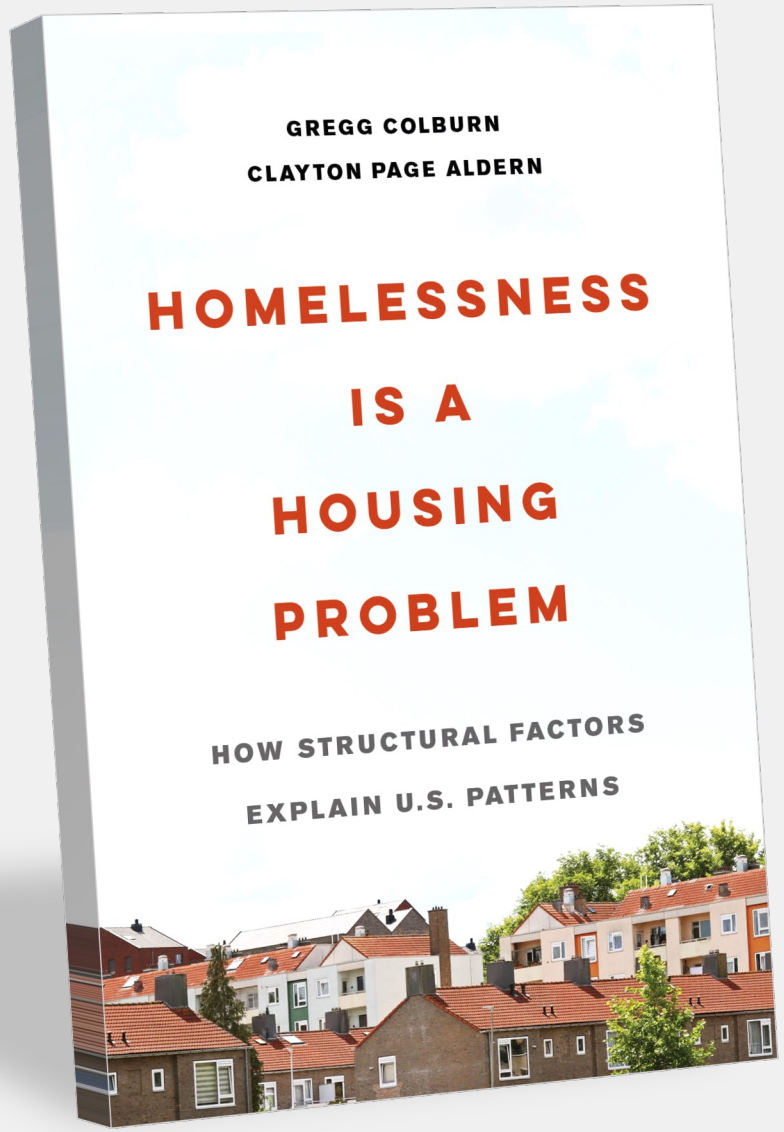
Homelessness is a Housing Problem

18th European Research Conference on Homelessness
Budapest, Hungary

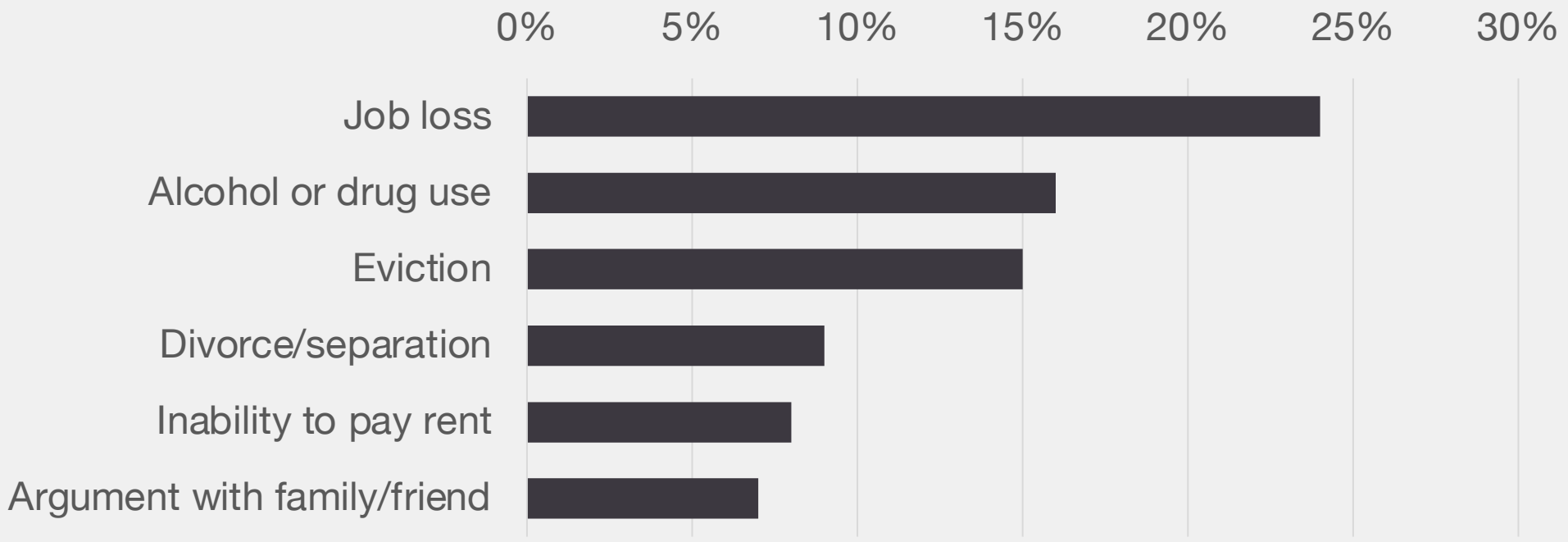
Gregg Colburn | September 13, 2024
University of Washington


GREGG COLBURN
CLAYTON PAGE ALDERN
HOMELESSNESS IS A HOUSING PROBLEM
HOW STRUCTURAL FACTORS EXPLAIN U.S. PATTERNS

(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 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?

