

Homelessness: The Central Result of Inequality in a Society

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SOC-210

Personal Connection

The discussion of homelessness in this course is not one that most classes like to touch on. The personal, grounded approach to understanding homelessness was much more in depth than I had expected, considering most classes seem to shy away from discussions of inequality in modern times, especially with examples from the US.



[Asheville Citizen Times, 2026](#)

How Sociology Changed My Perspective

- Module 1's elaboration on class and how deeply entrenched in our everyday lives it is made me think deeply about how classism was involved in things I normally didn't think twice about. I've been able to find instances where I am both negatively and positively impacted by class, and it's made me much more aware of how I interact with the world.
- It has also made me much more conscious of how many aspects of our society that seem like facts of life aren't, in several senses. On one hand, there are the more conventional cultural aspects, like when to smile, how to greet people, etc, but on the other there are the effects of the US's social institutions. Just as "...government dictates mark the points at which we require socialization into a new category" (Section 5.3), groups like certain political parties and religious groups have had a very large and relatively unique impact on American culture that I had only been peripherally aware of before.

Personal Troubles vs. Public Issues

Homelessness can't exist in a vacuum where we can attribute all of a person's choices and circumstances leading up to and during their being homeless to their own internal motivations and objective choices and nothing else. The personal troubles a homeless person faces, like choosing where to risk sleeping or experiencing drug addiction, are affected by the public issues of the greater culture they live in. For example, homeless people's lives and options are affected by:

- History: For instance, the historical oppression of BIPOC, women, LGBTQ+, and disabled people leading to greater rates of homelessness/unemployment among those populations
- Social norms: For instance, it being frowned upon to appear unhygienic or sick in public, or to wear ill fitting/mismatched clothes
- Safety: For example, women only shelters, dangerous weather, food scarcity, or the risk of being arrested

The sociological imagination can be used to examine the relationship between the choices a person makes and the greater culture they live in.

Inequality, Conformity, or Social Movements

Understanding stratification is key to understanding homelessness. As social stratification defines people based on power or wealth, homelessness is a direct result of those who benefit from social stratification needing a population of people with no power and no wealth in order to reinforce their position. The homeless, and the impoverished as a whole, make up the base of the pyramid of resource distribution, with “people with fewer and fewer resources represent[ing] the lower layers” (9.1). An effect of this stratification and lack of social power can be homeless individuals being “outcast by the rest of their community, adding to the feeling of reliance on one another and the sense of separation” from other social groups they might otherwise consider themselves a part of (D5). When focusing on homelessness in regards to stratification, it is essential to connect poverty to the unequal distribution of resources, rather than the complete absence of them.

Growth Reflection

Going back to my Module 2 reflection, our new perspective on homelessness has evolved my thinking on how we as a culture interact with wealth and social inequality. I still believe that the class system in a culture is just as influential as factors like religion, food, clothing, and the government. However, I have put more thought into how those factors affect both me and my peers in our daily lives. Taking a closer look into how the US deals with homelessness has made me think more about how poverty factors into American culture; I previously wondered if there was a sort of socialized resentment of poverty, even among those living in it. Now that I've learned about both the efforts to criminalize visible homelessness and how other countries differ in their view of homelessness, I can more confidently compare our cultural view to foreign ones.

Status

While homelessness is a socioeconomic status, it affects a person's status in other social aspects.

- “Homeless” becomes a person’s primary status, as it has the most impact in their daily life
- Can inhibit expression of other statuses for a number of reasons, including safety, financial strain, and legality
- As a socioeconomic status: “Homeless” describes both the economic status of being unable to afford permanent housing, and the social status of belonging to the “homeless” group within the broader social structure/culture

Role Strain, Role Conflict, and Role Performance

Consider a situation in which a police officer arrests a homeless person for loitering, and suspects they have committed some illegal act based on their appearance. The roles that the officer and homeless individual play socially, as well as other roles they might identify with, can have a great effect on why and how this scenario happens:

- **Role Strain:** Consider the regular tasks and expectations put upon a person by their role as “homeless.” They may need to migrate frequently, supply their basic needs, keep up with hygiene, apply for/attend multiple jobs, and more. These expectations can take a toll on an individual’s mental and physical health, leading to more issues in the future.
- **Role Conflict:** Many homeless people are employed at at least one place of work, and often hold multiple jobs at one time. Consider how the responsibilities of these jobs may interfere with each other, and with the individual’s role as a homeless person.
- **Role Performance:** How an individual acts regarding their role as “homeless” may vary. They could be expected to hide any signs that they are homeless while at work, but need to appear outwardly homeless in order to receive aid.

