

HOMELESSNESS THROUGH THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Addison McMahon

Introduction to Sociology (SOC-210-OALD2)

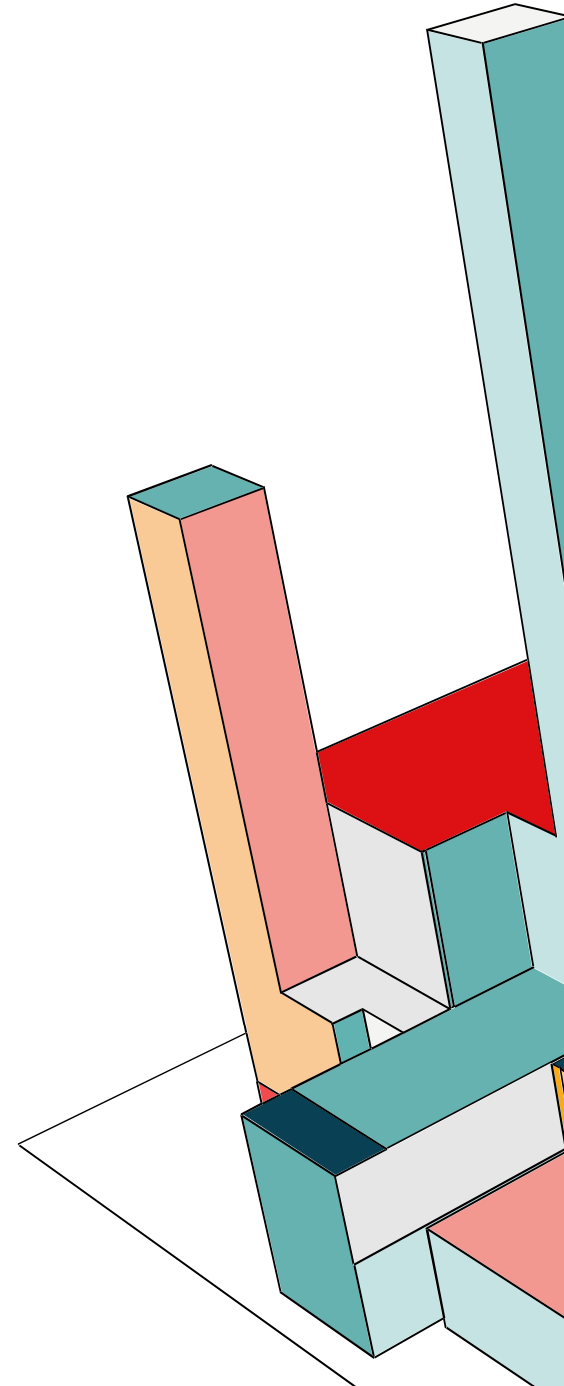


Original photo taken in Asheville.

Homelessness stood out to me throughout this course because there are many sociological concepts and factors that effect homelessness. This can be seen not only through the people experiencing the adversity, but also through the rest of the population.

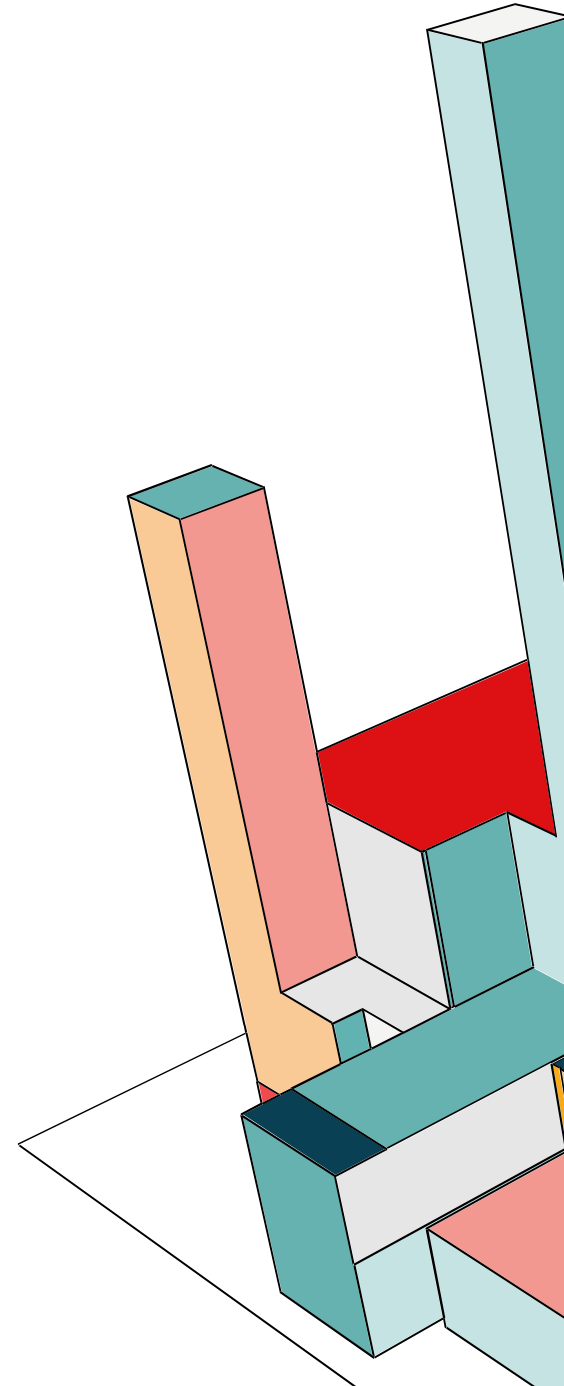
HOW SOCIOLOGY CHANGED MY PERSPECTIVE

During module 1 conflict theory stuck with me. The text defines conflict theory as “the way inequities and inequalities contribute to social, political, and power differences and how they perpetuate power” (Section 1.3). It continues by saying “conflict theory looks at society as a competition for limited resources” (Section 1.3). In my Module 1 reflection I mentioned that this theory seems obvious but when I personally reflected, I realized that this idea has become so normal that it had never been something I took time to dissect. The way I see the world changed after taking the time to consider the effects of conflict theory. We as humans in this society are constantly battling a force beyond us. Whether this be trying to get the groceries we need for specific food allergies or on a larger scale trying to maintain housing among the many other aspects of life. And with this battle there are many inequalities based on representation, skin tone, background, resources, that effects everyone's ability to comfortably make it through life, with certain characteristics or situations benefiting while others causing more difficulty. The way to say this lacking complexity is that life isn't fair and this makes surviving difficult at times.



