

Homelessness Through the Sociological Imagination

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Homelessness stood out to me because I see it in my community and never really thought about the causes before this class. It made me realize it's not just about individual choices, but bigger social systems.



How Sociology Changed My Perspective

- Before this course, I saw homelessness mostly as a personal issue. Now I understand how social structures like housing costs and job access play a role.
- “Functionalists view society as a system in which all parts work—or function—together to create society as a whole” (Section 3.4, ebook). I now view the world as a whole puzzle with different pieces that might be hard to fit in with other pieces but no matter what it will create a beautiful picture with all of it together.

Personal Troubles vs Public Issues

- Homelessness shows the **sociological imagination** because what seems like a personal problem (losing housing) is actually connected to public issues like:
 - Lack of affordable housing
 - Low wages
 - Limited access to healthcare

Inequality / Social Forces

- Homelessness is strongly connected to **social inequality**.
- Example: People with fewer resources are more likely to experience housing insecurity.
- Extreme poverty can be defined as, “lacking even the basic necessities, which typically include adequate food, clean water, safe housing, and access to healthcare” (eBook, 10.2).D6
- “Social structures can significantly restrict the opportunities available to people living in poverty. When comparing this experience to someone living in a low-income or lower-middle-income country, the situation could be even more difficult”. D6

Growth Reflection

- At the beginning of the course, I saw inequality as mostly the result of individual choices, like how hard someone worked or the decisions they made. Over time, my thinking changed as I learned about the sociological imagination and how larger systems shape people's opportunities. I now understand that inequality is influenced by factors like economic structures, access to education, housing policies, and social expectations, which can limit or expand a person's chances in life. My view of social change also evolved, since I used to think change mainly came from individual effort, but now I see it often requires collective action, policy changes, and shifts in societal values. Overall, I've developed a deeper and more informed perspective that connects personal experiences to broader social forces

Homelessness as a Status

- Homelessness is not just a condition—it shapes a person’s *social identity* and how they are viewed in society.
A *status* is a social position a person holds (such as student, worker, or parent).
- Homelessness is often an **ascribed status**, meaning it usually comes from life circumstances rather than choice.
- It becomes part of a person’s **social identity**—how they see themselves and how others define them.
- Society often attaches **stigma**, leading to stereotypes and unfair treatment.
- These perceptions can affect confidence, opportunities, and interactions with others.
- **Why It Matters:**
Understanding homelessness through social identity shows how people are impacted not just by lacking housing, but by how society labels and treats them.

