



### Why Homelessness?

Growing up in Western North Carolina, I walked past unhoused neighbors downtown without really seeing them. This course gave me a language for what I had been avoiding — and made me realize that looking away was itself a social act shaped by the same forces that create homelessness in the first place.

THROUGH THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

# Homelessness as a Case Study

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#### Primary Textbook:

*Conerly, Holmes & Tamang*  
*Introduction to Sociology 3e (OpenStax, 2021)*  
*Free at [openstax.org](https://openstax.org)*

# How Sociology Changed My Perspective | Module 1

## MY VIEW BEFORE THIS COURSE

Before this course, I thought of homelessness the way most people in my community did — as something that happened to individuals who had made a series of bad decisions. I assumed that people who were homeless lacked motivation, had addiction problems they chose not to address, or simply refused to work. I never really questioned why homelessness seemed concentrated in certain parts of the city, or why some people recovered from hard times while others ended up on the street. I thought the solution was simple: shelters, charity, and personal responsibility. The idea that larger forces — rent prices, wage stagnation, a broken mental health system — could systematically produce homelessness simply never occurred to me.

## WHAT SOCIOLOGY CHANGED

The concept that most changed my thinking was the sociological imagination — the ability to connect personal troubles to public issues. When I applied it to homelessness, I stopped seeing individual failures and started seeing a pattern produced by structural forces: rising housing costs, low wages, inadequate healthcare. Sociology taught me to ask not just "what happened to this person?" but "what is happening in this society that makes this outcome so common?"

### Direct Quote — OpenStax 3e, Sec. 1.1

*"Sociologists often study culture using the sociological imagination, which pioneer sociologist C. Wright Mills described as an awareness of the relationship between a person's behavior and experience and the wider culture that shaped the person's choices and perceptions."*

— Conerly et al., *Introduction to Sociology 3e* (OpenStax), Sec. 1.1, p. 8

# Personal Troubles vs. Public Issues | OpenStax 3e, Sec. 1.1

## PERSONAL TROUBLE

### Individual-level framing:

*"He just made bad choices."*

*"She should get a job."*

*"Why not go to a shelter?"*

This view treats homelessness as a private failure rooted in individual biography. It focuses on personal behavior while ignoring the social structure that shapes what options are even available to that person.

*OpenStax 3e (Sec. 1.1, p. 9): "To a sociologist, the personal decisions an individual makes do not exist in a vacuum. Cultural patterns, social forces and influences put pressure on people to select one choice over another."*

## C. Wright Mills Sociological Imagination (1959)

## PUBLIC ISSUE

### Structural-level framing:

*Rising rents. Stagnant wages. Defunded mental health systems. Criminalization of poverty.*

When hundreds of people in one county lose housing simultaneously, it is not a coincidence. Homelessness is patterned by race, class, gender, and policy decisions made long before any individual ended up on the street.

*OpenStax 3e (Sec. 1.1, p. 8): The sociological imagination connects personal experience to the "wider culture that shaped the person's choices and perceptions" — history and biography together.*

# Social Stratification & Homelessness (Module 2) | D6

## Discussion

### Social Stratification

OpenStax 3e  
Ch. 9, Sec. 9.1  
p. 236

OpenStax 3e, Sec. 9.1 (p. 236):  
"Social stratification is a system by which a society ranks categories of people in a hierarchy."

### APPLICATION TO HOMELESSNESS

Social stratification — the ranking of people in a hierarchy based on wealth, power, and prestige — directly explains why homelessness is not random. In Asheville, as in cities across the country, the people most likely to experience homelessness are those already at the bottom of existing hierarchies: people of color, veterans, individuals with disabilities, and those exiting the criminal justice system. Stratification creates unequal access to housing, healthcare, and employment, meaning that losing a job or a relationship does not carry the same risk for everyone — it depends entirely on where you are in the social hierarchy to begin with.