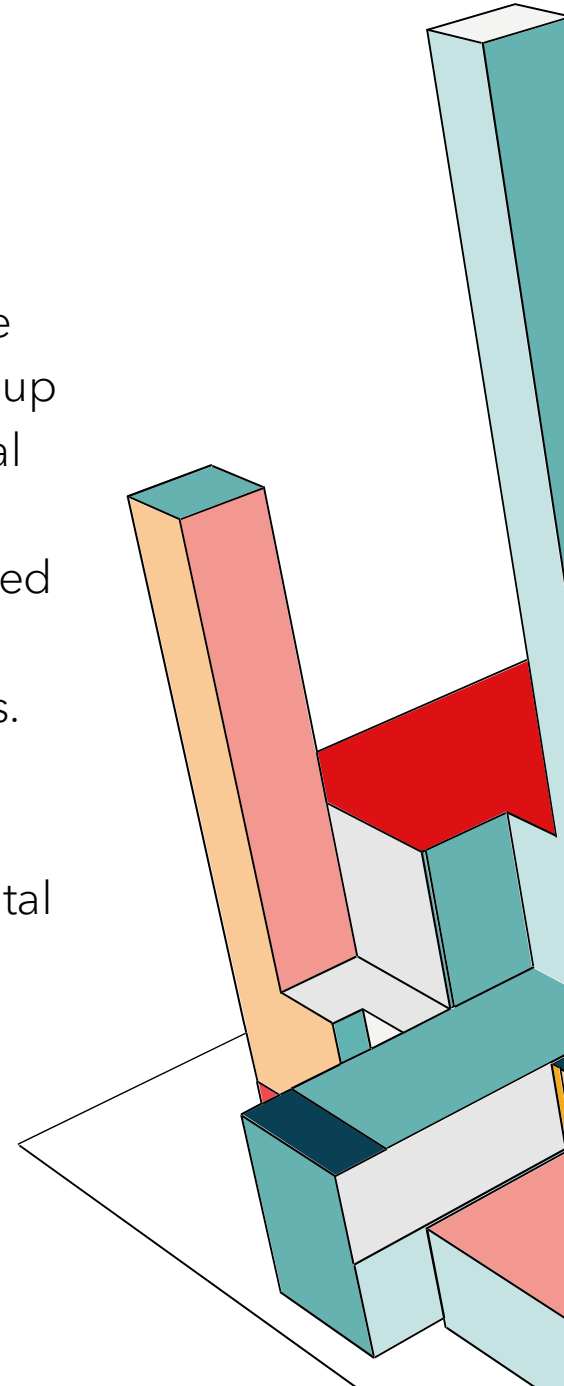
PERSONAL TROUBLES VS. PUBLIC ISSUES

Sociological imagination is “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” (Section 1.1). When considering the sociological imagination and homelessness, the relationship is between one's personal experience of losing their home to the broader public issues that played a part in that personal experience. These public issues include lack of affordable housing, inflation, etc. When thinking about homelessness using the sociological imagination, it's clear that there are issues bigger than personal that have a major effect on one's ability to maintain housing.



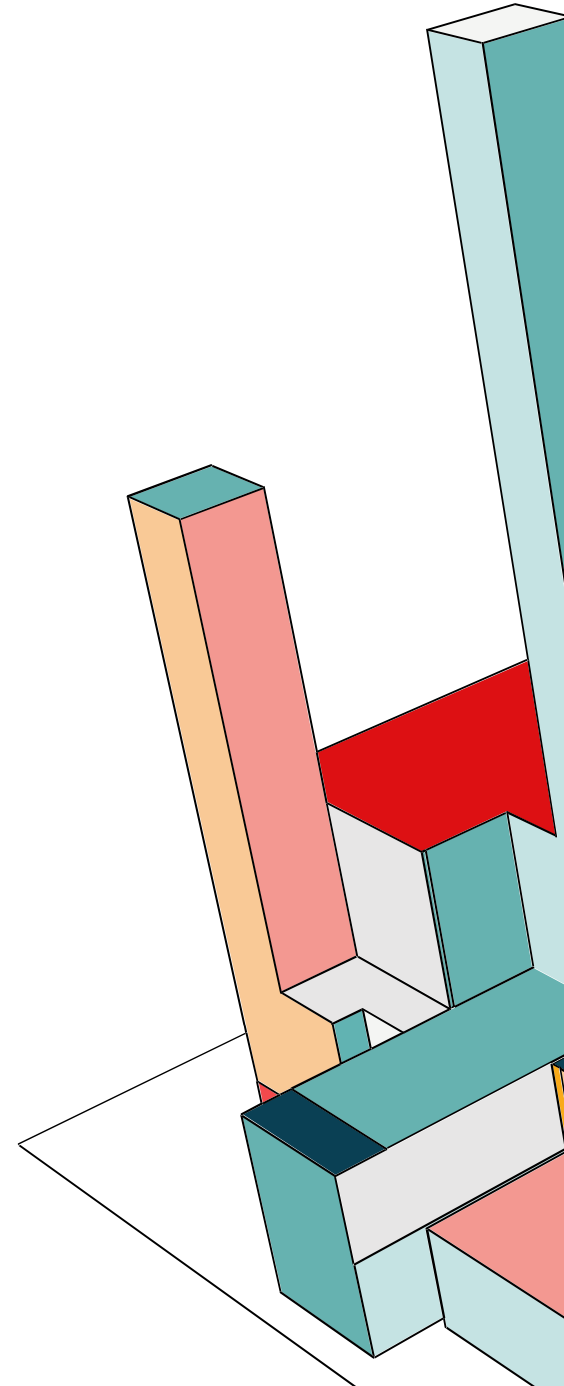
INEQUALITY, CONFORMITY, OR SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

In Module 2 the concept of in-groups and out-groups was introduced. These groups are very present and noticeable when considering homelessness. The text defines an in-group as “the group that an individual feels she belongs to, and she believes it to be an integral part of who she is.” And an out group is “a group someone doesn’t belong to; often we may feel disdain or competition in relationship to an out-group” (Section 6.1). I mentioned this in my D5 forum assignment when referring to The Peoples Temple. I said, “The People’s Temple was able to create such a strong in-group,” which fostered their success. When you think about this idea in the context of homelessness as someone who isn’t homeless the in-group would refer to those who aren’t homeless while the out-group would refer to those who are homeless. This sly form of bias in thinking can be detrimental to the homeless population. Often, we see people treating those who are experiencing homelessness as less than human, because of the out-group, making them less likely to help those in need. We see this type of thinking in the Grant Pass v. Johnson article as homelessness was being managed by laws unjust penalties. In-group and out-group mentality can be extremely harmful when it comes to helping alleviate homelessness.



