

# Homelessness

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Homelessness has stood out to me because coming from Asheville, NC it is highly visible in my community

Homelessness represents deeper social problems far beyond individual choices; alongside all the things we can be doing to improve these conditions



# How sociology changed my perspective

The concept that truly changed my perspective in this module was the Sociological Imagination. Before this class, I tended to view people's successes or failures as strictly the result of their own hard work or lack thereof. However, learning about how "personal troubles" are often "public issues" made me realize that larger social structures are always at play. As noted in the text, "Awareness of the relationship between a person's behavior and experience and the wider culture that shaped the person's choices and perceptions." (Chapter 1, slide 6). This surprised me because it challenges the "bootstrap" mentality I grew up with and forces me to look at the invisible forces, like the economy or education systems, that shape a person's path. I noticed myself thinking like a sociologist during our Discussion Forum on Cultural Fads. Initially, I thought fads like Tik Tok dance trends were just random coincidences. However, applying the lens of symbolic interactionism, I began to see them as ways people signal their belonging to a specific group. In that forum, I wrote about how these objects aren't just tools; they are symbols of status. I realized that my own desire to "fit in" with certain trends isn't just a personal want, it's a socialized behavior. I'm no longer just "consuming" media; I'm analyzing the hidden curriculum of the ads I see, questioning what they are telling me about gender roles or "the American Dream." Understanding sociological research methods has made me a more critical consumer of information. In the Discussion Forum on Social Institutions, we looked at how socialization can impact identity. This taught me that things like family and social media are not just factors in one's life, but everyday influences of who we are, and what we value. As the textbook states, "the process through which people are taught to be proficient members of society by describing the ways that people come to understand societal norms/expectations, to accept society's beliefs, and to be aware of societal values." (Chapter 5, slide, 4). By studying these ideas, I can better understand myself by identifying which of my beliefs are truly "mine" and which were handed to me by my culture (socialization). Moving forward, I think this perspective will make me more empathetic toward others because I'll be looking at the context of their lives rather than just their surface-level actions.

# Groups

Personal trouble: Someone losing their job, addiction-alcohol/drugs, eviction from home in result of oneself, etc.

Public issue: Lack of affordable housing–The economy is unsustainable, low wages, limited healthcare to offer help

The sociological imagination connects individual experiences with larger social forces.

If you look at one person experiencing homelessness without sociological imagination, it's possible you make assumptions on whether they make poor financial choices? Or have a substance abuse issue?

This perspective looks at homelessness as a situation caused by strictly by an individual and their life choices. On the contrary there are larger social forces out there that push people to see things differently. When looked at through the public issue lens you may see how homelessness may have been caused in result to our unsustainable economy, lack of accessibility to receive mental help, and more.

Overall the sociological imagination leads people to understand that if it were one person that is homeless, it might be a personal fault.

However, when hundreds, and thousands of people are homeless it reveals a structural failure.

# Inequality

On Inequality and Empathy (D6) Reflecting on the difficult decisions people face due to inequality. It's easy to look at others' lives through a lens of "personal choice" until you see all the barriers and hardships people must handle in the way. Personally i have realized that my own successes aren't just about hard work, but also the starting point I was given. In the U.S., we often ignore how deep these divides are. The text points out that "social stratification is a socioeconomic system that divides society's members into categories ranking from high to low, based on things like wealth, power, and prestige" (Section 9.3). Seeing those rankings laid out for me to "experience" made me really see things from a different perspective, and be more empathetic toward the hard choices others have to make every day. In relation to homelessness these everyday inequalities we are given and not chosen can land people in unhoused situation far easier than others.

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# Growth Reflection

Before studying the Reproductive Justice Movement, I thought social movements mostly just occurred spur of the moment when people became upset about an issue and felt they needed to act then. I imagined change as something led by a few powerful people or “heroes” who inspired others to act. However, my understanding of social movements has changed drastically. I now understand that social movements are not spur of the moment or solely emotional—they are highly organized situations that rely on a lot of time,, planning, and intentional use of resources.

One of the largest insights for me was realizing how important working together and becoming aware of one's resources and how to use them are. Change doesn't come from one person; it comes from many different people and organizations working together over time. The Reproductive Justice Movement showed me a clear example of how groups coordinate and share resources, all with hope to build momentum and create lasting positive impact. This led me to a deeper understanding that leadership is often times shared amongst many people oppose to centered on a single figure.