Role Strain / Conflict

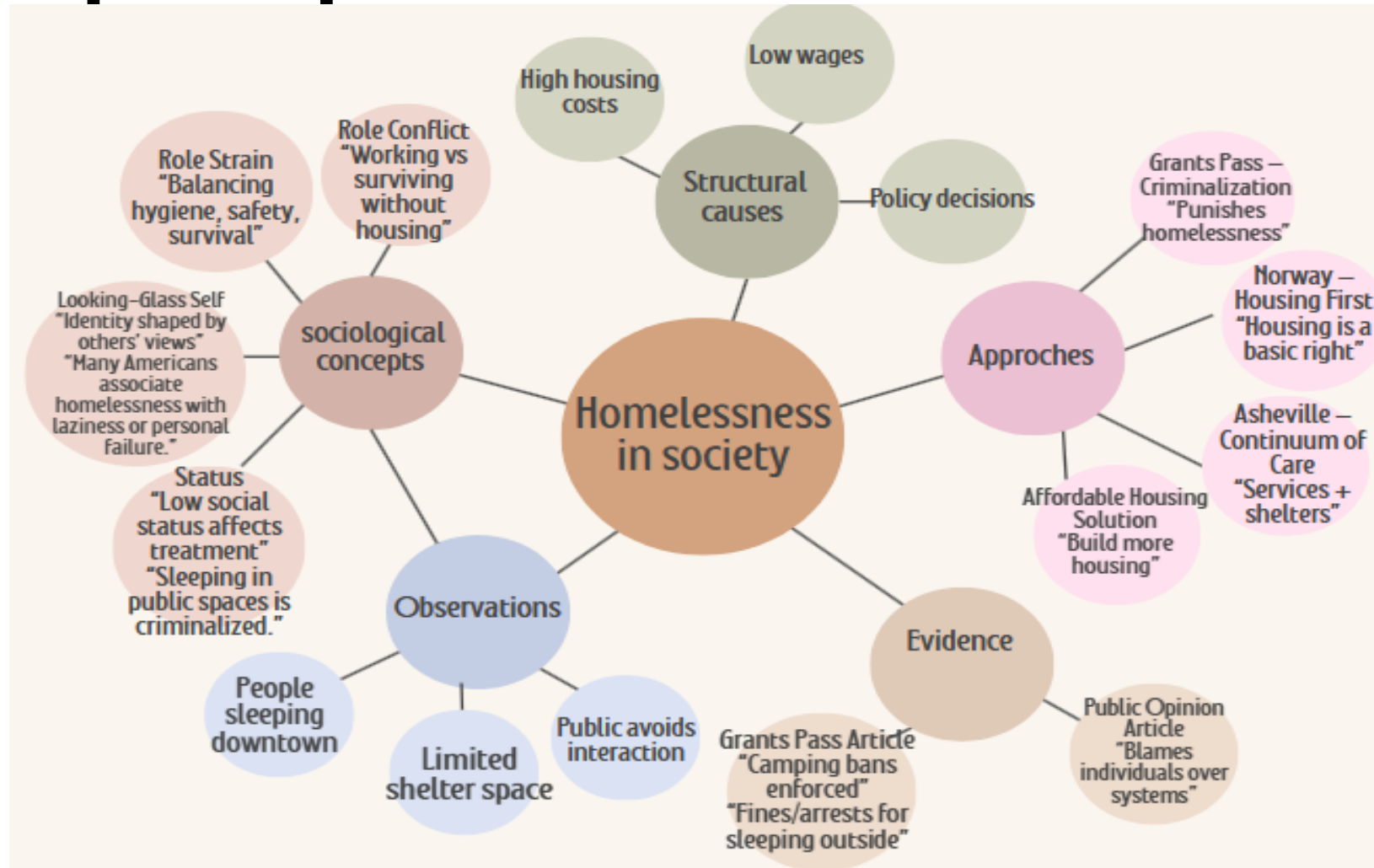
- A homeless parent would experience **Role strain** due to the immense challenges of fulfilling parental duties while lacking stable housing. They could struggle to provide basic needs like food, shelter, and clothing, leading to feelings of inadequacy. Additionally, they may face difficulties in ensuring their child's education and well-being, as accessing resources and maintaining a routine can be nearly impossible without a fixed address. This situation can create significant emotional and psychological stress, as the parent grapples with the conflict between their desire to care for their child and their inability to do so effectively under such harsh circumstances.
- “Role strain occurs when incompatible demands are built into a single status.” (4.3 ebook)

Looking-Glass Self

- The **looking-glass self** explains how people form identity based on others' reactions. Negative public attitudes toward homeless individuals leads to Lower self-esteem while Feeling invisible or judged.
- I learned in Chapter 4, where people view others in a certain manner, as in the concept of the looking-glass self. The manner in which people treat those who are homeless can change their view of themselves, and if people ignore them completely, they may think they are invisible. "when I've been downtown and driving on Patton, I've noticed people experiencing homelessness sitting on benches or near stores. A lot of times, people either avoid them completely or treat them with suspicion. I remember one time seeing someone ask for money, and most people walked past without making eye contact."HD1