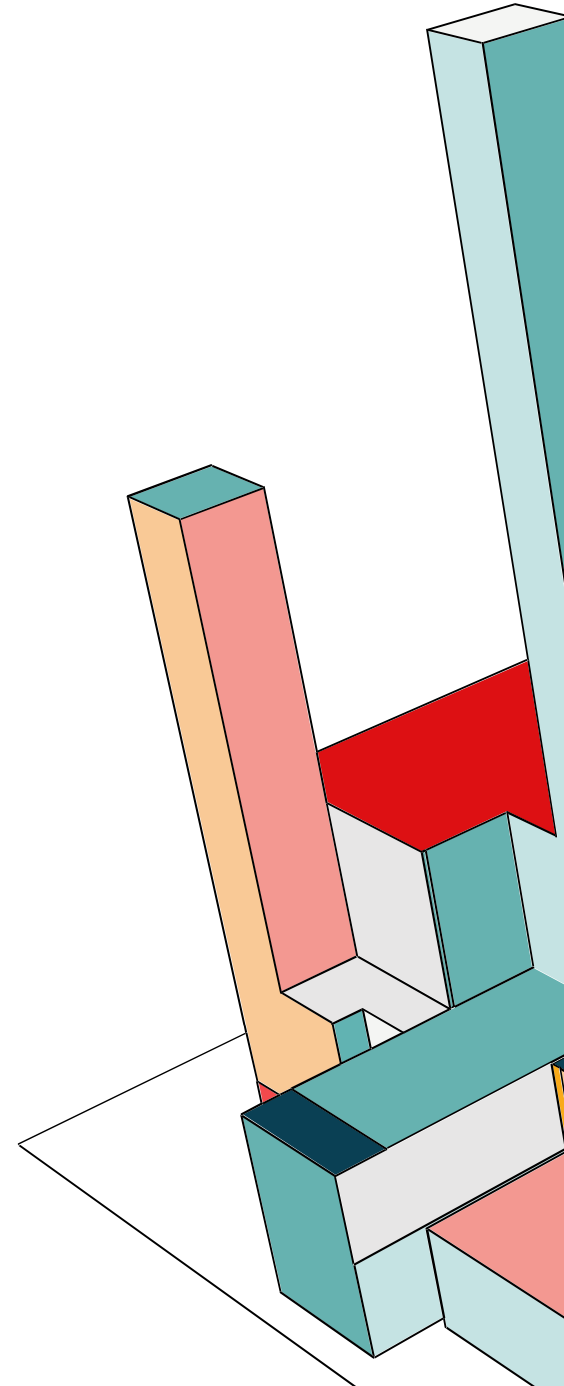
GROWTH REFLECTION

In module 2 I learned and conducted research about the #MeToo movement. I mentioned in my reflection that social media plays a big role in the influence of movements like the #MeToo movement. Although this is true my thinking toward social change has evolved. While reflecting on my response I noticed that I failed to recognize the years of work, progress, and impact of the movement. It was this work and history that allowed the popularity to rise when brought to social media. If the #MeToo movement wasn't already inspiring, then it wouldn't have gained popularity. I now recognize that when confronted with a social change movement on social media, it is vital that you conduct your research to fully grasp all the amazing work that has taken place without the recognition it has deserved over the years because it is the history of the movement that creates a story and lays the foundation for the work that will come post the popularity increase.



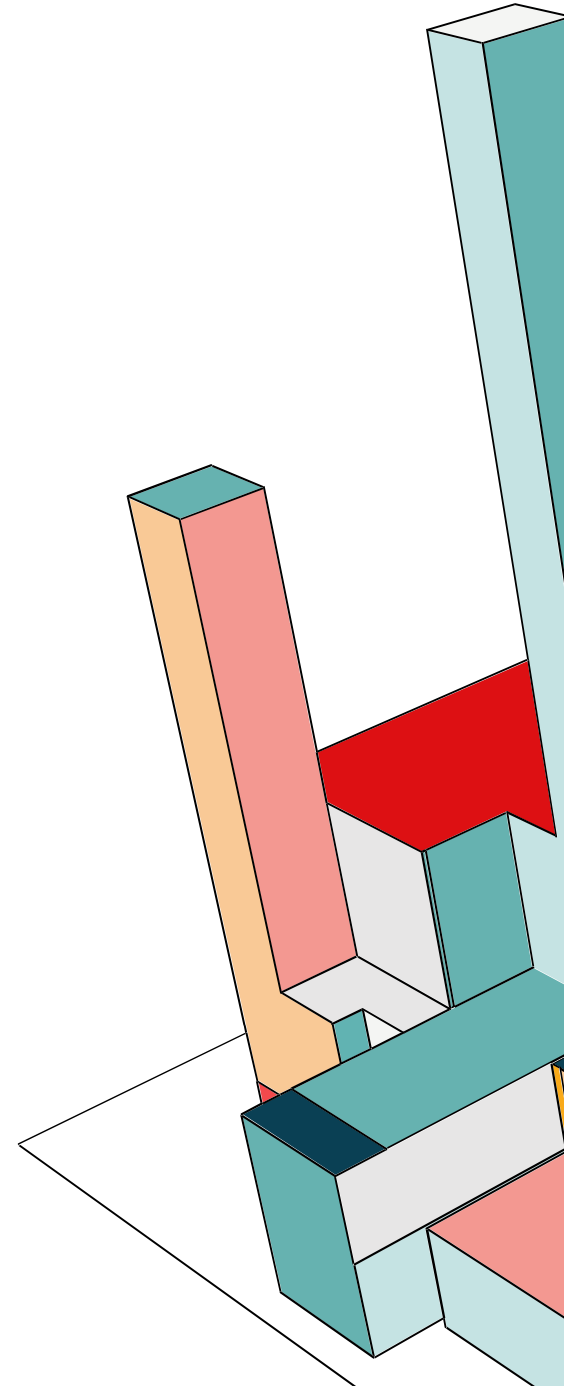
STATUS

According to the textbook, status describes “the responsibilities and benefits that a person experiences according to their rank and role in society” (Section 4.3). As someone experiencing homelessness, one would experience hardship like exclusion, being treated as less than, struggling to keep warm, having to make a strenuous effort to find food daily, etc., because of their status. For these reasons, the status of a homeless person is often very different than the status of a people in a home. This status has a major effect on the mental and physical health of those experiencing homelessness as they are constantly finding ways to survive. This status makes it difficult for them to fit into typical groups or get a job.