This also connected to what I learned about conformity and social influence. While society shapes our beliefs and behaviors, social movements give a demonstration that people also contain the ability and power to challenge and change the societal norms set before us. When individuals come together with a shared goal, it is possible to resist pressure to conform and instead create new standards and systems.

Overall, my thinking has shifted from seeing social movements as spontaneous and single leader-driven to understanding and recognizing them as strategic processes which take a lot of time and effort. I now understand that in order to achieve meaningful social change it requires consistent effort, team work, and organization. Change is not made simply of strong emotions.

# Status

To explain homelessness as a **status** one must look at it through a sociological lens—not simply a personal situation, but as a recognized social position that determines how people are seen and treated by the rest of the public. Homelessness is seen as a **social status** because it puts people into a specific category within society. Like other statuses; for example, student, parent, or worker, it comes with expectations, and assumptions. However, opposite to many of those, it is commonly a **stigmatized status**. People experiencing homelessness are commonly stereotyped as dangerous, or self-inflicted even though the reality is much more complex and often tied to structural issues such as lack of affordable housing or systemic inequality. Homelessness is typically an **achieved status**; However, that doesn't mean it is fully under individual control... larger social and economic forces play a big role. As a status, homelessness affects how most individuals interact with institutions and other people. This can cause it to be difficult to obtain a job, or receive good healthcare, and education. People more so than not react differently to them in public areas, such as taking an added step to form distance while walking in downtown past a homeless person. This status can also become a **master status**, overshadowing other aspects of who someone is. Simply because someone is homeless does not mean they aren't capable of possibly being a veteran, parent. However, when someone is labeled as "homeless," that tends to dominate and dictate how they are viewed by others. Overall, understanding homelessness as a status helps people understand it is not simply being unhoused but it's the category all unhoused people are put in—taking away sight of all the other aspects of their lives.

# Role Strain, Role conflict, Role Performance

Growing up, it was a common occurrence for my family to go downtown and out to dinner every now and then in downtown Asheville. As we've been analyzing throughout the semester, there is quite a large homeless population; as long as I can remember, each and every time we'd pass an unhoused person on the street, my dad would move me to the opposite side of him, grab my hand, and increase our walking pace just a bit.

These actions are a clear demonstration of role conflict—he believed our status was above the person we were passing and thought it best we quickly move past them (4.3). These actions also reflect role strain, where my dad sensed the “demeanor” of said unhoused person was something we should consciously pull away from. In the context of role performance, my father, this unhoused person, and I are all people; we all require the same things to fuel our bodies and live, yet they experience life from completely different lenses.

# Looking glass self

Chapter 4 Concepts focus on the building blocks of social interaction—how we define ourselves and others through social roles and statuses. In Asheville, a common public observation I've noticed is the change in reaction to homeless people. When I'm downtown I observe 80% of people take 2 steps away to add distance, and pick up their walking pace when passing a homeless person on the sidewalk; opposed to the 20% who might happily give them leftovers, or some money. This highlights a breakdown in traditional social scripts where the unhoused people are no longer seen as a "neighbor in crisis" but as a "threat to public order". A sociological concept that relates to homelessness would be the concept of the Looking-Glass Self. This concept explains how our self-identity is shaped by how we perceive others seeing us. A homeless person in Asheville, may form their self-image based on the reactions the public has to them. When pedestrians look away, cross the street, or when the law declares their basic needs such as sleeping with a blanket as a crime. This concept shows that homelessness is not just a lack of four walls and a roof; it's a damning of one's self. If society treats someone as a "criminal" for trying to survive, that person may begin to see themselves as a criminal, which can lead to more withdrawal from mainstream society.

# Norway (housing first) - Grant Pass

The two face many key similarities and differences. Both Asheville and Norway view homelessness as a condition that needs intervention. Both the Grants Pass model and Asheville's current climate reflect an increasing tension between the rights of the unhoused and the safety of the general public. In contrast, there are also differences. Norway provides housing as a baseline. Asheville's model often involves "steps" or "readiness", while Grants Pass uses the legal system to remove people from public view completely. The Norway model operates within a social structure of strong state-supported welfare and cultural norms that view housing as a collective responsibility. In contrast, Asheville's circumstances are shaped by a cultural shift where the unhoused are commonly viewed as criminals opposed to those in need of help. Social institutions like the legal system (in the Grants Pass ruling) and local government (in Asheville's CoC) act as gatekeepers. While Norway's policies support individuals by taking away the stress of survival, Asheville can sometimes constrain them by requiring certain things before providing permanent stability. The approach discussed in "The Obvious Answer to Homelessness" (affordable housing) is arguably the most effective at addressing the root causes. While Norway and Asheville manage the people experiencing the crisis, addressing the affordable housing gap targets the systemic failure. As long as there is an absolute shortage of affordable homes, even the best service-oriented models will struggle with a "bottleneck" where people have nowhere to go once they are "ready" for housing.

