

# Homelessness and Being Displaced By Helene

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Introduction to Sociology  
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The morning of September 29th, 2024, I had to flee my house due to flooding and did not return until June of 2025. I was lucky to have neighbors unaffected, and to have never been truly homeless. For many in Asheville, a return to normalcy hasn't happened or never will. Learning about homelessness and the causes connect to me so deeply because I watched my community experience it.

Road to leave my house  
day after Helene



My house morning of Helene  
once it was safe to go out

# How Sociology Changed My Perspective

One new term I learned that really changed my perspective is ethnography. Ethnography is defined in our textbook as “the immersion of the researcher in the natural setting of an entire social community to observe and experience their everyday life and culture” (2.2 Research Methods). If someone had previously asked me about ethnography, I would’ve assumed it was just field research, rather than an entire branch of field research. It makes complete sense as a research method, as it gives you a nearly unbiased view into the world and how people interact with each other. What I thought was really interesting was institutional ethnography. Institutional ethnography is considered a “feminist-inspired approach to social analysis and primarily considers women’s experiences within male-dominated societies and power structures” that was first defined by sociologist Dorothy E. Smith (2.2 Research Methods). I think it is really awesome that a whole branch of research was established for women, as they are often left out of medical and other scientific trials, especially women of color. This specific type of ethnography of course does not particularly relate to homelessness, but it is still important to note as a branch of research. I would be curious to later do research on if homeless women have different experiences than homeless men, whether it be increased sexual violence or struggling during menstration due to the lack of products, medicine, and food.

# Personal Troubles vs. Public Issues

The sociological imagination is defined in the textbook as “the ability to understand how your own past relates to that of other people, as well as to history in general and societal structures in particular” (1.1 What is Sociology?). Relating homelessness to the sociological imagination with my personal experience, I can acknowledge that my experience of homelessness/displacement is much tamer than what most homeless individuals can say, like those living in Grants Pass or even the ones in downtown Asheville. A major point I can relate to with others is the lack of help from government of Asheville, North Carolina, and the United States. I come from a single income household and am very fortunate that my mother makes enough money that having to rebuild our house with little/no help from FEMA did not set us back like it did with other members of the community. It is a fact that people of lower incomes/the homeless population were unproportionally affected by the Hurricane.

# Inequality, Conformity, and Social Movements

In Module 2, we experimented with the inequality of being a single mother. Using the SPENT simulation, we had a primary goal of maintaining a job and not going bankrupt for a month. We simulated living in Relative Poverty, which is "a state of living where people can afford necessities but are unable to meet their society's average standard of living" (10.2 Global Wealth and Poverty). But even someone homeless can be living on the borderline of Relative Poverty and Absolute Poverty. Absolute Poverty is when a person is experiencing "deprivation so severe that it puts day-to-day survival in jeopardy" (10.2 Global Wealth and Poverty). They might be able to afford food and water, but not a place to live. They might've had to choose between buying a tent for shelter or having a couple weeks of food. In the simulation, we luckily got to choose our job, but as I pointed out in my discussion 6, if we didn't live somewhere with multiple job opportunities, and were stuck with something like the 2.75/h diner job, it would be impossible to survive (D6: Stratified Choices: Navigating Inequality). Even if a homeless person is living somewhere with multiple job opportunities, not every establishment will hire a homeless person due to the stigma behind being homeless.

# Growth Reflection

Everything we learned/experienced in hypothetical scenarios in Module 2 made me realize (more than I already knew) how truly difficult it is to be a homeless person in America. Especially now that I've done research on the social stigma of being homeless, like the automatic assumption that one is homeless because of an addiction. Last year in my English II class, I had the opportunity to research the Indian slums and how people living in the slums are disproportionately affected by climate change and politics. While the living conditions in our simulations are not as awful as in the slums, it is still an example of how poverty is not just relevant in America, but also in one of the largest countries in the world. Having to choose between things for my child and making it to the end of the month was difficult. This is an example of relative poverty. Relative poverty is defined as "a state of living where people can afford necessities but are unable to meet their society's average standard of living" (10.2 Global Wealth and Poverty). It may seem like an obvious choice: save money, spend money on your child later. But to me, I have been in that situation where I couldn't experience something due to money. I never want any of my kids to feel that they don't deserve something or are lesser than others because I can't afford it, both with my future kids and my pretend child in SPENT.

# Homelessness as a Status

The very structure of society, especially American society, relies on status, as well as class and power (4.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Society). But one would not have class and power without status, and vice versa. Class and status are economically determined. More money, higher class and a more respected status. Less money, lower class and disrespected by society. With a homeless status, you are basically disregarded, treated as worthless criminals who have no work ethic.

