

Criminalizing Homelessness

A Study of Encampment Clearances in Seattle, WA

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Abstract

The 2024 *Grants Pass* decision newly emboldens US cities to manage homelessness through spatial removal. Although literature provides ample evidence of the harmful health and material effects of these tactics, the longer-term results for housing outcomes and movement patterns remain less clear. Leveraging outreach data, we employ relational event models to predict the likelihood of various events after a clearance. Displaced residents are most likely to lose contact with staff, and the risks of unsheltered events appear higher than moving indoors. Individuals also typically stay close to their original locations, though the size of encampment communities decreases. Results suggest that removals do not effectively bring people inside, but instead encourage spatial churn to reduce the visibility of concentrated homelessness.

Introduction

Cities have responded to surges in unsheltered homelessness by displacing encampments (Goldfischer 2020; Margier 2023). Officials claim that these removals prioritize public health, community safety, and inhabitant vulnerability (Robinson 2019). However, clearances can worsen people's security, service use, support networks, and legal involvement. Individuals also often lose belongings and survival supplies during such events (Darrah-Okike et al. 2018; Robinson 2019; Chang et al. 2022; Goldshear et al. 2023). Limited scholarship even indicates that removals remain ineffective at transitioning people indoors (Herring et al. 2020; Giamarino and Loukaitou-Sideris 2024).

Few studies examine shelter and housing outcomes after clearances. Scholarship also remains divided as to where and with whom displaced residents move. To address these gaps, we evaluate:

- The size of encampment communities following removal;
- People's relocation patterns;
- The likelihood of movement and housing outcomes; and
- The effects of individual and site characteristics.

Data and Methods

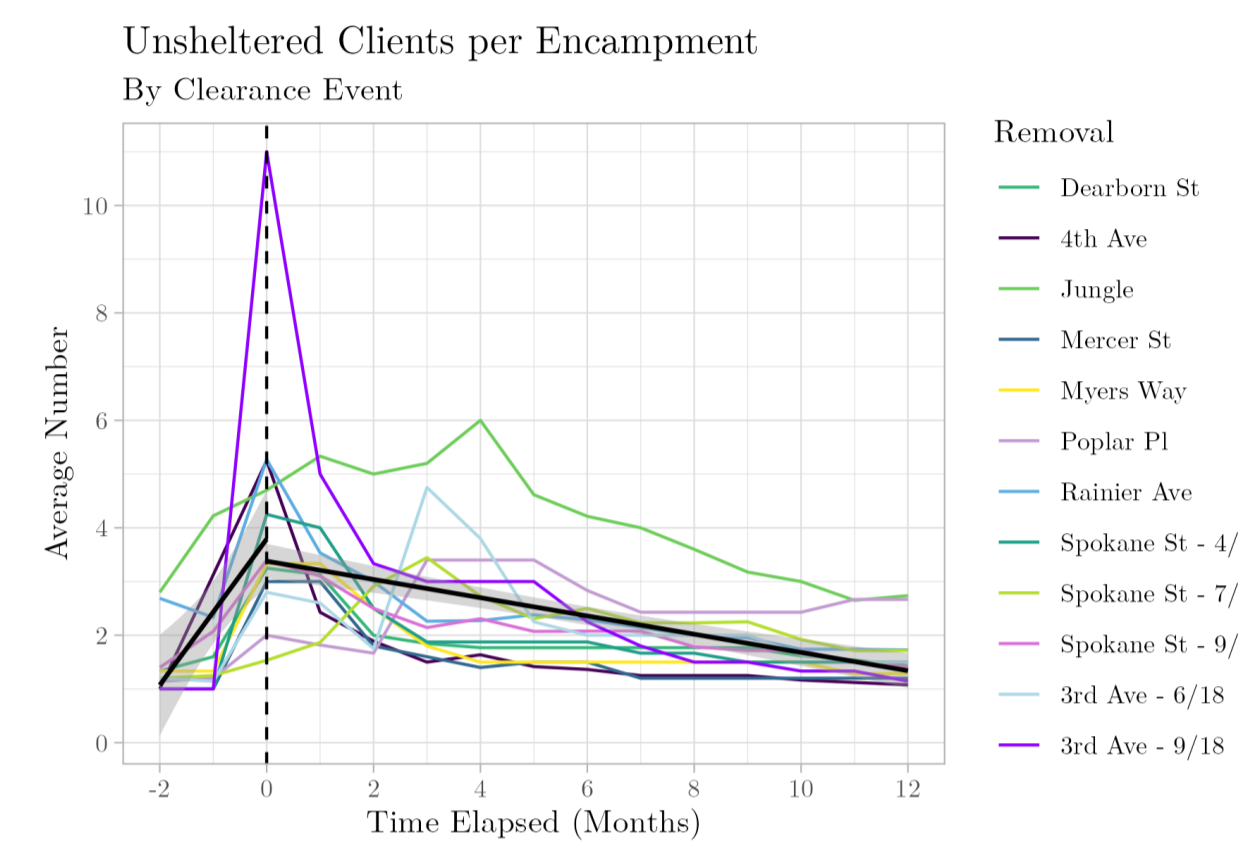
Utilizing publicly available encampment journals, we identified the twelve largest removals conducted by the City of Seattle between 2016 and 2018. Service provider ETS REACH then used outreach data to query clients displaced from selected sites. REACH compiled spatiotemporal data for staff encounters with these clients, including their living situations, demographics, and health issues.