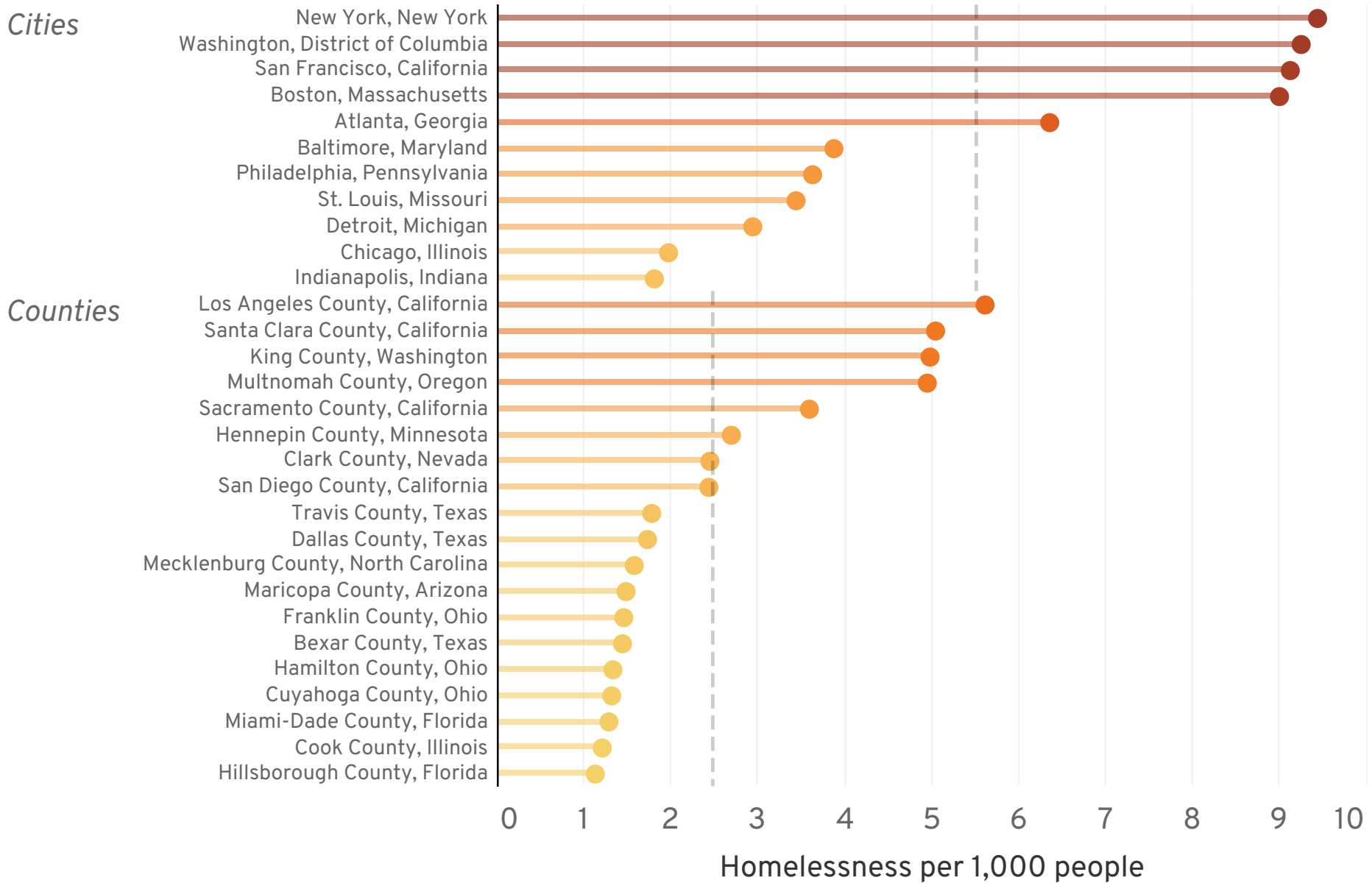
Introduction

- 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

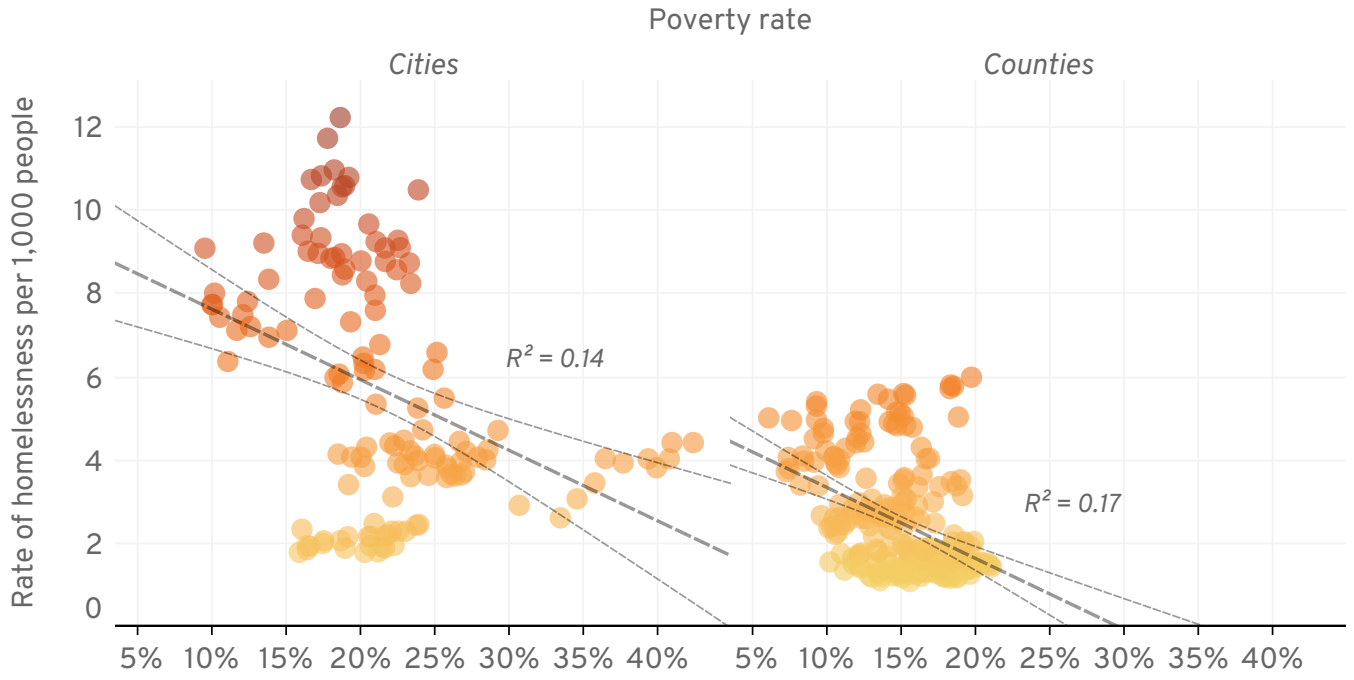


Potential explanations:
The individual