# Role Strain, Role Conflict, and Role Performance

Role Strain- Stress that occurs when too much is required of a single role

Role Conflict- A situation when one or more of an individual's roles clash

Role Performance- The expression of a role

A good example of these roles that me and my classmates experienced is the SPENT simulation from Module 2. We practiced our role performance as a single mother; we were also the sole income of a household and an office worker. We performed these roles on the daily, sometimes being asked to do more for each role, like take extra work time or attend our sons plays or host his friends. When one of our roles strain, it conflicts with our other roles and we must pick between making money, saving money, or keeping our kid happy.

# Looking-Glass Self- How public relations shape identity

We see examples of how public relations shape identity when we consider how outcast from society the homeless population is. Let it be abundantly clear, the outcast "role" is not their fault in any way. Due to the social stigma surrounding homelessness, like being addicts or lazy, homeless people are automatically ascribed negative statuses, leading them to be bottom members of society. An ascribed status is the role/rank one is given in society (4.3 Social Constructions of Reality). While to many people of upper class, homelessness is always attributed to personal choice, anyone who has been in that situation can understand that they would do anything to be "normal."

# The Three Approaches

## Asheville's Continuum of Care-

Establishes services such as support programs, emergency shelters, and transitional housing. Focuses on "broadening and strengthening the affordable housing ecosystem and tools" (City of Asheville Affordable Housing Plan)

## Norway's Housing First-

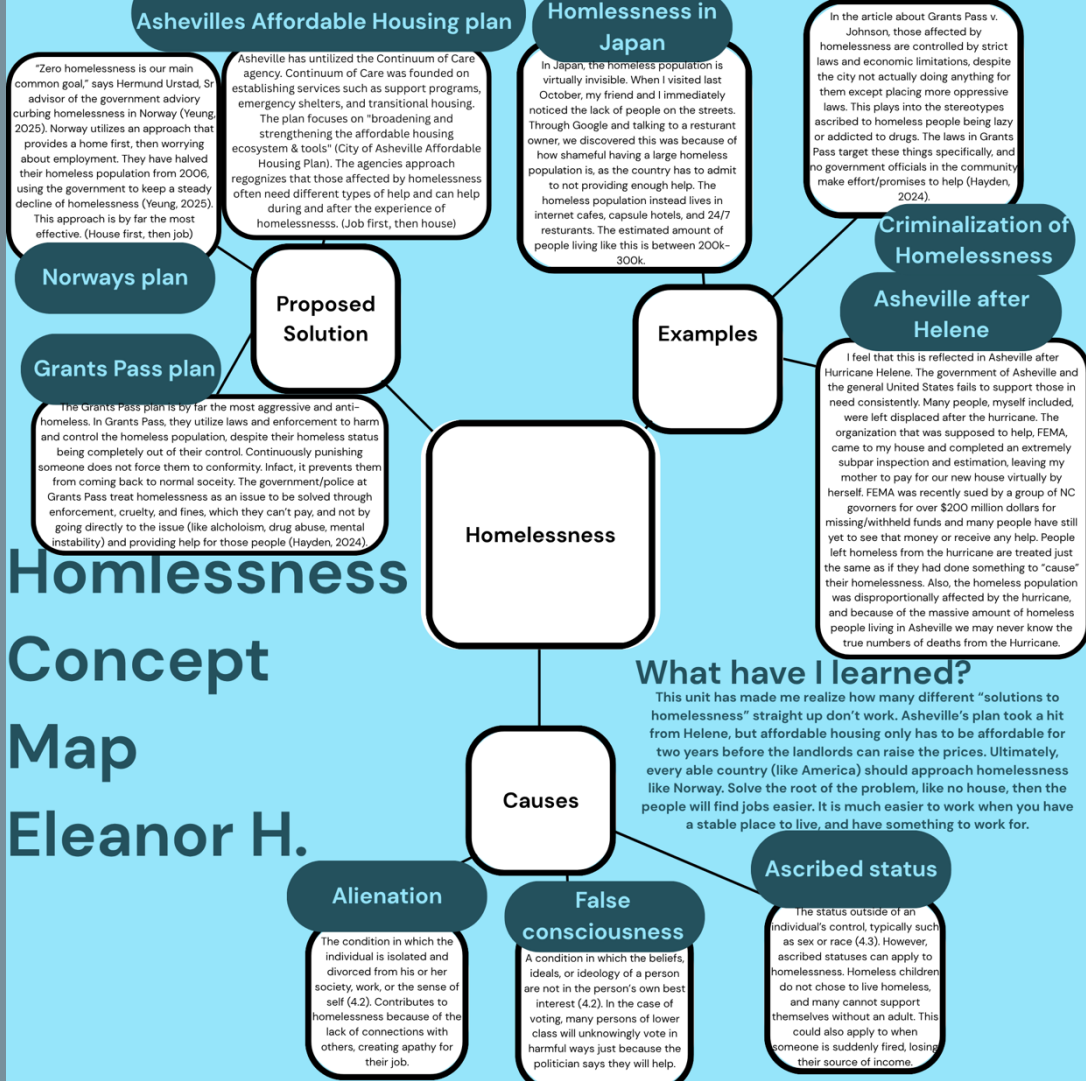
Utilizes an approach that provides a home first, then helps them find a job. Norway has halved their homeless population from 2006, using the government to keep a steady decline of homelessness (Yeung, 2025)