Category	Asheville Continuum of Care (USA)	Norway Housing First Model	Grants Pass Criminalization (USA)
Basic Approach	Coordinated system of services (shelters, outreach, housing programs)	Housing is provided first, then services follow	Laws penalize sleeping/camping in public spaces
Main Goal	Reduce and prevent homelessness through collaboration	End homelessness by guaranteeing stable housing	Reduce visible homelessness in public areas
Key Strategy	Emergency shelter, rapid rehousing, case management	Immediate permanent housing + support services	Fines, citations, and removal of encampments
Role of Government	Works with nonprofits, HUD funding, local agencies	Strong national government funding and welfare system	Local government enforcement (police, courts)
2023-2024 Data	~573 people (2023) ~739 (2024) experiencing homelessness	Countries using Housing First (like Norway/Finland) report major reductions in homelessness (often 30-80%)	Court cases show cities banning public sleeping even without shelter availability
Trend	Increasing in recent years (partly due to disasters like Hurricane Helene)	Decreasing homelessness over time	Often does NOT reduce total homelessness just moves it
Strengths	Coordinated community effort Multiple services available	Proven to reduce homelessness long-term Focus on stability and dignity	Addresses public complaints quickly
Weaknesses	Can be slow and complex Homelessness still rising	Expensive – Requires strong government support	– Doesn't solve root causes – Can criminalize poverty
Philosophy	“Support people through a system of care”	“Housing is a human right”	Public order must be maintained€
Long-Term Impact	Mixed results so far	Most effective at reducing homelessness	Often cyclical-people remain homeless

Concept Map



Structural Causes & Solutions

- Homelessness is caused by:
 - **Housing cost**
 - **Unemployment**
 - **Healthcare access**
 - **Best approach:** Housing First (Norway)
Because it addresses root causes first
- Reference: “*The Obvious Answer to Homelessness*” → housing is the key solution “Eviction isn’t just a condition of poverty; it causes poverty.”
- “root causes” to me means recognizing that homelessness isn’t just about personal choices—it’s shaped by larger social structures and long-term issues that make it hard for people to stay housed in the first place. These often include things like lack of affordable housing, low wages, unemployment, mental health challenges, limited access to healthcare, and systemic inequality.

@Local Evidence

- Local organizations like Homeward bound, whose goal is to coordinate the community's efforts to prevent and end homelessness, address this by providing resources such as emergency shelter, housing assistance, and support services. Another organization, Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry (ABCCM), aims to provide crisis assistance and pathways to stability, which can alleviate the strain on homeless parents by offering food, clothing, and job training. These organizations work to mitigate the role strain by helping parents meet their children's basic needs and regain stability.
- [Homeward Bound of WNC](#)
- [Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry \(ABCCM\)](#)

Sociological Analysis

- **Social inequality:** Not everyone has equal access to safe, stable, and affordable housing. Factors like income, race, education, and employment status can create barriers that make it harder for certain groups to find or keep housing. This shows how homelessness is not just an individual issue, but connected to larger patterns of inequality in society.
- **Social structure:** Systems such as the economy, government policies, and the job market shape people's opportunities. For example, high housing costs, low wages, and limited access to healthcare or education can increase the risk of homelessness. These structures influence life chances, meaning some people are placed at a disadvantage before they even make personal choices.

Personal Growth

- Thinking about sociology probably feels different now than it did at the start of the semester! I've gone from seeing society as a set of norms and institutions to understanding the complex ways individuals and structures interact (This means looking at the same issue from multiple viewpoints, not just your own. Sociologists use different "lenses" to understand society.) and how social forces shape our lives and behaviors. I'm now more aware of social inequalities, power dynamics, and the different perspectives that exist within our communities.
- (different perspectives) This means that human behavior and relationships aren't simple—people's actions are influenced by many factors at the same time. These include social roles (like student or worker), cultural norms, power dynamics, and institutions (like schools or the government).

Why this Matters

- Understanding homelessness sociologically matters because it shifts the focus from blaming individuals to examining the larger systems that shape people's lives. Instead of assuming homelessness is only about personal choices, sociology looks at factors like social inequality, housing costs, wages, access to healthcare, and government policies. This helps explain why certain groups are more at risk and shows that homelessness is connected to how society is organized. It also matters because it leads to more effective solutions. When we understand the structural causes—like lack of affordable housing or limited job opportunities—we can support policies and programs that address those root issues, not just the symptoms.