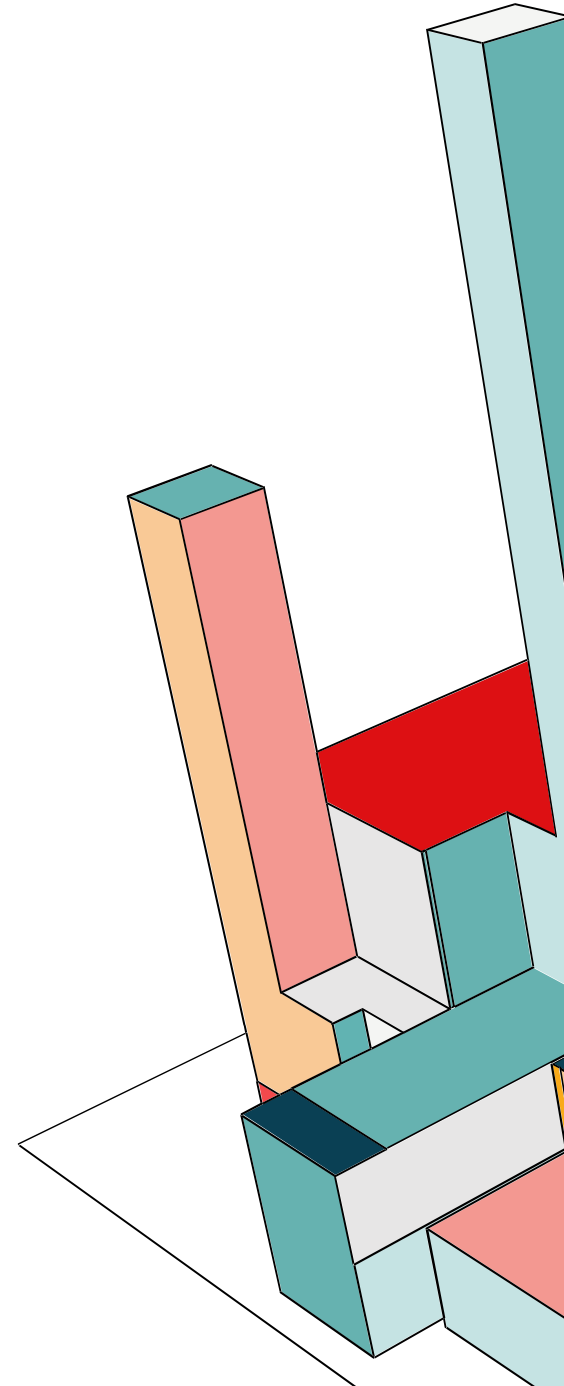
ROLE STRAIN, ROLE CONFLICT, AND ROLE PERFORMANCE

In the Grant Pass article, a woman shared her story. She said “It kind of all piled on at the same time”...“Flipped my world upside down. I never expected to be out here for this long” (Hayden). Her experience is an example of role strain. Role strain describes when “too much is required of a single role” (Section 4.3). After losing her husband she had a lot on her plate, alongside the grief, and she couldn’t keep up, causing her to lose her home. Role strain is a common association to homelessness, as is role conflict. Role conflict is “when one or more roles are contradictory” (Section 4.3). In this woman's case, she was experiencing role conflict as she was a grieving widow, but she was also facing the expenses of normal life, now without her husband. This role conflict can be extremely overwhelming and difficult to manage. Lastly role performance can be seen when homeless people are seen doing drugs or asking for money for example. “Role performance is how a person expresses his or her role” (Section 4.3). When homeless people express their role in this way it solidifies a bias in the public even if the majority of homeless people aren’t doing drugs or asking for money.



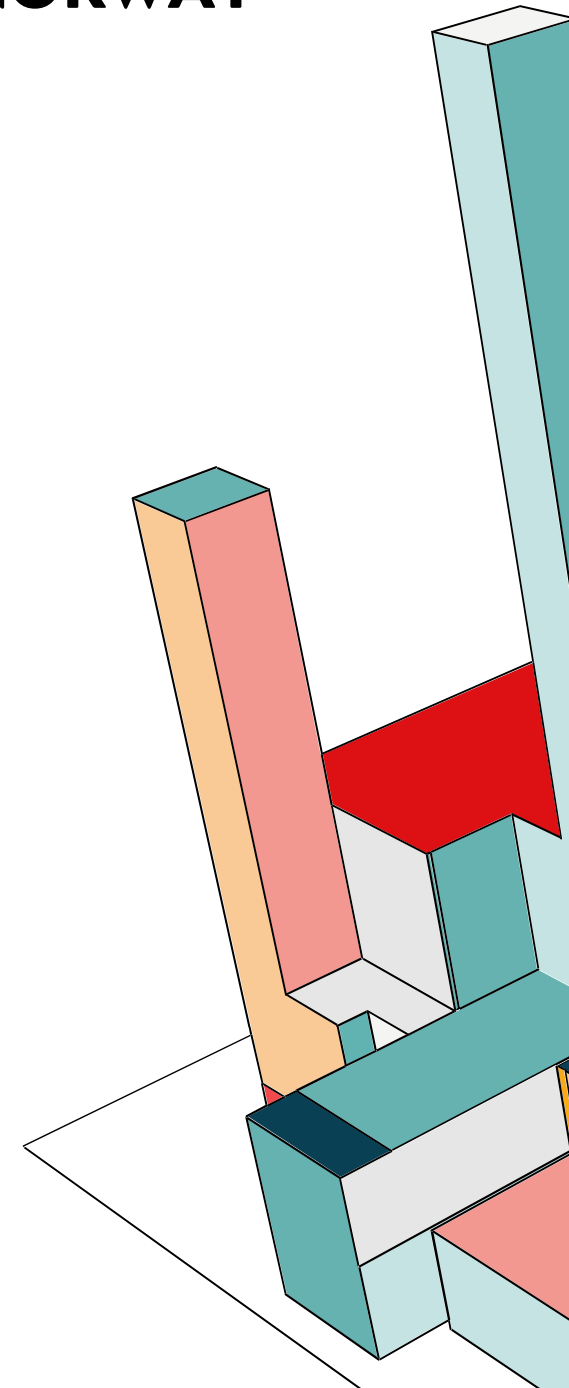
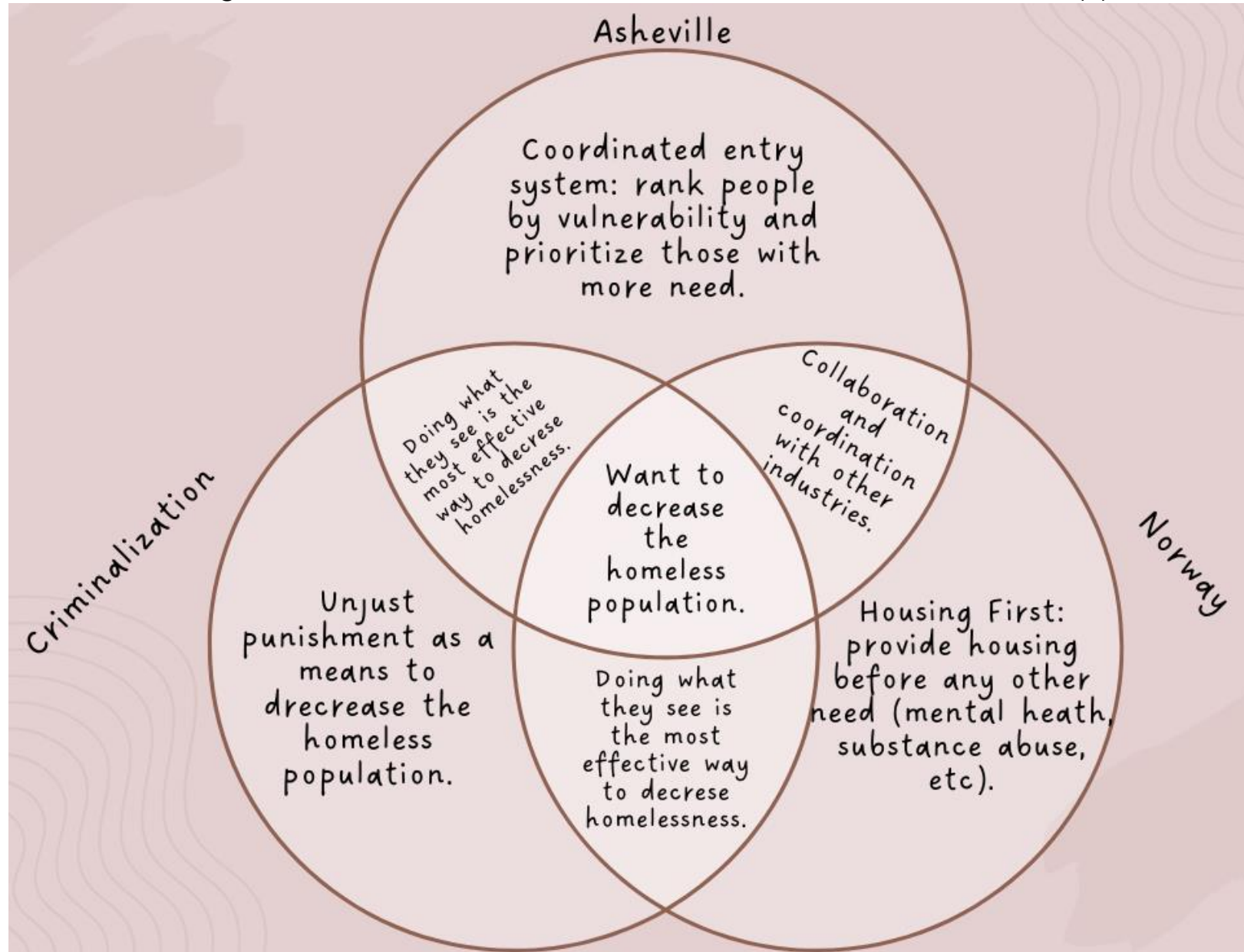
LOOKING-GLASS SELF

