital investments** to construct housing.

And where housing is difficult to construct, changes to regulations and land use policy are needed

# Three Tensions

Three tensions **complicate** this response:

- Short vs long-term
- Public versus private
- Local versus federal government

# Conclusion

- Continuing to diagnose homelessness as a problem of the **individual** will undermine efforts to prevent and end it.
- The country requires a **structural understanding of** and **structural responses to** homelessness.
- Bright spot: the dramatic fall in veteran homelessness in the United States over the last decade



# Thank you!

<https://homelessnesshousingproblem.com>

[colburn3@uw.edu](mailto:colburn3@uw.edu)  
[@ColburnGregg](#)

Gregg Colburn  
Runstad Department of Real Estate  
University of Washington