### From D6 Discussion Post

*"What struck me most in this week's reading was that stratification isn't just about income — it's about how society legitimizes who deserves resources and who doesn't. When I think about the unhoused people I walk past downtown, I realize I've been taught to see them as outside the system, when really they are produced by the system. Homelessness isn't a failure of individuals; it's the floor of our stratification structure made visible."  
— D6 post, referencing OpenStax 3e, Ch. 9, Sec. 9.1*

# Growth Reflection | Module 2 — Inequality & Social Change

## Before Module 2

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I thought inequality was mostly about individual effort — that people who worked hard would rise, and those who didn't would fall. I saw poverty as unfortunate but essentially fair. I didn't yet have the vocabulary to question whether the system itself was designed in ways that limited mobility for some groups far more than others.

## After Readings & Discussion

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Reading Chapter 9 of OpenStax on social stratification changed my framework entirely. The concept of a "hierarchy" that society constructs and maintains — not through individual merit, but through policy, history, and accumulated advantage — made me see homelessness not as an accident but as a predictable outcome of how we have organized wealth and housing in this country.

## How I Think Now

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I now understand that asking "why is that person homeless?" is the wrong starting question. The sociologically informed question is: "what features of our stratification system make homelessness the outcome for this group rather than that one?" Inequality isn't just background noise — it is the story. And that means solutions have to be structural, not just charitable.

# Status & Homelessness | OpenStax 3e, Sec. 4.3

## WHAT IS STATUS? (Sec. 4.3, p. 109)

**Status** is a socially defined position in a group or society. According to OpenStax 3e (Sec. 4.3), statuses shape how others treat us and how we come to understand ourselves within social life.

Types of status:

- **Ascribed:** assigned at birth (race, sex, family background)
- **Achieved:** earned through individual effort or circumstance
- **Master status:** the one status that overrides all others in social interactions

When a person is unhoused, that condition typically becomes their master status — it is the first and often only thing others see, regardless of the person's education, work history, family roles, or skills.

## HOMELESSNESS AS MASTER STATUS

In downtown Asheville, I observed this directly: a man in his 50s was sitting outside the entrance to a pharmacy. He was neatly dressed, reading a paperback. A manager came out and asked him to leave. Not because he had done anything wrong — but because his visible homelessness marked him as unwelcome regardless of his behavior in that moment.

**This is master status in action.** His achieved statuses — reader, community member, human being with dignity — were rendered invisible by one ascribed condition: being unhoused.

*OpenStax 3e (Sec. 4.3, p. 109) explains the social construction of reality: statuses are not natural facts but socially created and enforced through interaction — which means they can be challenged and changed through social action.*

# Role Strain, Role Conflict & Role Performance |

## OpenStax 3e, Sec. 4.3

### ROLE STRAIN

#### Definition:

*Tension that arises when competing demands are made within a single social role (OpenStax 3e, Sec. 4.3, p. 109).*

#### Applied to Homelessness:

A parent experiencing homelessness faces severe role strain: the parental role demands providing safety, stability, food, and a sense of normalcy for children — but each of these expectations requires resources that homelessness removes. The role itself remains, but the structural conditions make it nearly impossible to perform as society expects. The strain is not a failure of parenting; it is a failure of the safety net.

### ROLE CONFLICT

#### Definition:

*Conflict that arises when the expectations of two or more roles held simultaneously are incompatible (OpenStax 3e, Sec. 4.3, p. 109).*

#### Applied to Homelessness:

An unhoused person seeking employment faces direct role conflict: the job-seeker role requires a stable address for applications, clean professional clothing, reliable transportation, and access to a phone — while the role of "person experiencing homelessness" makes all of these things structurally difficult to obtain. Society expects both roles to be played, while making them mutually incompatible.

### ROLE PERFORMANCE

#### Definition:

*The way a person actually enacts a role, which may differ from the idealized expectations attached to it (OpenStax 3e, Sec. 4.3, p. 109).*

#### Applied to Homelessness:

Unhoused individuals often develop creative role performances to navigate a hostile social environment: using public libraries for warmth, hygiene, and Wi-Fi; timing visits to day shelters around service hours; performing visible compliance with rules to avoid police contact. These adaptations reveal how much intelligence and effort homelessness actually requires — and how far performance must diverge from expectation just to survive.

# The Looking-Glass Self & Homelessness | OpenStax 3e, Sec. 5.1

1

## We Imagine How We Appear

An unhoused person imagines how they appear to others — disheveled, without a permanent address, visibly outside the bounds of "normal" society. This imagined judgment is based on reading social cues: store owners watching them, people crossing the street, strangers avoiding eye contact.

