Objective

Visible homelessness is frequently conflated with crime by the public, resulting in complaints to the police and city government. For individuals experiencing homelessness, complaints may result in criminalization, displacement, and property loss. Because little data exist on where individuals who are homeless live, it is difficult to disentangle neighborhood propensity to report crime and homelessness from the underlying distribution of the unsheltered population. This may induce a spurious association between crime and homelessness. We address this using an independent census of homeless encampments to measure the associations between visible homelessness, citizen complaints, property crime, and fear of crime.

Data/Methods

We examine this with spatial panel models using police-reported property crime (N=260,827), 311 complaints about homelessness (N=31,447), survey-measured victimization fear (N=8,309), and three waves of a Seattle encampment census (N=1,889).

Results

Preliminary results indicate encampments are unrelated to property crime or fear of victimization, and only weakly predict citizen complaints. In contrast, citizen complaints about homelessness are mainly predicted by property crime.

Conclusions/Implications

Citizen complaints about homelessness may be driven more by property crime and social control capacity than visible homelessness. We discuss ramifications for our unhoused neighbors and next steps for examining the consequences of citizen complaints.