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

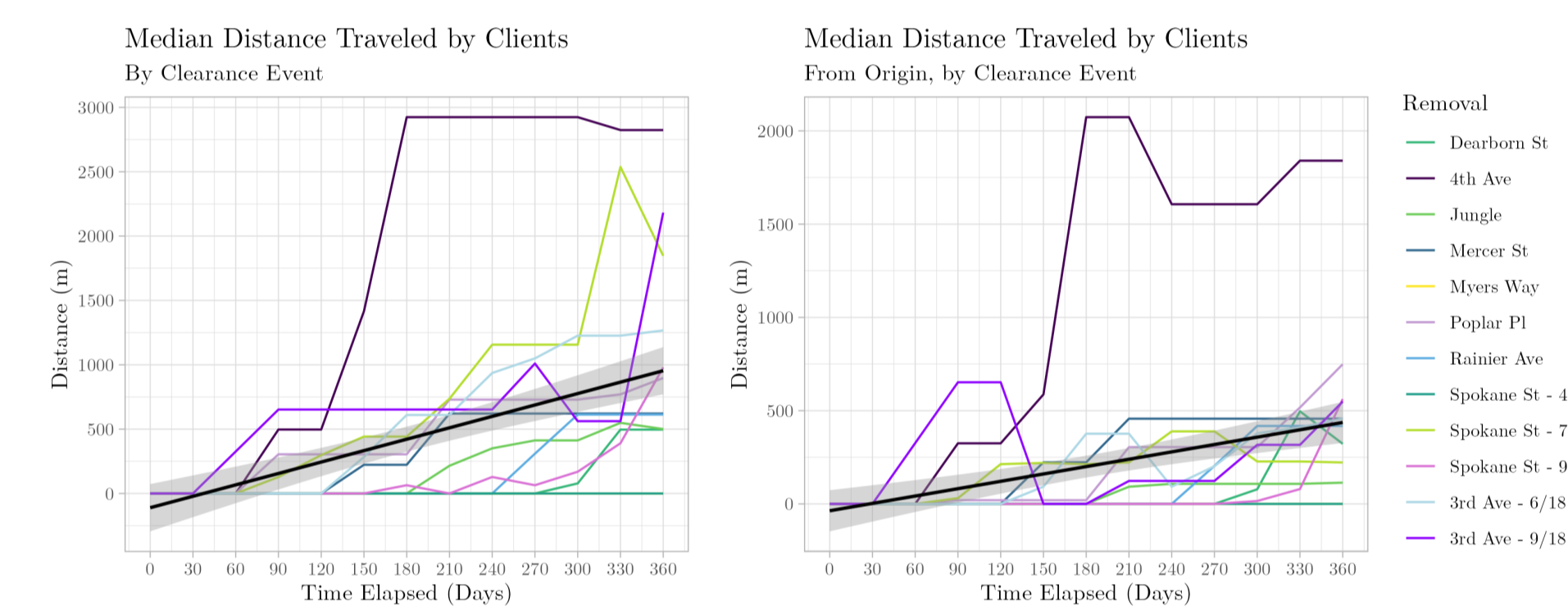
Modeling Outcomes: We utilize relational event models (REM) to predict the risks of a client "disappearing," moving between Census tracts, or entering shelter or housing. We also evaluate the effects of individual covariates, time, and location. All models employ a Bayesian estimator with weakly informative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