# Concept Map



# Structural causes & Solutions

According to "The Obvious Answer to Homelessness," lack of affordable housing is the root cause of the increasing homeless population. From taking a look at a "musical chairs" analogy we begin to see a perspective on unhoused people where it is not a reflection of individual shortcomings, but rather housing availability, dictating the number of homeless people within society. Often times factors such as employment and healthcare are put at fault, however as reviewed in the article data from the book "*Homelessness Is a Housing Problem*" it is indicated that high-rent, low-vacancy, big cities reveal the highest rates of homelessness—" Rather, the most relevant factors in the homelessness crisis are rent prices and vacancy rates." -- all despite local poverty and or health issues.

# Local Analysis

In communities across the United States there is a large lack of affordable housing. Alongside the struggle are organizations put in place with intent to help. In Western North Carolina there are several organizations attempting to provide assistance. One example of this is the Western Carolina Rescue Ministries. This organization aims to pinpoint three things; provide rescuing to those who need it, offer sources to help the people recover, and restore these individuals in a stable place. The organization holds several different shelters each with a different criteria open to those needing to attend, and each one offers resources such as food, clothes, volunteer/work opportunities to get people back on their feet.

# Sociological analysis

WCRM has proven to be a good recovery institution it seems to rely a large bit on **Role Performance**. The success of the people in recovery often times depends on their behavioral alignment with the organization's expectations, and definition of a stable person. This places a light on the way we separate helping a person and the way they show up socially and a person and their identity.

To address this scenario, we must go back to the beginning and rebuild as a community to ensure everyone's needs are met. This plan aligns with structural functionalism, a perspective that views society as a system of interconnected parts working together to maintain stability. If we, as a community, collaborate with organizations like Western Carolina Rescue Ministries (WCRM) to uplift and assist those less fortunate, we can achieve a positive shift in our society's overall dynamic.

# Personal Growth

At the beginning of the semester, I mainly viewed homelessness through the perspective of their position being individually inflicted, most commonly assuming that personal struggles such as addiction or job loss were the primary causes of the unhoused issue. However, since the beginning of the semester my thinking has shifted to a more complex understanding that separates the differences between "private troubles" and "public issues." The "musical chairs" analogy from *The Obvious Answer to Homelessness* was a turning point for me; it offered up an analogy making it clear that while individual struggles (the "sprained ankle") might determine *who* loses their seat, the lack of available chairs (affordable housing) is what primarily causes the loss of one's home inevitable. I now understand that homelessness is a structural failure within our economy and society oppose to simply a personal personal shortcoming. Comparing Asheville's "readiness" model to Norway's "Housing First" approach has shown me how our social institutions often have unrealistic demands of achieving stability before providing the first step assistance—a house. I've come to understand through this course that as long as we act like survival attempts are criminal conduct rather than a status, and as long as we continue not to address the "bottleneck" of available housing, we are simply watching a crisis occur opposed to stepping in to help solve this issue.

# Why This Matters

Understanding homelessness sociologically matters because it changes us from passively observing these people—making assumptions, into knowledgeable community members aware that more often than not homelessness is result of the structural flaws in our own communities. When we look past blaming the individual, we stop viewing the unhoused as a separate class of people and begin seeing them as people suffering in an unstable housing market and insufficient social policy. This perspective is important because it indicates how we react towards unhoused people and how we advocate for change; if we think the problem is solely addiction or job loss, we will only fund temporary solutions but if we can see it as the true lack of housing, we can begin acting on the changes needed to actually end the crisis at hand. To continue, the sociological imagination teaches us that a community is only as stable as its most vulnerable members, and if together we address the main causes of homelessness, we can take action, and create a more safe and stable community for all. We need to lose the "Looking-Glass Self" labels which institutionalize stigma, letting us see homelessness is not a reflection of one's personal worth and rather economic shortcomings.

# Sources

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