## Grants Pass's Criminalization-

Utilizes laws and enforcement to harm and control the homeless population, despite their homeless status being completely out of their control. Leans into the stigma mentioned in earlier slides. Fines people for being homeless, setting them back further. The law enforcement at Grants Pass does nothing but keep people in this cycle of homelessness.

Norway's approach is by far the most effective. They take immediate action to get to the root of the problem, then help with what Asheville helps with first, trying to find employment. (need to include numbers for how effective these programs are)

# Concept Map



# Homelessness Concept Map Eleanor H.

# Structural Causes and Solutions

According to The Obvious Answer to Homelessness article, the root cause of homelessness in places with low vacancy is that the “low income” housing in those spaces is still extremely expensive. The article further states that many people understand this as a root cause, and I can certainly see this with how expensive renting in Asheville is, but the reason it isn’t addressed is because homelessness is concentrated in Democratic states, therefore people blame Democratic programs for “handouts” and attributing those to homelessness, further playing into the stigma of homeless people being lazy (Demsas, 2023). It is easy to say the solution to homelessness in densely populated areas is lowering rent and raising wages, but then we would become so concentrated in some areas that it wouldn’t be much different than the Indian Slums, groups of people living in cheap places, controlled by politicians promising to give them a better living situation. The United States has been in this issue since the white flight out of urban areas. A temporary solution that works is in Houston, where homelessness has dropped 62% since 2011 (Demsas, 2023). Houston’s approach is like that of Norway’s, where they focus first on moving people into permanent supportive housing, giving them a path to success.

# Local Evidence

Asheville as a city has many non-profit organizations combatting the homeless crisis, but one is very close to me and my personal life. Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry, or [ABCCM](#), works very closely with the church I attend and the summer camp I attend as well. Specifically, Transformation Village and the Veterans Restoration Quarters. Both provide help (shelter, food) to the homeless population, Transformation Village focusing on providing women, mothers with children, and Veterans with transitional housing, and the Veterans Restoration Quarters focusing specifically on residential housing for Veterans. At summer camp, we also worked with the Recovery Living Ministry which specializes in helping those struggling with substance abuse. From the time I've worked with them, their mission has always been to help as many people as possible, no matter any part of their identity or race, and addressing the root cause of poverty, not having a home.

# Sociological Analysis

Structural Functionalism- The way each part of society functions together to contribute to the functioning of the whole (1.3 Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology)

When people become homeless, they lose a part of their societal functions, whether that be their house or job. ABCCM fills in those gaps, providing temporary stable housing which sets one's own cycle of structural functionalism back on track.

Habitualization- The idea that society is constructed by us and those before us, and it is followed like a habit (4.3 Social Constructions of Reality)

Human beings can only construct their habits based on what society gives them. ABCCM provides transitional housing, which gives the motivation to get back to work or get a degree so that someone never has to remove having stable housing from their "habits."

# Personal Growth

When I came into this class, I was not sure what Sociology was. I signed up because I figured it'd help me in my agent career that I want later down the line. I got much more than that out of this course. This course taught me so much about human interactionism, and about homelessness. I was never taught to blame homelessness on the homeless people themselves, but this course further solidified my belief that homelessness cannot always be avoided. Someone's spouse could die, and their spouse may have been the only person earning money in their house. Or maybe their spouse died, and they could no longer work. Or maybe they got injured and became unable to work. If anything, this course has instilled a new sense of empathy in me and made me wonder about the homeless I see around Asheville.

# Why My Growth Matters

Young people will always be at the forefront for change. Mine and my classmates understanding of this class can/will potentially affect future movements, policies, and help that the homeless population receives. But also, since I live in Asheville, I am so desensitized to homelessness. Taking a course like this and doing as much work as we have around homelessness, opens mine and my classmates' eyes to the issues around our town.