Results

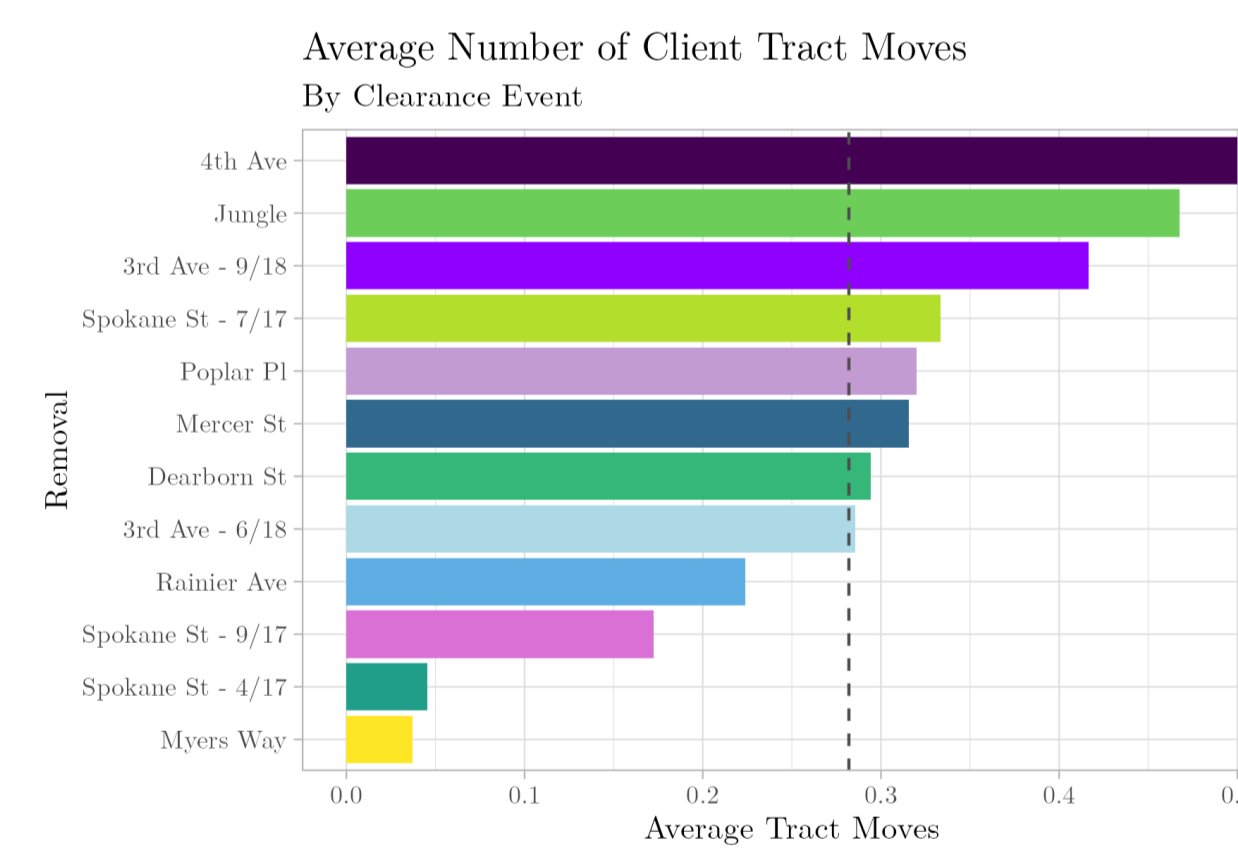
Removal reduces the size of encampment communities.