Public reactions and opinions have a major effect on homelessness. A lot of this is tied to the idea of the looking-glass self which is defined as when “we imagine how we must appear to others, then react to this speculation” (Section 4.3). In my HD1 post I mentioned that “when homelessness is brought up, people typically have a definition or roles for how the person got in that situation or the type of person they are.” This stigma put on homeless people by the public makes them adopt a certain idea of who they are and what others think of them. This is detrimental to their mental health and their willingness to try and find help. Another example of the effects of the looking-glass self can be seen through this quote in the article “The Obvious Answer to Homelessness”: “if homelessness is about personal failure, it’s easier to dismiss as something that couldn’t happen to us, and harsh treatment is easier to rationalize toward those who experience it” (Demsas). The common idea that homelessness is because of personal failure pushes those same ideas that I mentioned previously onto those experiencing homelessness.

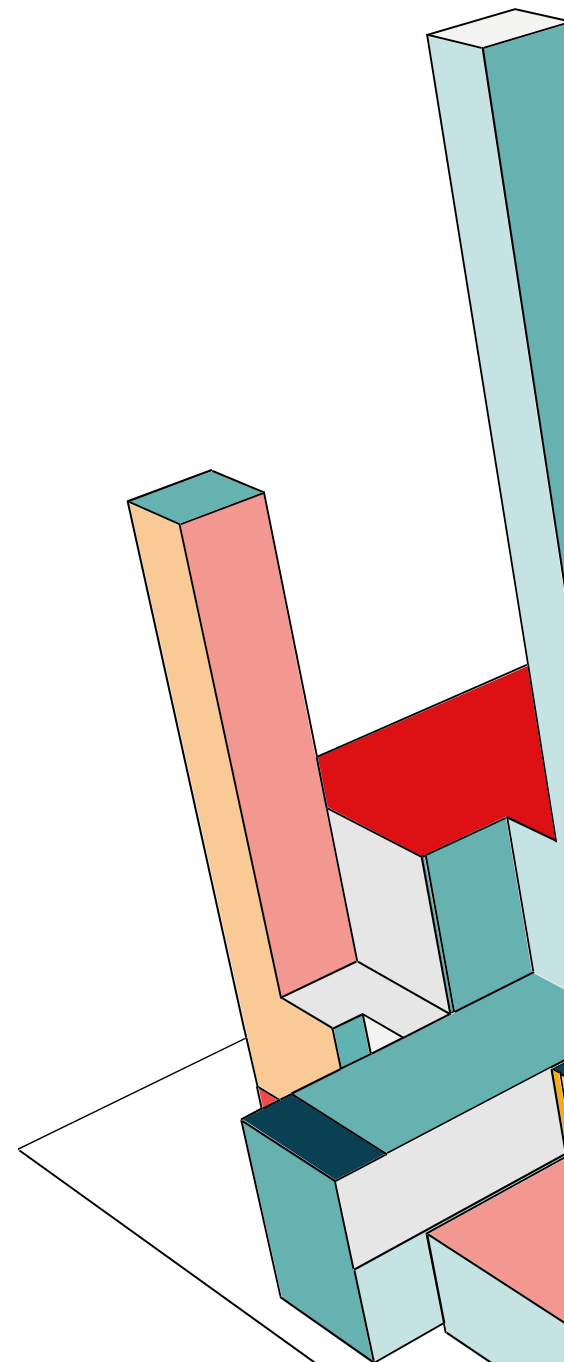
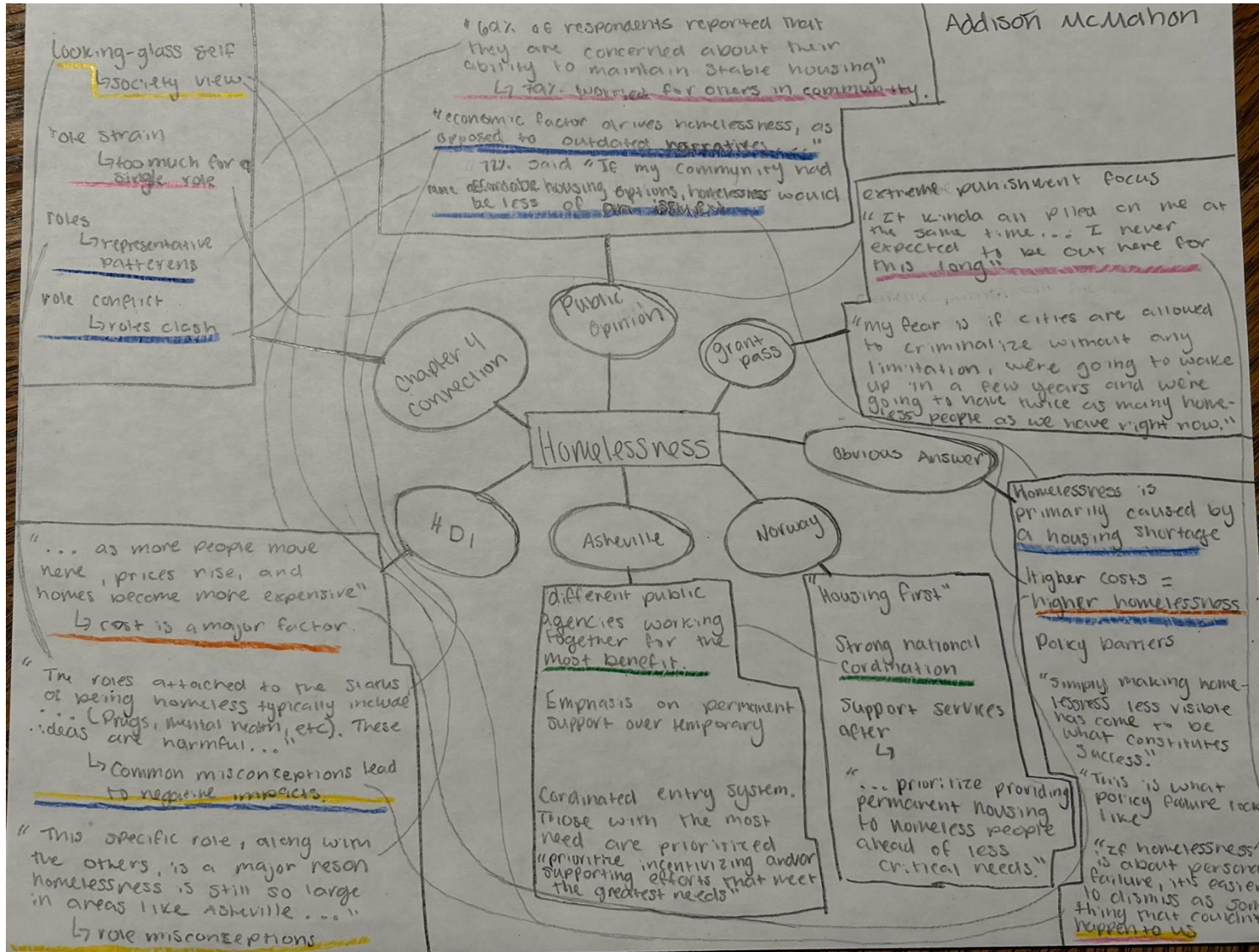