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.

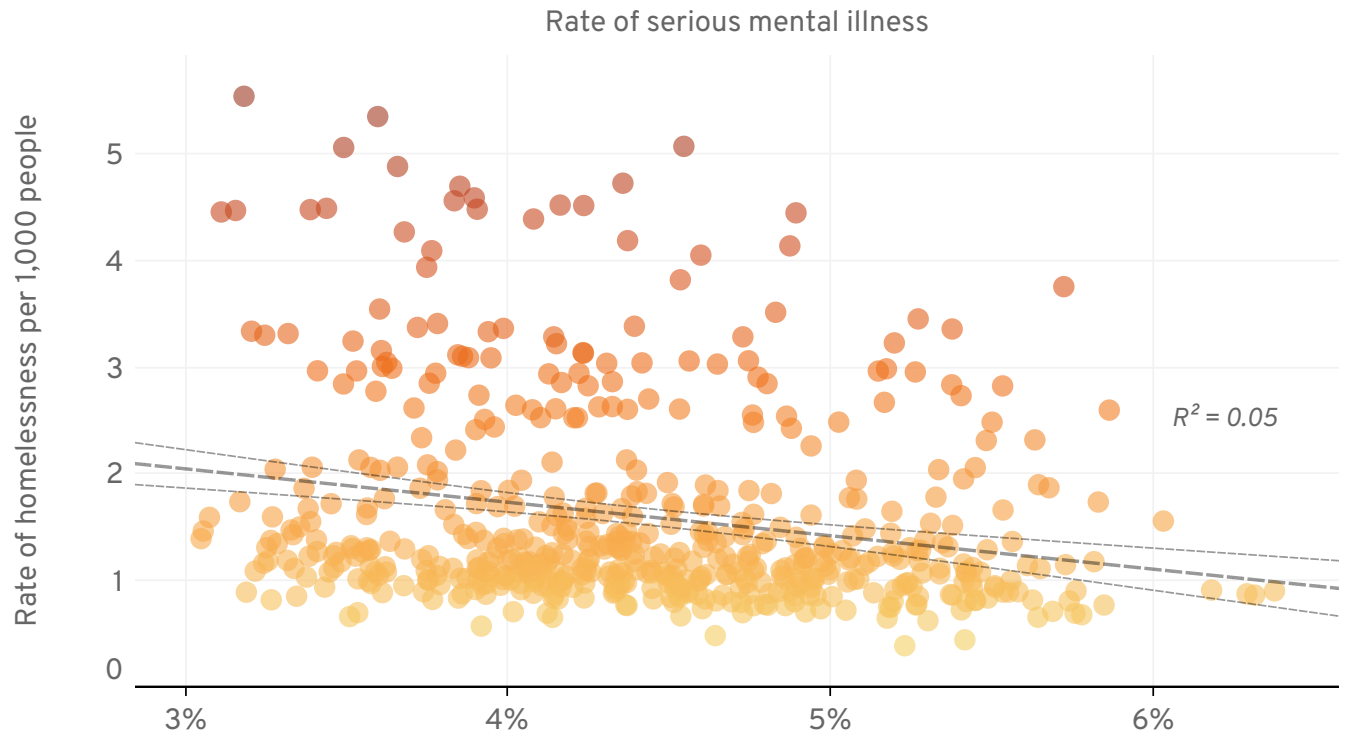


Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals for the slope of the regression line.

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.