2

## We Interpret Others' Reactions

Public reactions — avoidance, disgust, pity, hostility, and police contact — are absorbed as social messages about one's worth. These reactions say, repeatedly and loudly: you do not belong here. The unhoused person does not simply experience poverty; they experience a constant social verdict being rendered about their humanity.

3

## We Develop Our Self-Concept

Identity forms around these reflected appraisals. Research cited in HD1 discussions showed that internalized stigma — shame, withdrawal, and a deep sense of unworthiness — becomes one of the most serious barriers to accepting help and pursuing housing. The mirror of society has told a person who they are, and they have begun to believe it.

*Charles Cooley's looking-glass self (OpenStax 3e, Sec. 5.1, p. 121): we develop our self-concept by imagining how we appear to others, then interpreting their reactions. For unhoused individuals, that mirror is relentlessly hostile.*

# Three Social Responses to Homelessness | HD2 Data

## ASHEVILLE, NC

### *Continuum of Care*

- ▶ Step-by-step model: emergency shelter → transitional housing → permanent housing; each step requires meeting behavioral requirements
- ▶ Requires sobriety, program compliance, and demonstrated "housing readiness" before permanent placement is offered
- ▶ 2024 Buncombe County Point-in-Time count: 739 unhoused (520 sheltered, 219 unsheltered) — up 29% from 2023 despite new shelter beds
- ▶ Homeward Bound WNC leads local CoC; adopted Housing First model in 2006 and has since housed 2,648+ individuals (homewardboundwnc.org)

## NORWAY

### *Housing First*

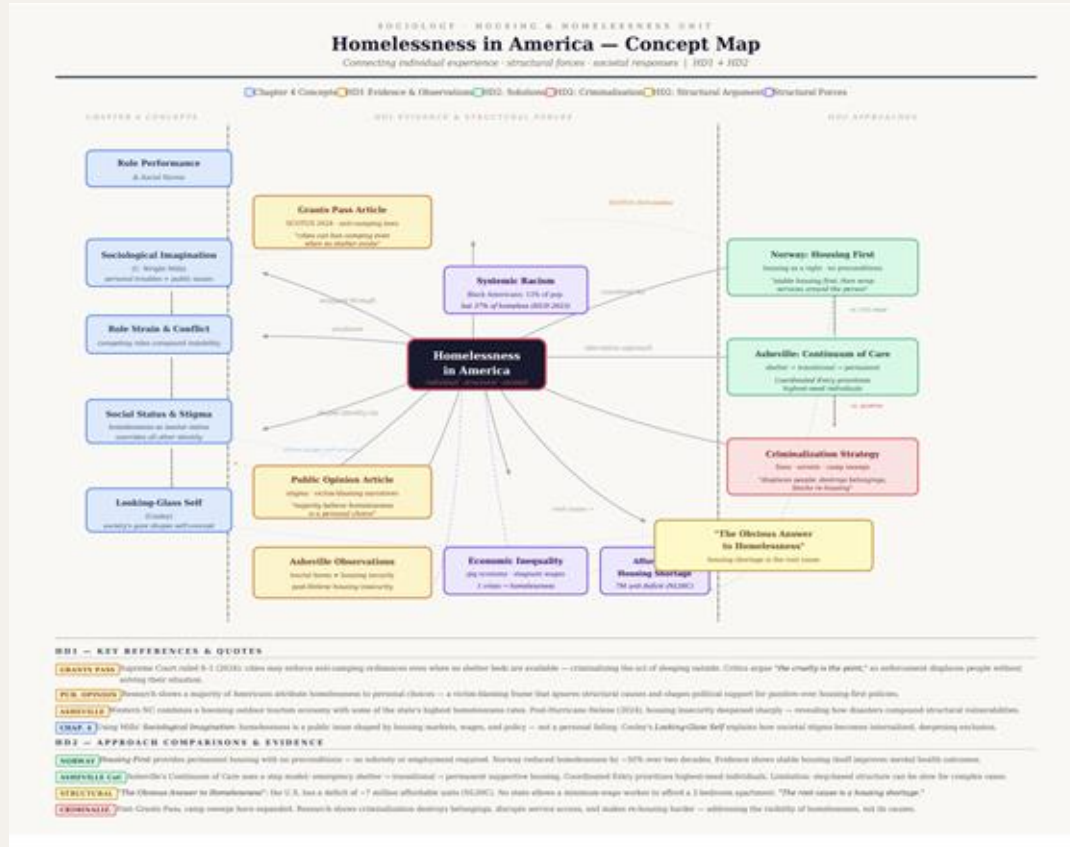
- ▶ Permanent housing is provided immediately and unconditionally — people do not have to earn their way into shelter
- ▶ All other services (mental health, substance use, employment) are provided after housing is secured, not as a precondition for it
- ▶ National data shows significant reductions in chronic homelessness; HD2 sources document 90%+ housing retention rates in Housing First programs
- ▶ Based on evidence that housing is the foundation for addressing every other need — not a reward for addressing them first