THREE APPROACHES - ASHEVILLE (CONTINUUM OF CARE) - NORWAY (HOUSING FIRST) - CRIMINALIZATION (GRANTS PASS)

Chart showing the main similarities and differences between the three approaches.

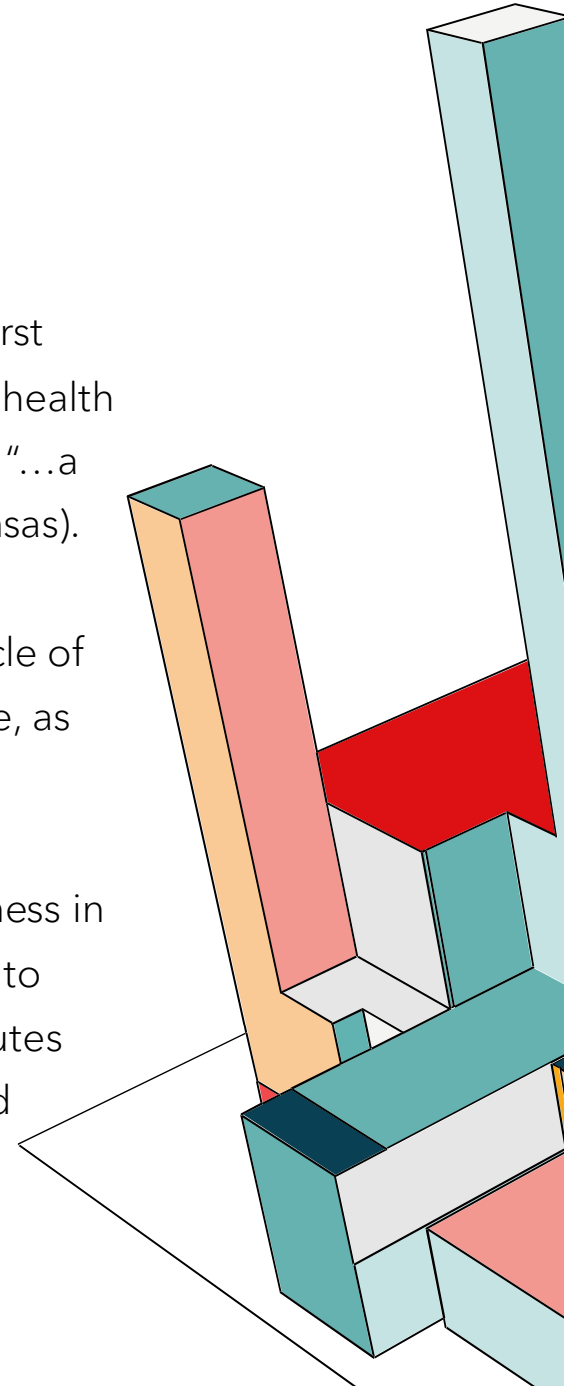


CONCEPT MAP



STRUCTURAL CAUSES & SOLUTIONS

Norway's singular goal-based approach is the most effective for addressing homelessness. Its zero-homelessness goal gives a clear idea of what the priority is without overcomplication. The housing first initiative allows the homelessness problem to subside prior to getting involved by assessing mental health or drug abuse issues. This idea is backed up by this quote in *The Obvious Answer to Homelessness*: "...a focus on moving people into permanent supportive housing provides a road map to success" (Demsas). Once people are housed, they will be able to comfortably work out any other potential difficulties. Norway's emphasis on permanent over temporary housing creates stability and a break from the cycle of homelessness. Norway's national coordination is strong. This helps resolve the issue on a larger scale, as many local governments have actively implemented their efforts. Norway also has an emphasis on prevention, so they can stop homelessness before it starts. Also, data has proven that their system is actively working. There is a chart in the article titled "The number of people experiencing homelessness in Norway has nearly halved since 2006" that proves their success (Yeung). Lastly, *The Obvious Answer to Homelessness* mentions that "simply making homelessness less visible has come to be what constitutes 'success'" (Demsas). This is a major flaw in many plans, but Norway acknowledges homelessness and actively works within the community to help alleviate the issue. Because of these reasons, Norway's approach is most effective at addressing the root causes of homelessness.