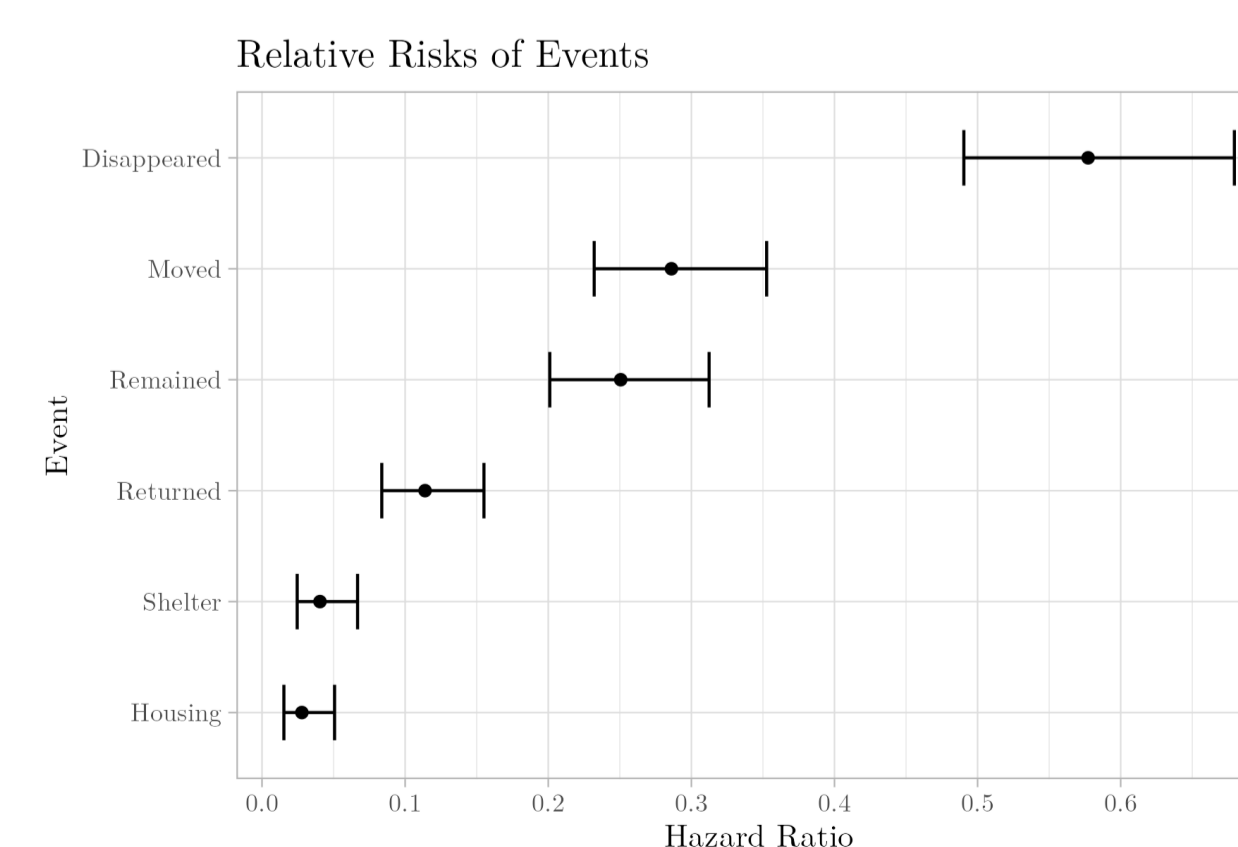
Most people travel less than 1000m in the following year. Yet REACH encounters most clients within 500m of their original locations.



