Experiencing Homelessness in Portland, Maine
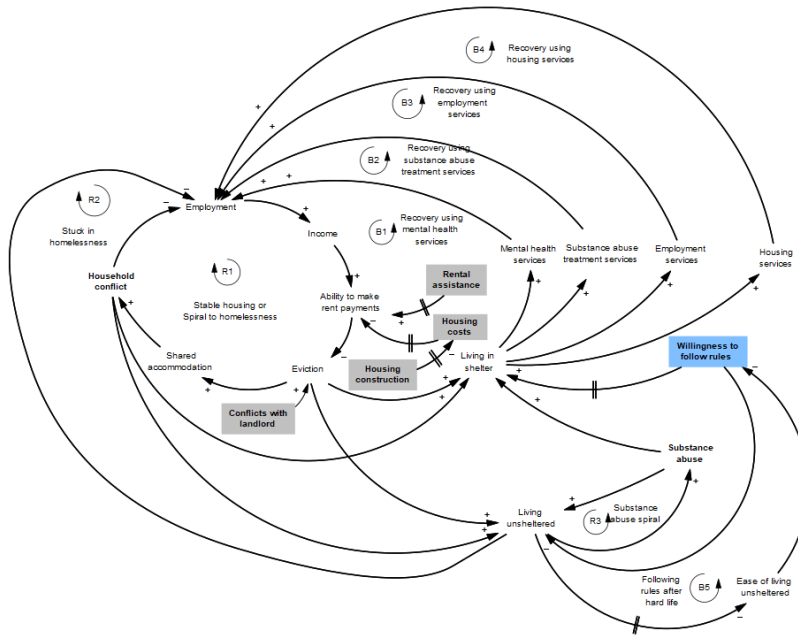
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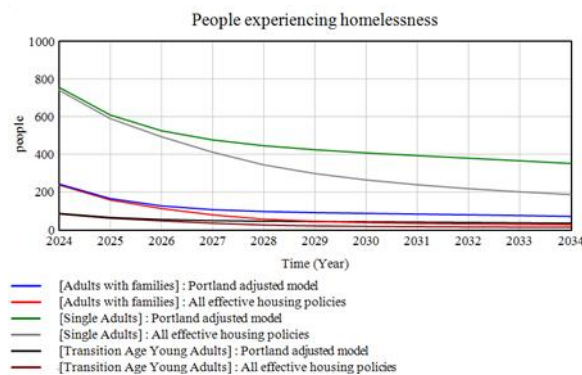voyer@maine.edu

The state of Maine is home to approximately 1.4 million people. At the January 2024 Point-In-Time count by the federal department of Housing and Urban Development, people experiencing homelessness were 2,695. Of those, 1,256, or 47%, were in Maine's largest city, Portland. The present paper applied systems thinking and system dynamics to Portland's experience, from 2010 to 2024, with people experiencing homelessness, and used that model to project Portland's experience through 2034.

Dynamic Hypothesis

Several simulations found policies to consider, including accelerating the pace and scale of low-income housing construction, increasing rental assistance, using a "Housing First" approach, and encouraging people experiencing homelessness to use emergency shelters and the services available there.

People Experiencing Homelessness, Base Run vs. All Effective Policies

The analysis makes clear the rigorous challenge of "solving" the problem of people experiencing homelessness in Portland, Maine (or elsewhere, for that matter). The analysis indicates that some combination (or perhaps all at once) of the following set of ambitious policies would make a difference:

- Policies to increase housing supply, thereby reducing the number of people experiencing homelessness:
  - Encouraging more building permits by loosening zoning rules
  - Speeding up the time it takes the City to issue permits once requested
  - Reducing the number of permits not used
  - Speeding up construction time
- Policies to help people avoid homelessness in the first place (rental assistance) or provide field- or shelter-based services to help them get back to the General population (bullets 2 through 5) or provide them with housing to provide dignity and comfort near the end of their lives or provide a way back to the General population (Housing First). Portland, Maine, has had some success with these types of policies (City of Portland, Maine: 2024):
  - Providing rental assistance
  - Helping homeless people avoid substance abuse
  - Helping homeless people recover from substance abuse
  - Encouraging unsheltered people to move into the shelter
  - Encouraging greater use of services available in the City's shelter
  - Providing Housing First units for Single Adults

Of these two sets of policies, evidence indicates that the encouragement of increased housing supply is the more challenging (Maine Policy Institute, 2025; State of Maine, 2025). People in authority positions in state and municipal government, and in the private property development sector, must address these issues with greater alacrity.

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