## GRANTS PASS, OR

### *Criminalization*

- ▶ City ordinances banned camping, sitting, and lying in public spaces — targeting unhoused individuals specifically
- ▶ 2024: Supreme Court ruled in *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson* that such bans are constitutional, opening the door nationally
- ▶ Criminalization displaces people and creates fines and arrest records that make housing harder to obtain — a revolving door, not a solution
- ▶ OpenStax Ch. 7 (Sec. 7.1, p. 174): labeling theory shows that once labeled criminal or deviant, individuals face compounding disadvantage — the label becomes self-fulfilling

# Concept Map | HA1 – How Course Concepts Connect to Homelessness



# Structural Causes & Solutions | "The Obvious Answer to Homelessness"

## Housing

Asheville's fair market rent for a 1-bedroom rose from \$799 in 2019 to \$1,496 in 2024. The median home sale price is \$418,250 — 6.3x the median household income. This gap is structural, not personal.

## Employment

The local living wage in Buncombe County is \$22.10/hr (Just Economics WNC, 2024). A full-time minimum-wage worker earns far less — meaning employment alone does not prevent homelessness.

## Healthcare

Untreated mental illness and substance use disorders without housing-linked care create a cycle: homelessness worsens health, poor health makes housing less attainable. One does not precede the other.

## Policy

The criminalization approach (Grants Pass) displaces without housing. Continuum of Care models manage homelessness. Only Housing First has consistent evidence of ending it at the individual level.

## "The Obvious Answer to Homelessness" — Course Article Analysis

The article argues that Housing First is not a radical idea — it is the logically obvious response once you accept that homelessness is caused by a lack of housing, not by personal character flaws. The Norway model best addresses structural root causes because it removes the preconditions that Continuum of Care models attach to shelter, preconditions that OpenStax Sec. 9.1 helps us recognize as themselves products of class bias — the assumption that poor and unhoused people must prove worthiness before receiving basic needs.

*Criminalization (Grants Pass) does the opposite: it applies the logic of labeling theory (OpenStax Ch. 7, Sec. 7.1) by legally stamping unhoused individuals as deviant, which deepens the stigma and structural barriers that produced their homelessness in the first place. The "obvious answer" is not obvious to a society organized around stratification — but it becomes clear the moment you apply the sociological imagination.*

# Local Evidence | Asheville & Buncombe County, NC



## LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS & GOALS

**Homeward Bound WNC** (founded 1988): Mission is to prevent and end homelessness through permanent housing and support. Adopted Housing First in 2006. Operates Compass Point Village — 85 permanent supportive housing units on Tunnel Road — and the AHOPE day shelter. Has housed 2,648+ individuals since founding.

**ABCCM (Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry)**: Operates emergency shelter beds and transitional housing. Participates in the city's HMIS data system. Added 37 Safe Haven shelter beds in 2024–25.