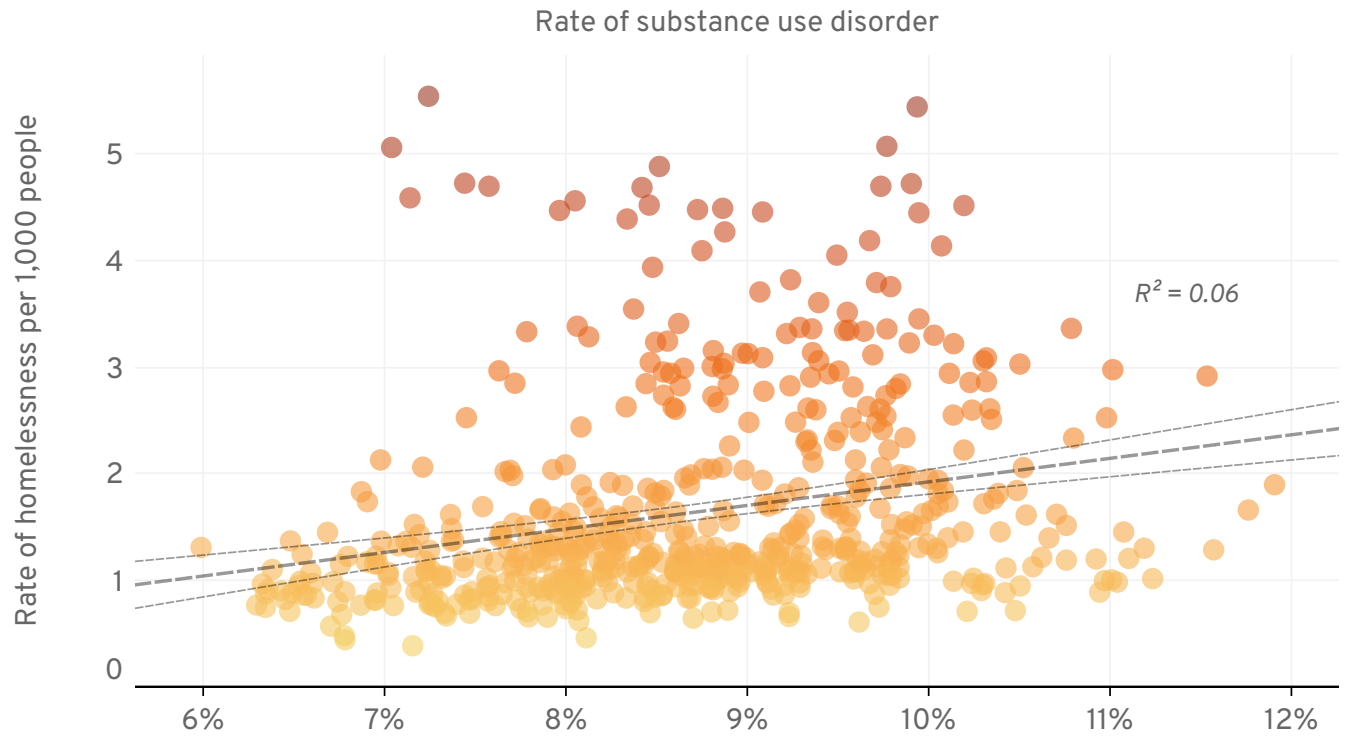


Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals for the slope of the regression line.

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.

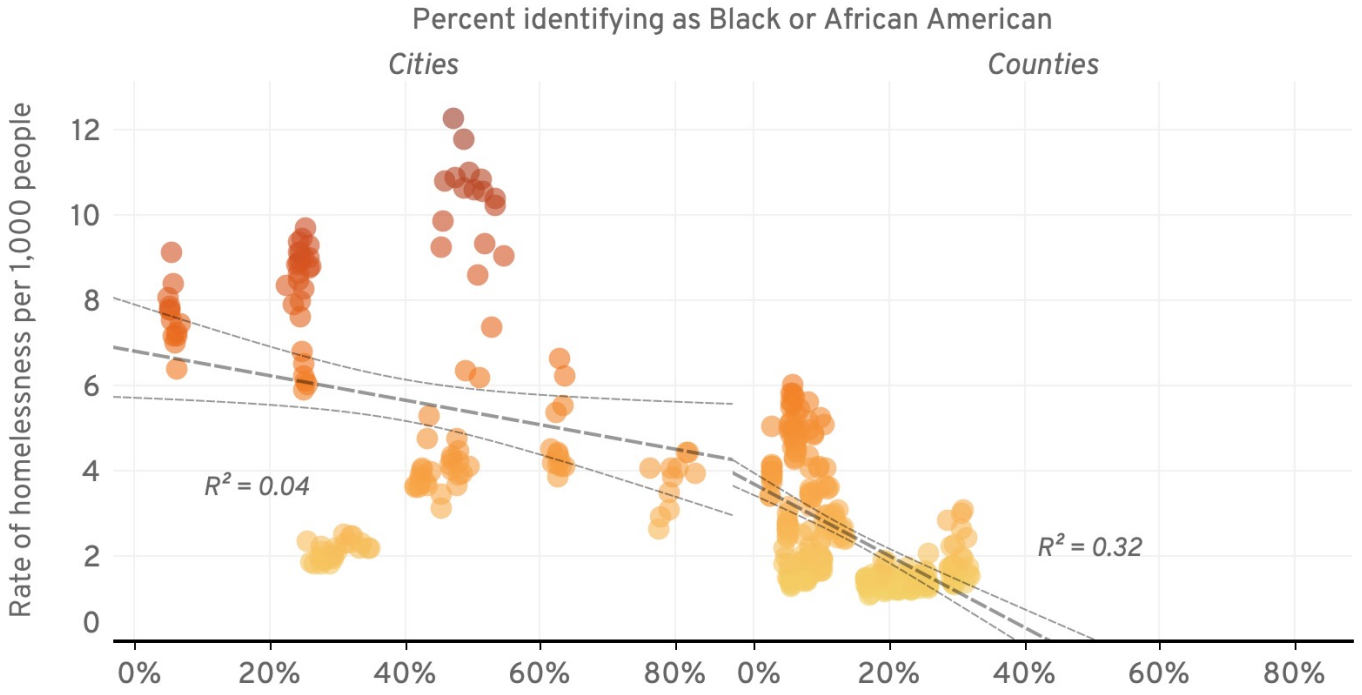


Bands indicate 95% confidence intervals for the slope of the regression line.

