Seattle is experiencing a homelessness crisis accompanied by public discontent over signs of homelessness. This visible homelessness is often conflated with crime, resulting in complaints to the police and city government. These complaints often result in negative consequences for homeless individuals, including criminalization, relocation, and deprivation of property. Because there is little data on where people who are homeless live across the city, past research has been unable to separate the relationship between counts of complaints and the size of the unsheltered population from citizen propensity to make complaints. This study probes the sources and consequences of these complaints using new data sources. We link data on police calls, complaints to city government (via the Find It, Fix It app), and a survey on fear of crime and police satisfaction to a census of homeless encampments in Seattle. This allows us to separate the visible unsheltered population from social control actions--citizen complaints and police contacts. Preliminary results indicate homeless encampments are unrelated to property crime, fear of crime or police satisfaction, and only weakly related to complaints. Complaints to city government are strongly related to local property crime levels. We discuss next steps for estimating consequences of complaints.

Many Seattle residents experience the crisis of homelessness, a social disruption often accompanied by discontent over their presence in the city. Visible homelessness is frequently conflated with crime, resulting in complaints to the police and city government. For homeless individuals these complaints may result in criminalization, forced relocation, and property loss. Because little data exists on where homeless individuals live, past research was unable to separate the counts of complaints and the size of the unsheltered population from citizen propensity to make complaints. Leaving this question unanswered allows agitated residents and overwhelmed politicians to continue assuming these connections, regardless of accuracy. Consequences of complaints are explored by linking novel sources: data on police calls, complaints to city government (primarily via 311 smartphone app), and a fear of crime survey to a census of Seattle homeless encampments. This approach separates the visible unsheltered population from two key forms of social control--citizen complaints and police contacts. Preliminary results indicate homeless encampments are unrelated to property crime, fear of crime, and weakly related to complaints; complaints to government are strongly related to local property crime. We discuss next steps for estimating complaint consequences and explore social control ramification for our unhoused neighbors.

Many Seattle residents experience the crisis of homelessness, a social disruption often accompanied by discontent over their presence in the city. Visible homelessness is frequently conflated with crime, resulting in complaints to the police and city government. For homeless individuals these complaints may result in criminalization, forced relocation, and property loss. Because little data exists on where homeless individuals live, past research was unable to disentangle property crime and complaints about homelessness from the size and location of the unsheltered population. This allows residents and policymakers to continue assuming these connections, regardless of accuracy.  We explore predictors of complaints by linking data on police calls, complaints to city government (primarily via 311 smartphone app), and a fear of crime survey to a census of Seattle homeless encampments. This approach separates the visible unsheltered population from two key forms of social control--citizen complaints and police contacts. Preliminary results indicate homeless encampments are unrelated to property crime or fear of crime, and weakly related to complaints; complaints to government about homelessness are strongly related to property crime. We discuss next steps for estimating complaint consequences and explore social control ramification for our unhoused neighbors.