The homeless individual may have been loitering outside of their place of work, as they don’t have a car to leave in. They may have appeared tired or anxious due to the many responsibilities they have to juggle. The police officer may have unconsciously assigned the homeless individual the role of “criminal” based on their own biases regarding what the individual’s role performance should have looked like. The roles a person assigns themselves, as well as how they perform them socially, and how others interpret that performance, affect how a person acts and is treated greatly.

Looking-Glass Self

The cultural perception of an individual and the identifying groups they belong to can have a major impact on how that individual views themselves. An individual may conform to the public's expectations of them in order to stay within their group, or they may completely reject that identity in order to defy public expectations. As explained in the articles regarding Norway and Grants Pass' methods of solving homelessness, the cultural view of homelessness is different in the US and Europe. Across Europe, housing is generally seen as a human right, while in the US it is seen as a privilege, or something that needs to be earned monetarily. This affects how both public and individual perceptions of being homeless manifest; In Norway, a homeless person may be viewed as more unfortunate or a victim of unfair circumstances, while in the US a homeless person may be socialized to believe that they haven't 'worked hard enough' for housing or that their being homeless is a direct result of some personal failure. American society has "come to view visible signs of poverty as signs of moral failings" in many cases, and that has had major negative impacts to many homeless people's self esteem (HD1).

Three Approaches

Asheville	Grants Pass	Norway
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Focus on BIPOC discrimination- Effort to prioritize existing residents, but still prepare for a predicted influx of new, wealthier residents (expected population increase of 31% within the next 25 years)- Advocate for more state funding/legislation- Prioritize those in the most need (60% or less than the areas median income)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Criminalization of the homeless- View being homeless as a personal choice/failure- Taking away resources to encourage the homeless to leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Coordinated effort by all levels of government- Preventative measures and providing affordable housing prioritized- Long term plan that can be adjusted to fit local communities needs- Drop from .15% homelessness rate in 1996 to .062% in 2020

Structural Causes & Solutions

In order to ensure long term success in reducing homelessness, affordable housing must be prioritized. Having a permanent address that doesn't completely deplete someones funds regularly sets them up for long term success; They can save money, apply for jobs more easily, and overall improve their quality of life in a way that could not be achieved without permanent shelter. Even in the case that a homeless person has a job and can afford most of their basic needs, housing costs have risen so high that they are unattainable for most of those with non-career wages. According to the "Obvious Answer to Homelessness" article, "...a growing number of people are forced to spend 30 percent or more of their income on rent." There is no room for growth if almost a third of a persons funds are being spent on rent alone. In addition, the article cites that cities with the lowest rates of unemployment also have the highest rates of homelessness; this is evidence that simply providing material resources and more jobs isn't enough to permanently decrease homelessness.

Local Evidence

BeLoved (Asheville):

Goals:

- Providing food and school supplies
- Affordable housing
- Racial equity
- Affordable healthcare
- Cultural enrichment

Achievements:

- Crisis response during Helene
- Food pantries
- Volunteers constructing affordable homes
- Distributing resources (hygiene/food/school supplies) to families in need

Sociological Analysis

- From a Functionalist perspective, the existence of community volunteer programmes like BeLoved is a necessary part of making our society functional; They serve to provide for the members of our society with less resources, and their contributions ensure the whole structure runs smoothly. These organizations would always be necessary for the function of our society in order to not be thrown off balance.
- From a Conflict theory perspective, the fact that organizations like BeLoved play such a major role in our society is evidence that our society is inherently flawed and unfair. Conflict theory would state that there being anybody who isn't provided for is a problem that needs to be fixed, and that the ultimate goal of community service programmes should be to enact change and reach a point where no one relies on volunteer work for survival.

Personal Growth

Over the course of the semester, I've learned to make more critical observations of the world around me and how I interact with it. I've started practicing inserting daily experiences I have into a greater cultural context; considering what historical, political, and social factors might be affecting how I deal with situations. I've also started considering Sociology from an individual lens, as opposed to something that only applies to larger cultures or groups of people.

Why This Matters

Beyond just being aware of your own thought processes and how they are affected by your culture, it is important to understand homelessness through a sociological lens as it provides a basis for comprehending and connecting many of the factors that contribute to a culture. The economics, resources, social institutions, discrimination and inequality, social norms, and history of a culture all determine the attitude toward those who live in poverty. Understanding what factors contribute to homelessness, how it is perceived by the individual versus the greater society, how it may be solved theoretically and in the real world, and the consequences of it all contribute to a greater understanding of how cultures work as a whole. It allows for critical thinking on how to participate in social change in your own life, even in unrelated areas.