## BUNCOMBE COUNTY DATA (2024–2025)

unsheltered) — a 29% increase from 2023

- **2025 count:** 824 unhoused (334 unsheltered), a 9% increase — partly driven by Hurricane Helene, which damaged 11,488 homes
- Living wage: \$22.10/hr (Just Economics WNC) vs. median 1BR rent: \$1,496/mo (HUD FMR 2024)

Sources: Blue Ridge Public Radio (April 2024, March 2026); homewardboundwnc.org; City of Asheville Homelessness Data Dashboard

*Local evidence confirms the national pattern: homelessness in Asheville is rising not because individuals are failing, but because rents have doubled while wages have not, and because Hurricane Helene destroyed hundreds of housing units that have not yet been replaced.*

# Sociological Analysis of Local Evidence | 2 Concepts Applied

## CONCEPT 1: Social Stratification (OpenStax 3e, Sec. 9.1, p. 236)

**In my own words:** Social stratification is the way society organizes people into layers based on wealth, power, and prestige — and those layers are not just descriptions, they determine access to everything else.

**Applied to Asheville:** The 2024 data makes stratification visible: while Buncombe County's median household income is \$66,531, fair market rent for a one-bedroom is \$1,496/month — a price point that assumes a household income over \$54,000 just to spend 33% on rent. The 739 unhoused people counted in 2024 are not outliers; they are the predictable outcome of the bottom tier of a stratified housing market. Homeward Bound WNC's mission to provide permanent supportive housing is, in sociological terms, an attempt to interrupt stratification at the point of its most visible consequence.

*OpenStax ref: Sec. 9.1, p. 236*

## CONCEPT 2: Labeling Theory (OpenStax 3e, Sec. 7.1, p. 174)

**In my own words:** Labeling theory says that being officially identified as deviant — by law, institutions, or public perception — changes how others treat you and how you come to see yourself, often making the labeled condition worse.

**Applied to Asheville:** Asheville's Continuum of Care model, while more humane than Grants Pass, still carries labeling dynamics: individuals must be officially assessed, enrolled in programs, and classified by their barriers before receiving services. This process, while intended to help, attaches institutional labels that follow people — making landlords, employers, and service providers treat them first as "chronically homeless" rather than as individuals. The 2024 count's 29% increase despite new shelter beds suggests that labeling and managing homelessness without changing structural conditions will never end it. Only Homeward Bound's Housing First programs — which place people before labeling them — show high retention rates.

*OpenStax ref: Sec. 7.1, p. 174*

# Personal Growth | How My Thinking Changed This Semester

## My Starting Point

I came into this course with a kind of unconscious contempt that I never would have admitted to. I believed in meritocracy — that the system was basically fair, that people got what they worked for, and that homelessness was what happened when someone gave up. I had never interrogated those beliefs because they were invisible to me, wrapped inside what felt like common sense.

## A Turning Point

The turning point was reading Chapter 9 of OpenStax and applying stratification to the local data from Homeward Bound WNC. When I saw that Asheville's fair market rent assumes an income that most service workers cannot earn, something clicked. I realized I had been blaming individuals for outcomes that were structurally produced. The sociological imagination (Sec. 1.1) gave me a tool to finally see what I had been trained not to look at.

## Where I Am Now

I now carry a different kind of discomfort than I started with. Before, I was uncomfortable around unhoused people in a way that made me look away. Now I'm uncomfortable with systems — with the gap between rent and wages, with ordinances that criminalize survival, with my own previous certainty that those people had simply made wrong choices. That discomfort is productive. It means sociology worked.

# Why This Matters

## Beyond This Classroom

Understanding homelessness sociologically matters because every policy decision in a community is, at its core, a sociological choice. When a city council votes to criminalize camping, they are choosing to apply labeling theory rather than stratification theory — whether they know it or not. When a nonprofit adopts Housing First, they are acting on evidence that the sociological imagination helped produce.

I live in Asheville. I will vote on local housing bonds. I will have neighbors who are one rent increase away from the street. I will make decisions as an employer, as a parent, as a citizen — and all of those decisions will be shaped by whether I see the people around me as individuals responsible for their own outcomes, or as people embedded in social structures that I have some power to change.

Sociology gave me that second lens. I cannot put it down.

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*"The first fruit of this imagination — and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it — is the idea that the individual can understand her own experience and gauge her own fate only by locating herself within her period."*

— C. Wright Mills (1959), cited in OpenStax 3e, Sec. 1.1, p. 8