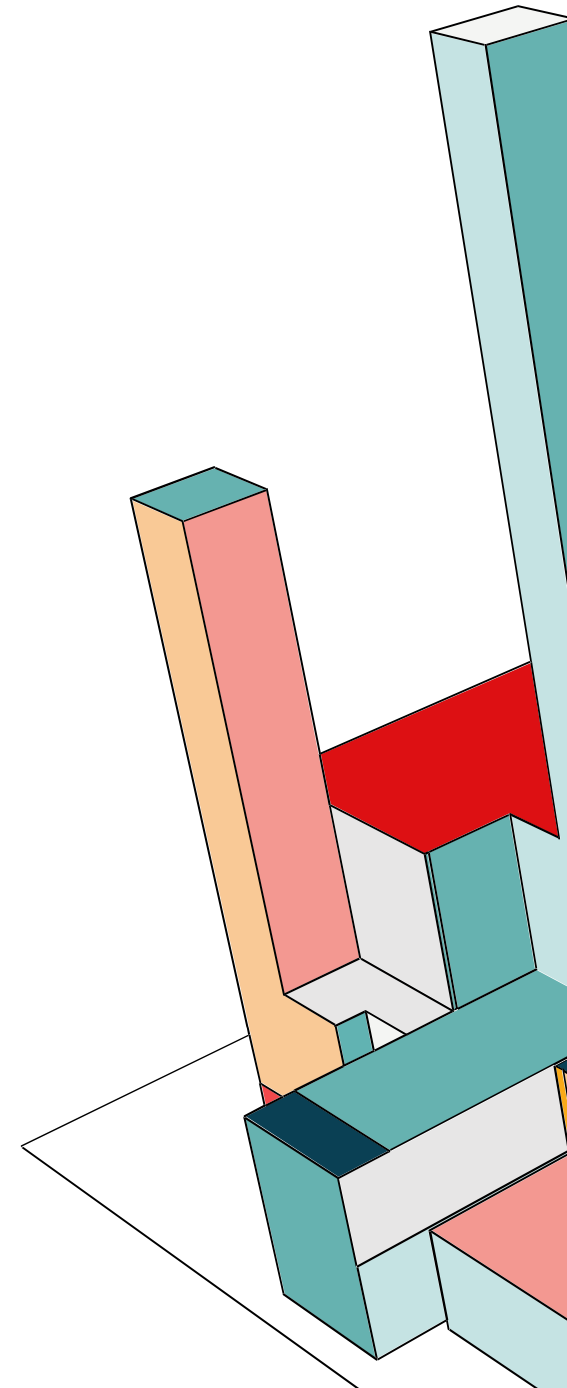


<https://www.bpr.org/bpr-news/2024-10-16/bridge-that-gap-mutual-aid-in-western-north-carolina-plays-lead-role-in-community-needs>

www.belovedasheville.com/our-story/.

LOCAL EVIDENCE

In Western NC, many people found themselves without livable housing after hurricane Helene. This is when a wave of mutual aid arose. Mutual aid is described as “neighbors caring for neighbors in difficult times” (III). One person from this article mentioned that “larger organizations, nonprofits, the state and federal government obviously ultimately are carrying an enormous amount of weight in terms of actually moving volume of supply,” however “... people, neighbors and local community had an oversized role” (III). This concept of helping your neighbor allowed people in the community to have an accessible way to receive the goods they needed. Another organization based in Western NC, BeLoved Asheville, has been actively supporting the community for over 15 years. They say their success is “credited to the ability to build relationships, create visible change, and generate community-led momentum for collective action” (“The Story of BeLoved Asheville - BeLoved Asheville”). These two examples have similar goals: to actively within the community, with their neighbors, to give help to those in need.

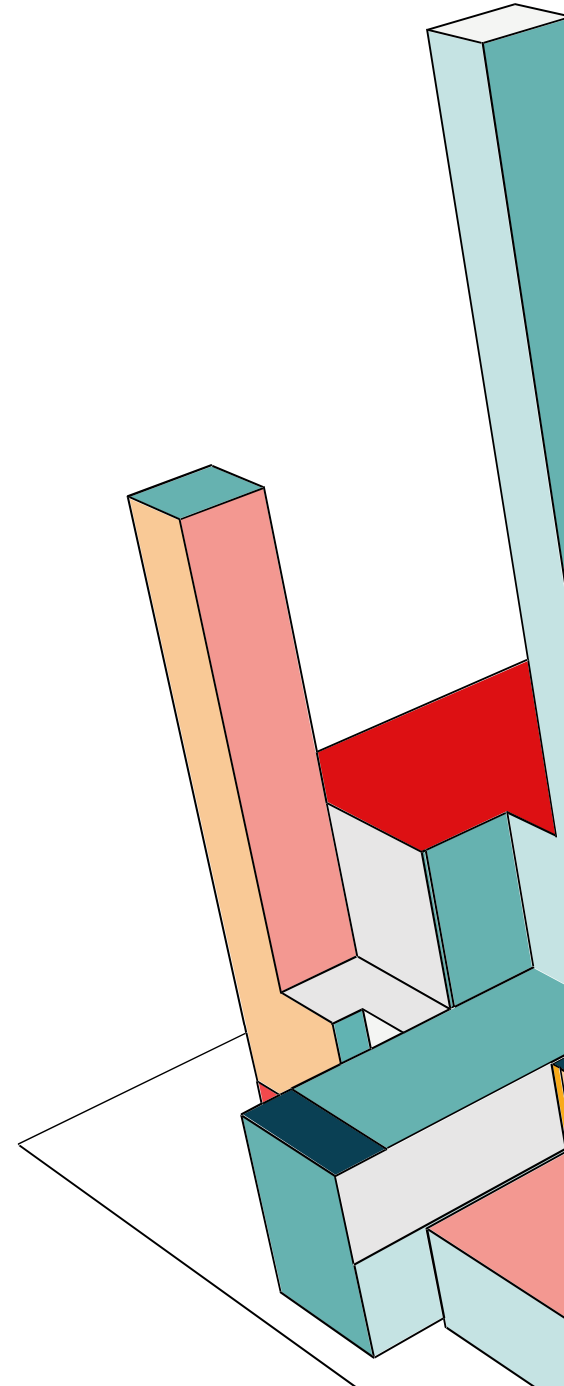


SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Two sociological concepts that relate to my local evidence include minority group and scapegoat theory.

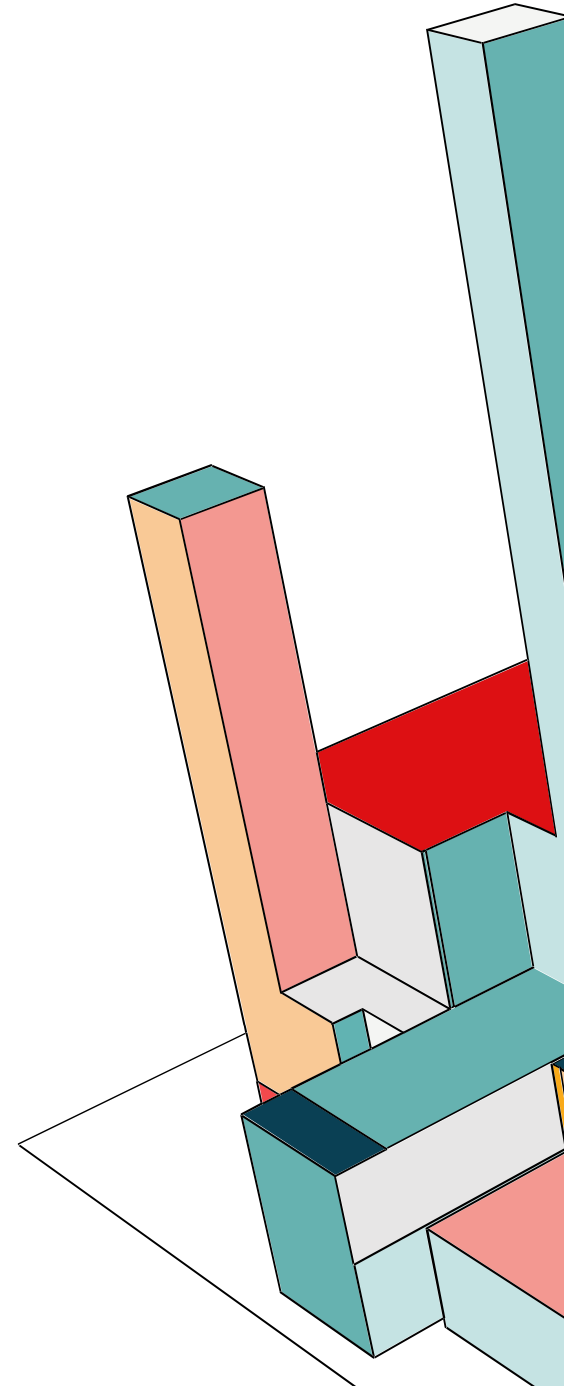
Minority group is described as when “any group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination” (Section 11.1). In the context of my local evidence, homeless people would be seen as the minority group post Helene. This is because a lot of the attention and aid was given to those who had lost were housed but had damaged due to the hurricane. However homeless people were less talked about and therefore less prioritized.