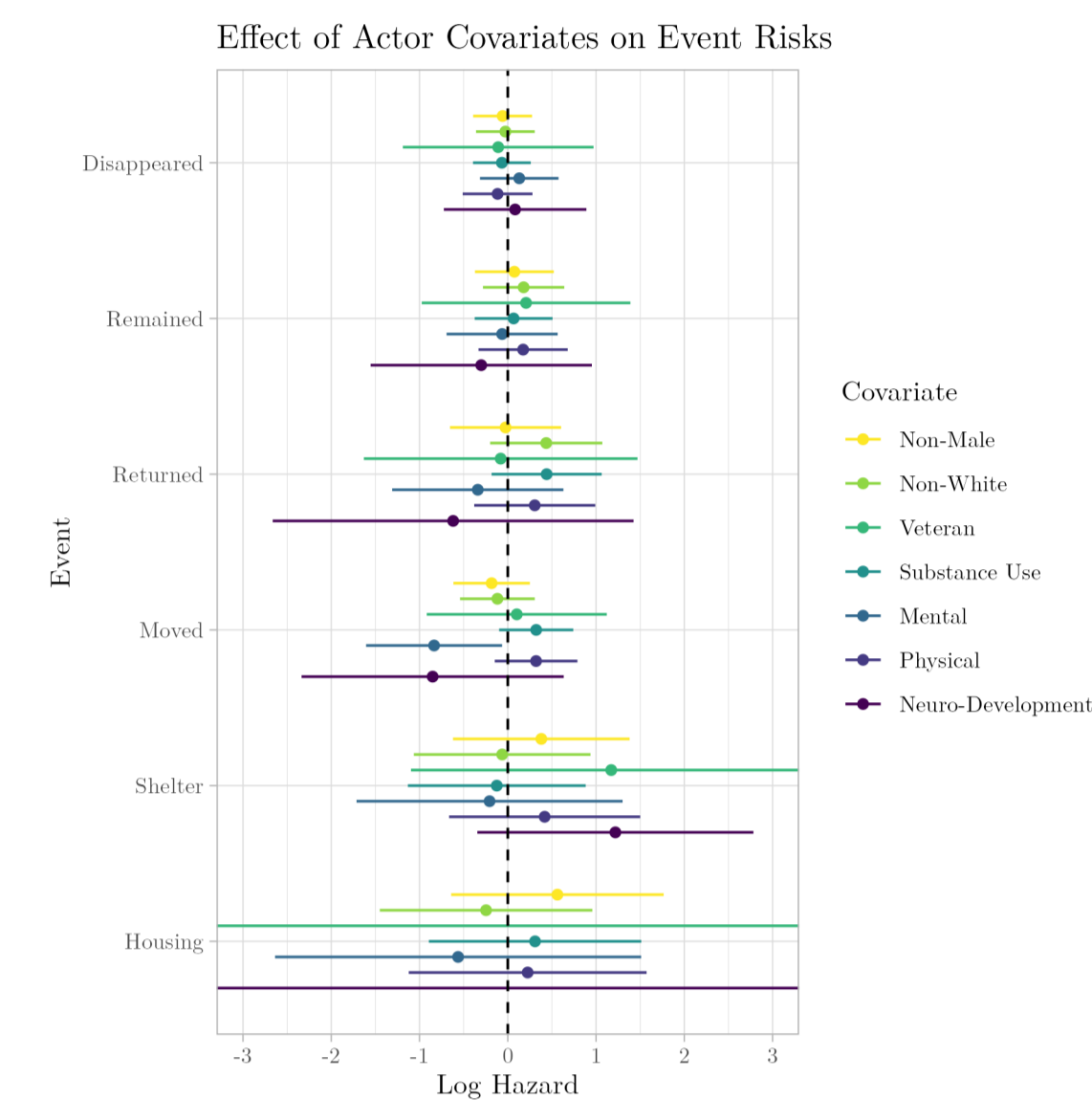
The average unsheltered client does not relocate tracts in the next year.



Clients appear most likely to lose contact. We observe significantly larger risks for all unsheltered events versus transitioning indoors.