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

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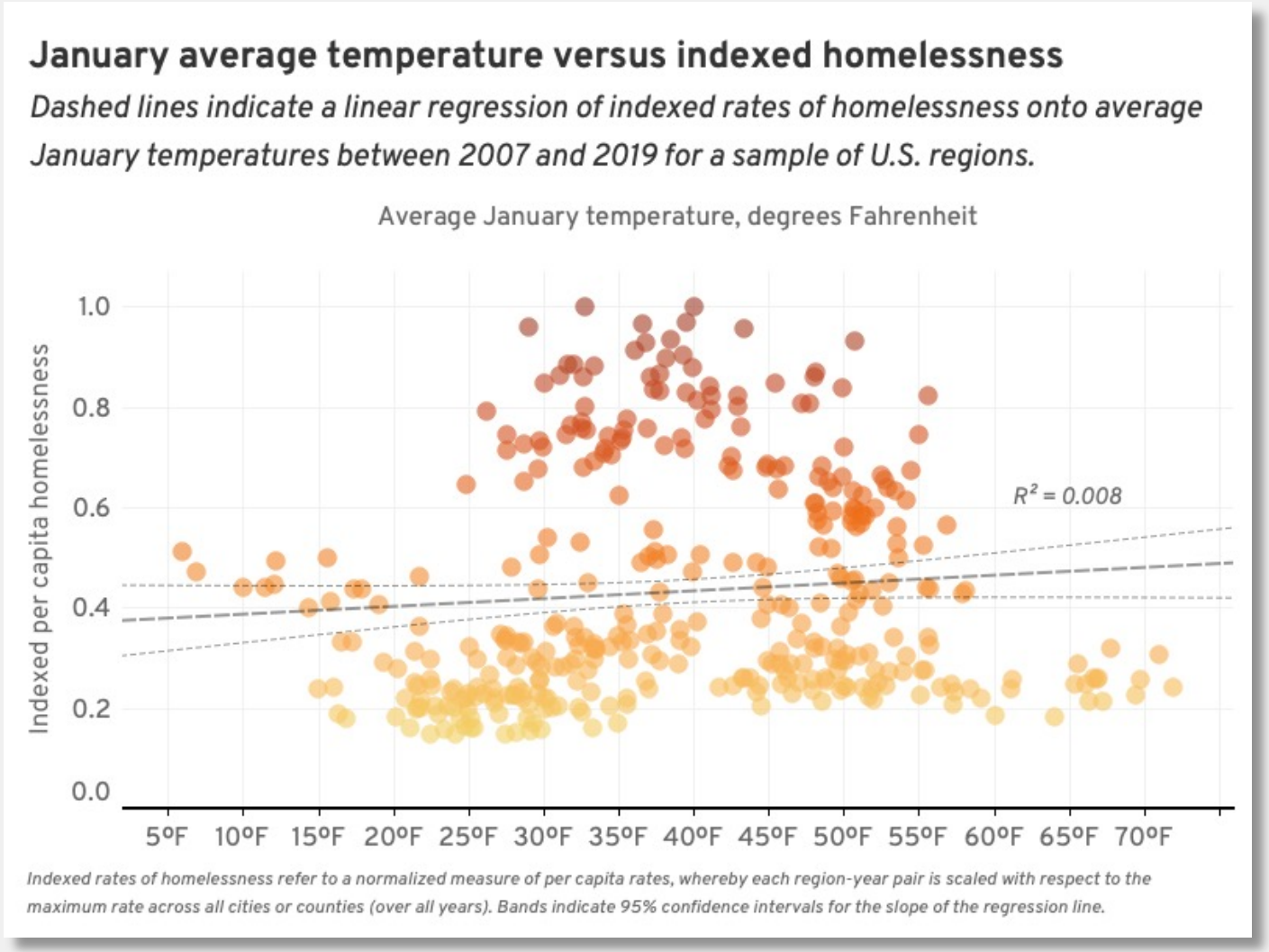
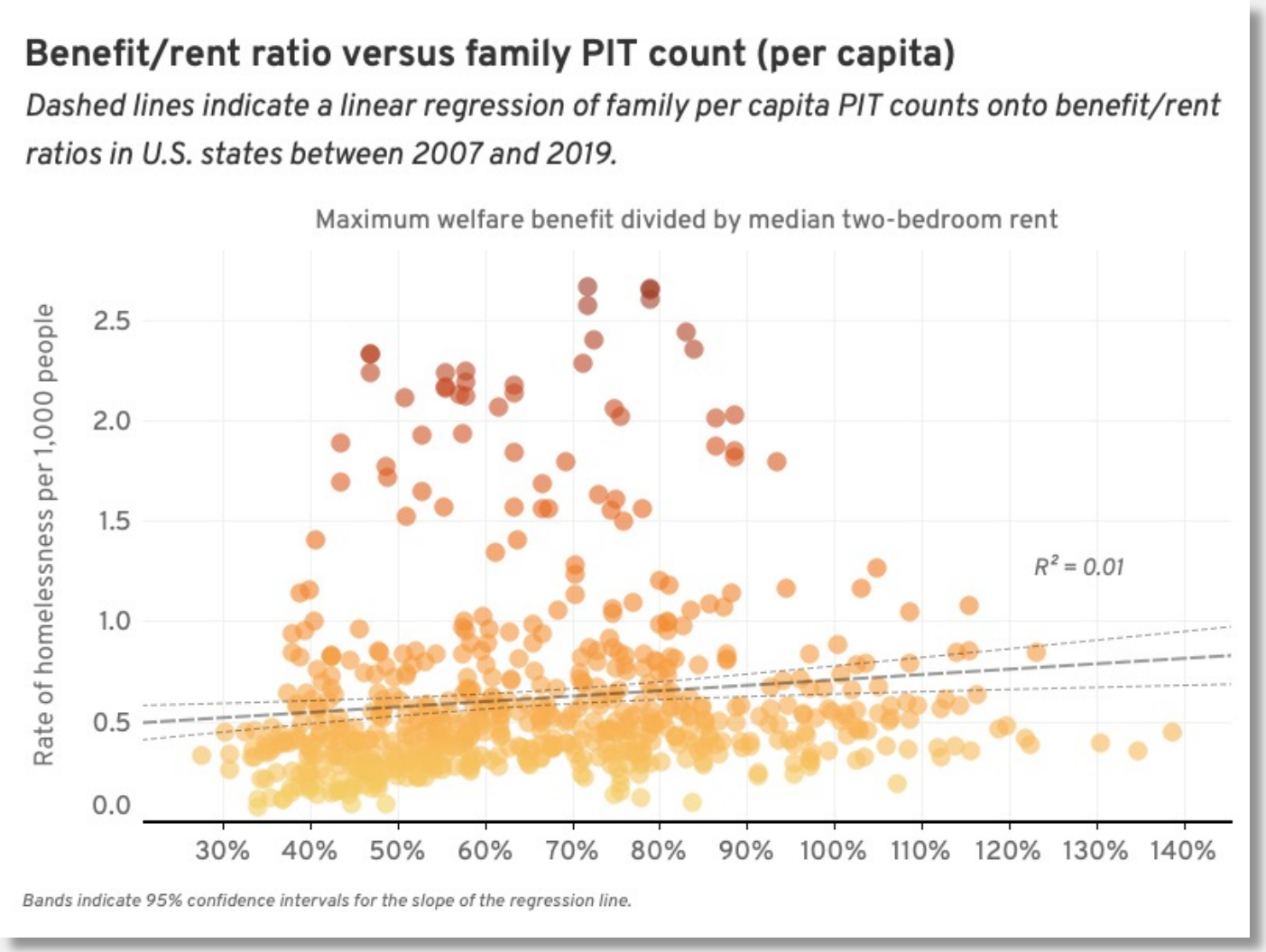
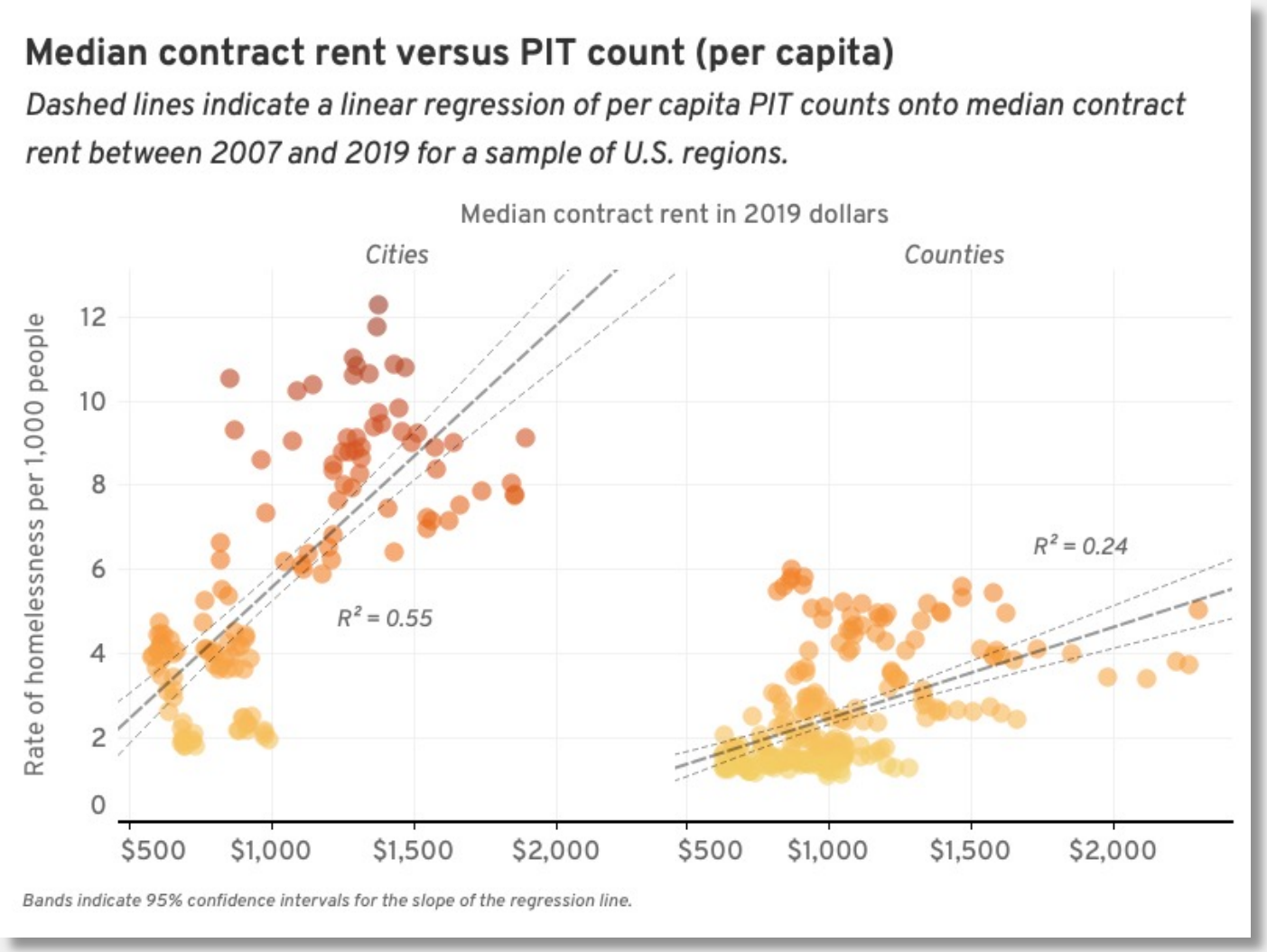