Scapegoat theory says that “the dominant group will displace its unfocused aggression onto a subordinate group” (Section 11.1). In Asheville this can be seen as saying that problem are caused directly by homelessness and nothing else. For example, I often hear talk about how public spaces are less utilized than they should be. This statement is followed by the claim that this is because of Asheville's homelessness problem. By putting this problem into homeless people, we ignore that the public spaces are outdated among other problems. This makes homeless people the scapegoats.



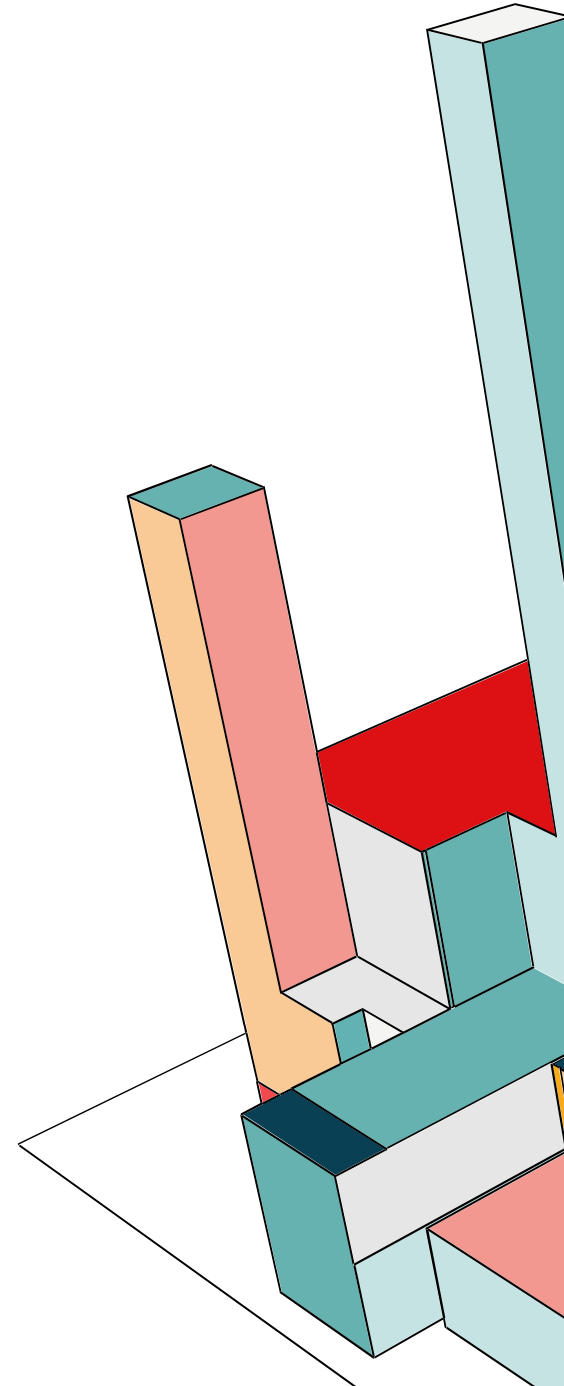
PERSONAL GROWTH

Before and at the beginning of this semester I was relatively closeminded. I found myself thinking that homelessness was primarily caused by the actions and missteps of the person, but I now realize that there is so much more that goes into ones fall into homelessness. Learning about sociological concepts like sociological imagination, role strain, I began realizing that there are many things that are out of the individual's control that pile up and lead to homelessness. And this is what happens majority of the time. I now understand that homelessness is a battle against the systems in place rather than a battle against a person, and to combat homelessness we must deal with the systems (lack of affordable housing, inflation, lack or resources, and the list goes on.) to help instead of trying to change people.



WHY THIS MATTERS

Understanding homelessness from a sociological perspective is very important beyond this academic setting as it is directly related to my personal change in perception, and likely the change in many others perception as well. When you are exposed to facts and concepts that introduce you to real sociological reasons that people struggle and find themselves in difficult situations you begin to realize that homelessness, among other problems, is caused by external factors that are difficult to combat when experiencing hardship. This idea opens your eyes to empathy and seeing those experiencing homelessness as people just like you. These realizations allow you to be a kind, functioning part of a society that is looking to make a positive impact.



SOURCES

---. "Introduction to Sociology 3e." Openstax.org, Openstax, 3 June 2021,
openstax.org/books/introduction-sociology-3e/pages/1-introduction.

Hayden, Jeremiah. "Grants Pass v. Johnson: Here's What Led to Key Homelessness Case before High Court." Opb, 4 Apr. 2024,
www.opb.org/article/2024/04/04/grants-pass-oregon-homeless-parks-Josephine-county-public-spaces-camping-shelter/.

Ill, Gerard Albert. ""Bridge That Gap": Mutual Aid in Western North Carolina Plays Lead Role in Community Needs." BPR, BPR - Blue Ridge, 16 Oct. 2024, www.bpr.org/bpr-news/2024-10-16/bridge-that-gap-mutual-aid-in-western-north-carolina-plays-lead-role-in-community-needs.

"The Story of BeLoved Asheville - BeLoved Asheville." BeLoved Asheville, 4 Aug. 2025,
www.belovedasheville.com/our-story/.

Yeung, Peter. "How Norway Is Proving That Homelessness Is a Solvable Problem." Reasons to Be Cheerful, 26 June 2025,
reasonstobecheerful.world/norway-proving-homelessness-solvable-problem/.

"Sign in to Your Account." Abtech.edu, 2026,
moodle.abtech.edu/pluginfile.php/6486715/mod_resource/content/1/September%202024%20Affordable%20Housing%20Plan%20Final%20Draft%20%281%29.pdf. Accessed 28 Apr. 2026.

Demas, Jerusalem. "The Obvious Answer to Homelessness." And why everyone's ignoring it, Jan. 2023.