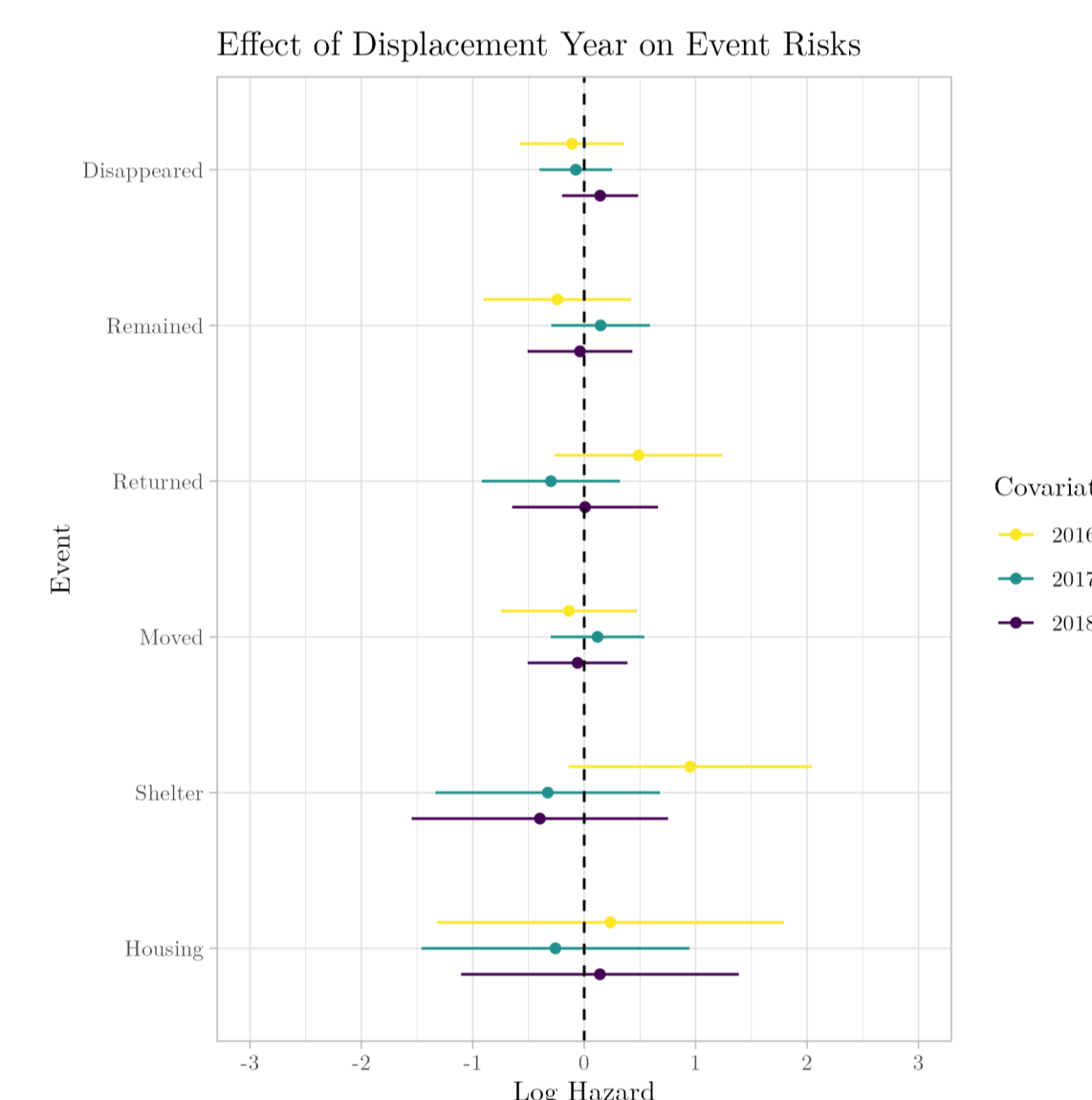


Note: Point estimates with 95% credible intervals; one-year window. Higher ratios suggest greater likelihoods of occurring.