Potential explanations: Local context

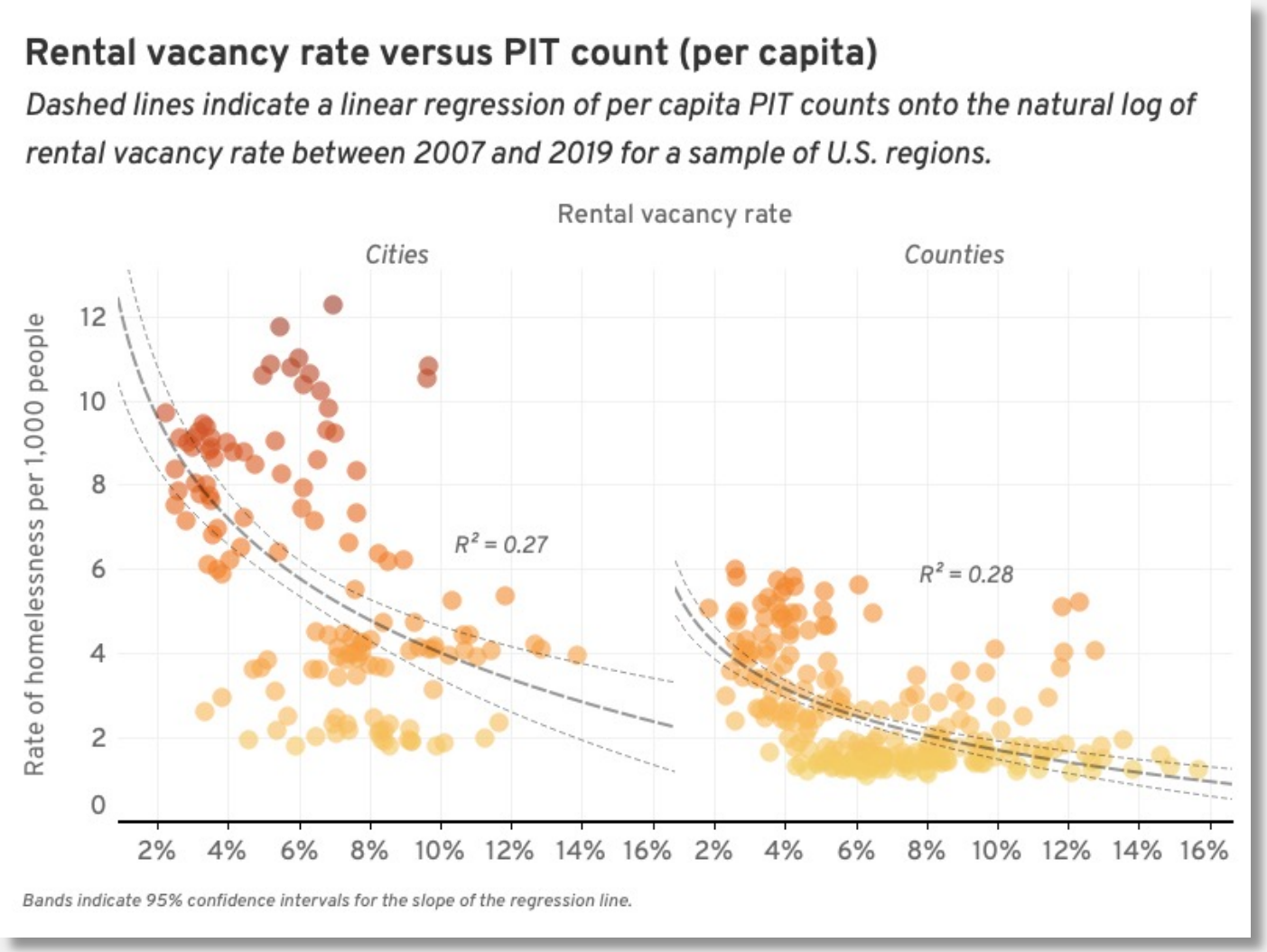


Potential explanations:
Housing market

Potential explanations: Housing market



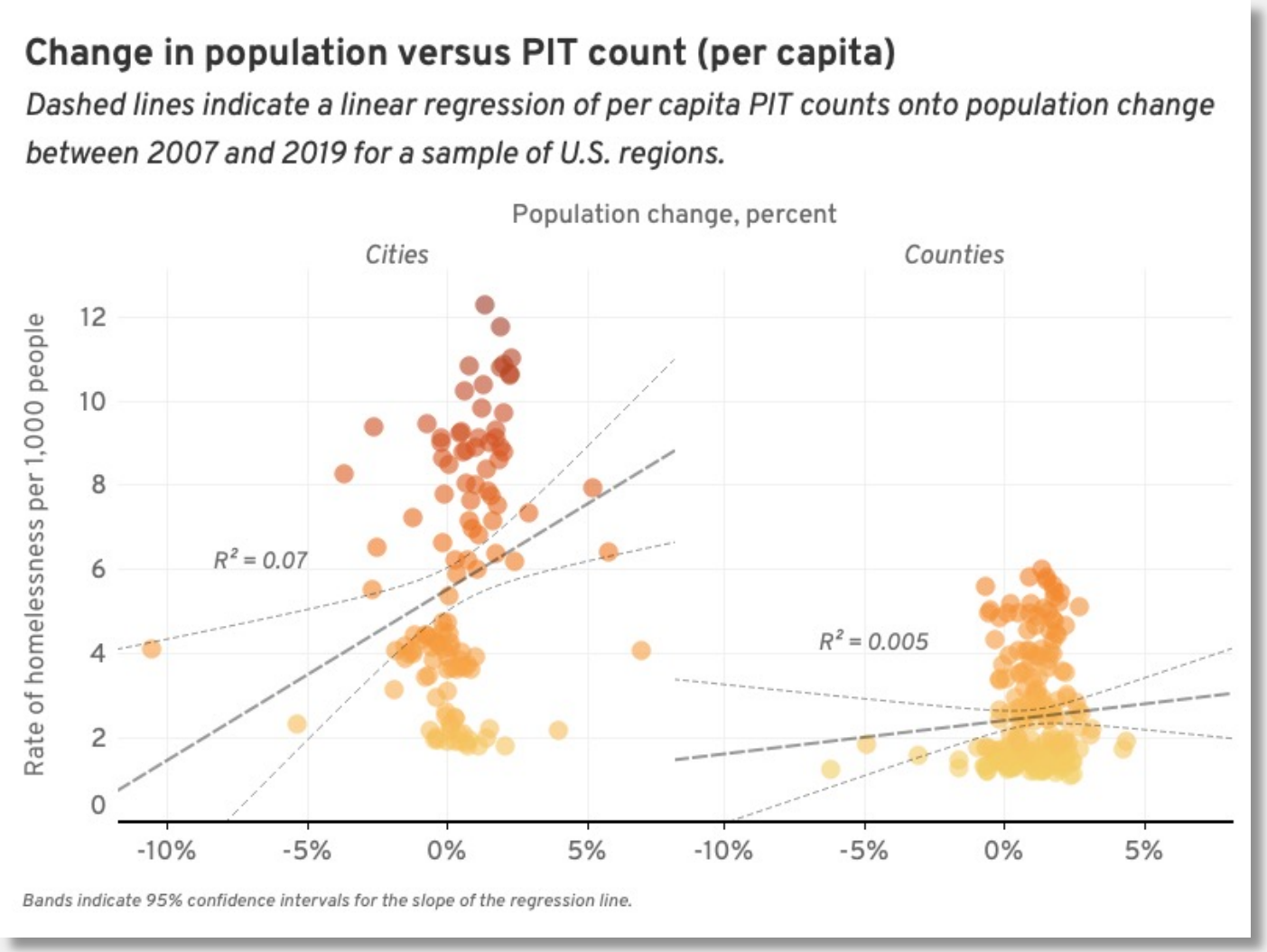
Potential explanations: Housing market



Potential explanations: Housing market

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

Potential explanations: Housing market



Typology

Typology

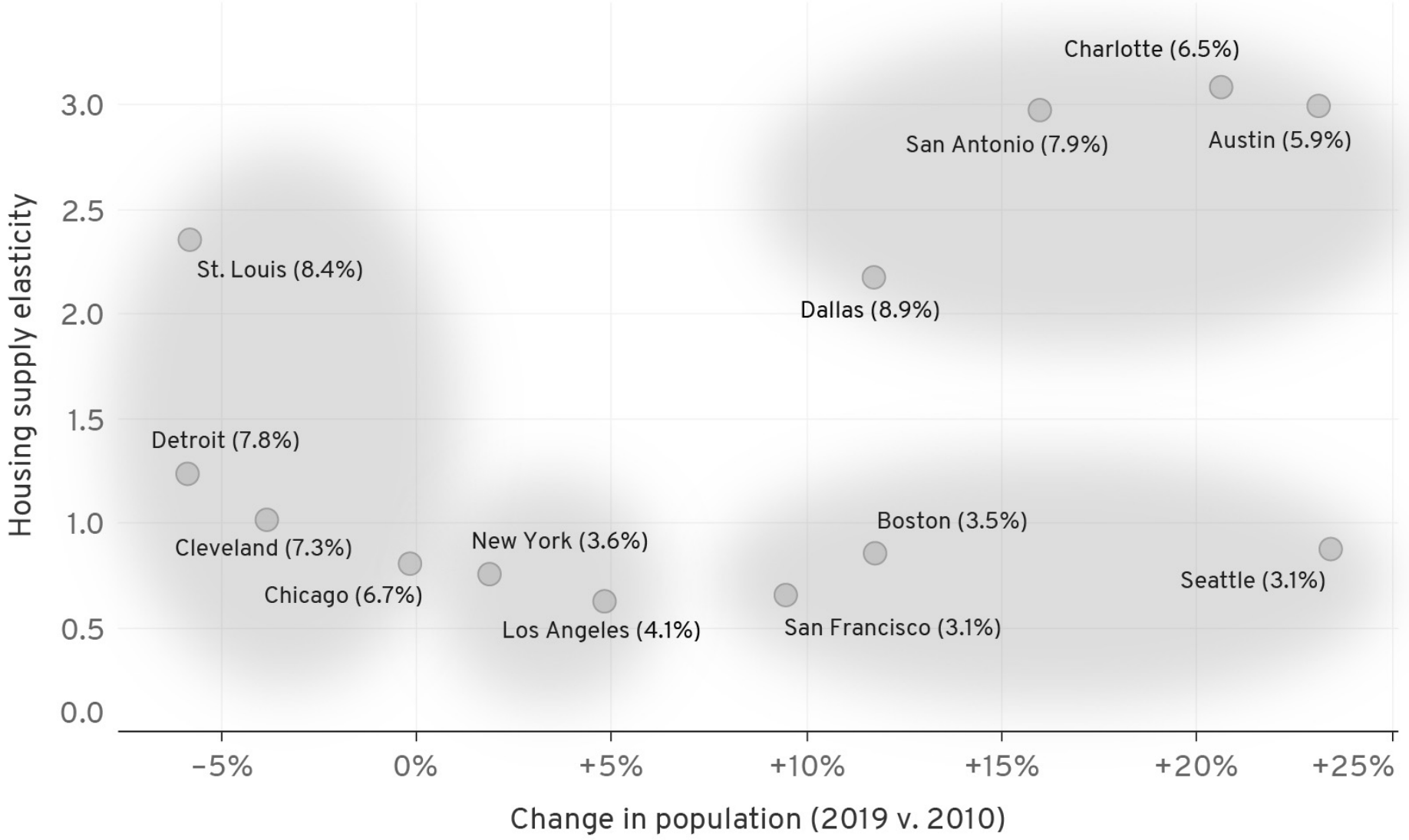
- **Housing supply elasticity** measures the change in the supply of housing to a change in price. Supply elasticity is driven by **regulations** and **topography**.

- Price elasticity of supply: $\frac{\%\ \Delta\ in\ quantity\ supplied}{\%\ \Delta\ in\ price}$

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).

Updates

- Covid-19 disrupted Census and homelessness data
- Eviction moratoria prevented significant surge in homelessness during the pandemic; next year will be important
- Post-2019 data (with obvious caveats) confirms findings from the book
- Troubling trends in: Maricopa County (Phoenix); Travis County (Austin); Sacramento County; Atlanta; Denver
- Highest per capita rates remain in coastal communities (LA, SF, Seattle, Boston, NY, DC)

Updates


CNN Politics
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Facts First
2024 Elections
Homeless people can be ticketed for sleeping outside, Supreme Court rules
By Devan Cole and John Fritze, CNN
4 minute read · Updated 12:41 PM EDT, Fri June 28, 2024


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By Jonathan Allen and Liya Cui
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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

International Application

International Application

- Outside of the U.S., I have shared my research in **Canada, Ireland, and Australia**
- All of these nations have **liberal** welfare regimes
- Similar housing market dynamics in these nations have produced similar experiences with homelessness
- **Does this logic hold in social democratic nations?**

International Application

- I plan to study the impact of market conditions on rates of homelessness throughout the social democratic nations of Europe
- Comparability of data will be important/challenging
- Hypothesis: Community level rates of homelessness in social democratic nations will be **less dependent** on housing market conditions than in the U.S.

Thank you!

https://homelessnesshousingproblem.com

colburn3@uw.edu

Gregg Colburn
College of Built Environments
University of Washington