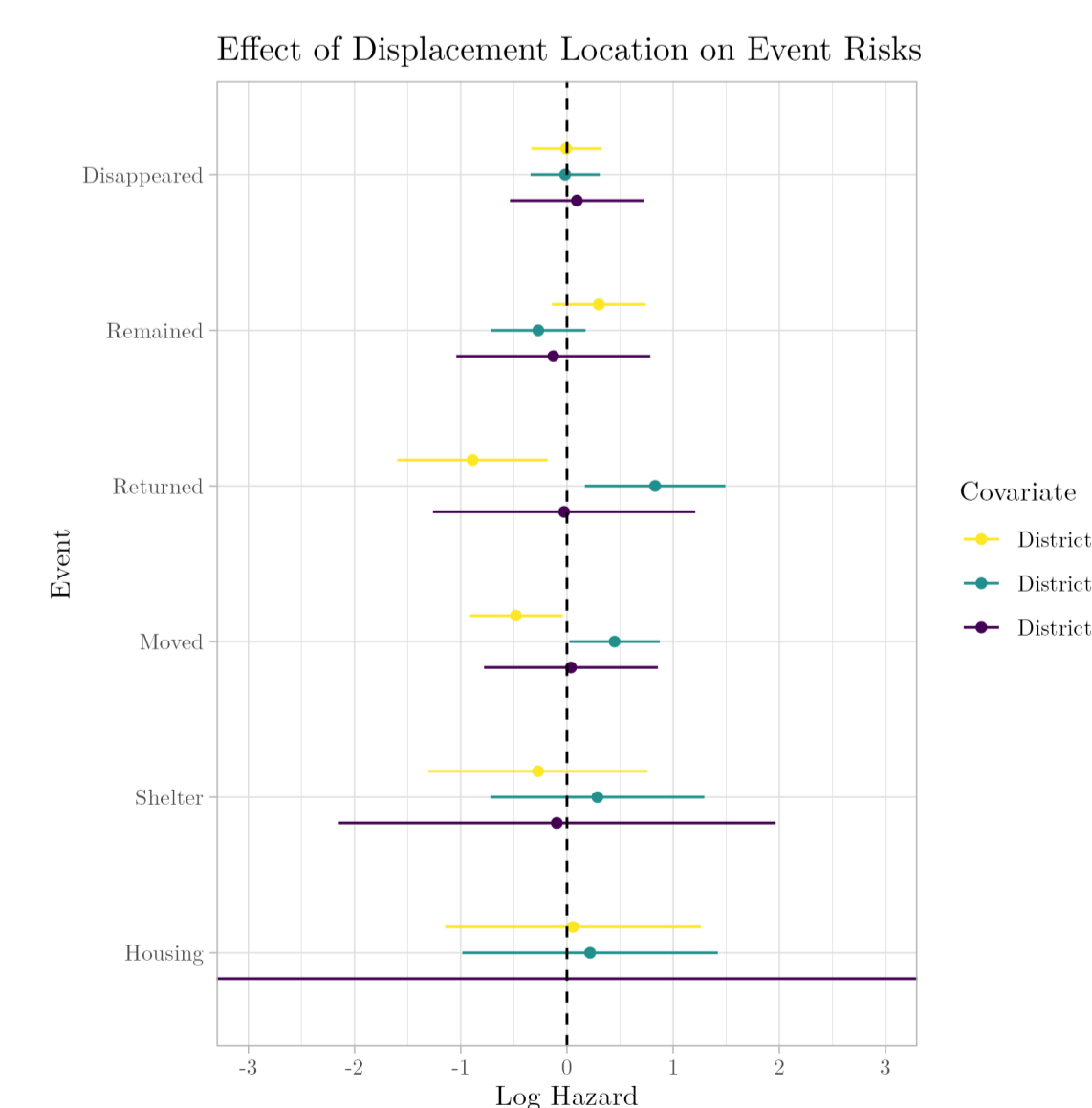


Note: Credible intervals that span 0 suggest no significant difference.

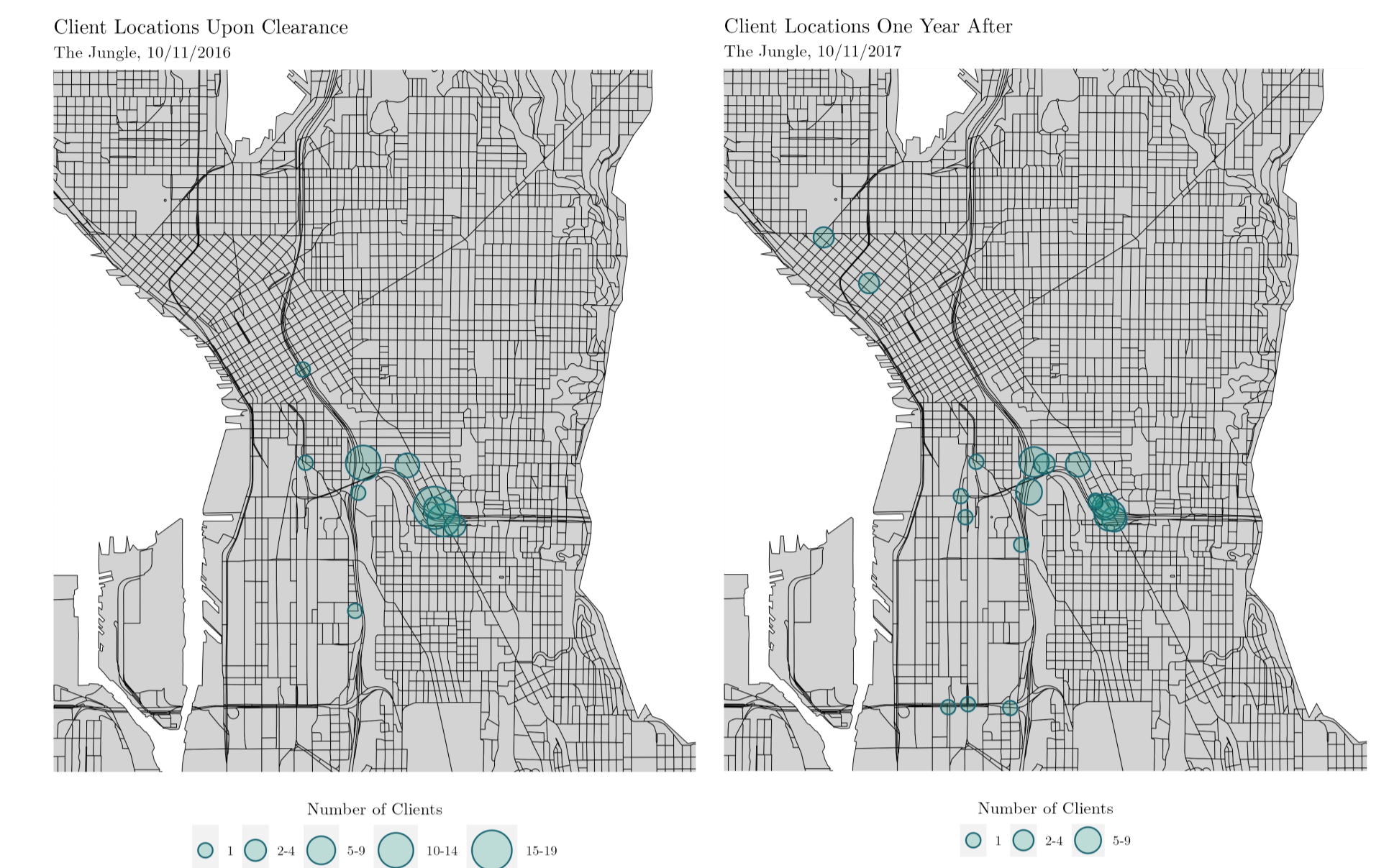
Some covariates significantly impact the likelihood of relocating, but not exiting the streets. For clients with mental illness, we predict a 57% decrease ($p < 0.05$) in the relative risk of moving tracts.



Outcomes do not appear associated with time, despite the sizable 159% increase ($p < 0.09$) in the risk of entering shelter for 2016.



Location impacts the likelihoods of some events. We predict increases in the risk of moving from (56.6%, $p < 0.05$) and returning to (129%, $p < 0.05$) origin tracts for District 2 clients (e.g., Beacon Hill, CID). Conversely, we estimate decreases for District 1 (e.g., SODO).



Visuals suggest stability in location but declines in encampment size.

Discussion

The likelihood of moving indoors following a clearance appears low. Removal instead seems to encourage spatial churn (Herring et al. 2020), sever camp communities, and reduce the visibility of homelessness. Although clients remain close to their original locations - potentially due to resources (Herbert and Beckett 2010) - displacement also disrupts service connections.

Clients with mental illness appear less apt to relocate, while those with physical conditions or substance use disorder demonstrate a higher likelihood to return, albeit insignificant. Such effects may again highlight attachments to area resources (e.g., health services). Removal location also predicts relocation patterns. The risk of churn (versus remaining) seems lower in industrial zones of District 1 and higher in highly-trafficked, mixed-use areas of District 2.

Conclusion

Our paper helps clarify the impacts of anti-camping practices by evaluating the trajectories of displaced residents. Although this study cannot assess the effect of clearances on housing pathways, future studies should control for exposure to displacement (e.g., by comparing sanctioned and unauthorized sites). Nevertheless, our findings ultimately support critiques that removal fails to bring people indoors and may instead serve to manage aesthetics. Communities must continue interrogating the motives behind tactics that fail to reduce homelessness, while advocating for those evidenced to increase housing equity.

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