

# Final Project: Homelessness Through the Sociological Imagination

SOC-210-OALD2

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Why did homelessness stand out to me in this course?

Living in Asheville, I have seen the homelessness crisis firsthand. I have always viewed homelessness as something that society has to come together to solve. While taking this course, I've learned more about the larger structural reasons behind the crisis, and why it requires a community effort in order to find a solution. Sociology has helped me to truly analyze the causes, responses, and possible solutions of the homelessness crisis.



(2021). <https://avltoday.6amcity.com/homeless-resources-asheville-nc>

# How Sociology Changed My Perspective

During this course, I learned about Charles Cooley's theory of the "looking-glass self," which he defined as how "people's self understanding is constructed, in part, by their perception of how others view them..." (OpenStax, Section 5.1). I found that this theory changed how I see the world because it gave me a new perspective on how social institutions and institutional agents effect people sociologically. I was able to connect this back to the idea of socialization, or "the process through which people are taught to be proficient members of a society" (OpenStax, Chapter 5 Introduction). These connections helped me to better understand how people's experiences fuel their self-development and how they see their own "self" or their "distinct identity that is developed through social interaction" (OpenStax, Section 5.1).

# Personal Troubles vs. Public Issues

C. Wright Mills explained the sociological imagination as the “awareness of the relationship between a person’s behavior and experience and the wider culture that shaped the person’s choices and perceptions” (OpenStax, Section 1.1). In other words, the sociological imagination helps one to connect a person’s personal struggles to larger structural issues within society. Homelessness, in this instance, can be evaluated as a structural problem that is caused by many external factors; homelessness can’t simply be attributed to an individual’s character or personal decisions. Some may say that homeless individuals are in their situation because of “laziness” or “unwillingness to work” or possible mental or physical health issues, but the reality that most people understand, around 50% according to the article “Key Takeaways from National Opinion Polling, May 2025,” is that the main issue contributing to homelessness is the lack of affordable housing. In the “Grants Pass v Johnson” article, Laura Gutowski explains that “It can happen to anybody...at any time.” Connecting these two ideas, one can see how homelessness is not the fault of the individual, but rather the fault of larger societal issues and the lack of a stable support system.

# Inequality, Conformity, and Social Movements

Homelessness is considered to be a direct result of social stratification, or “a society’s categorization of its people into rankings based on factors like wealth, income, education, family background, and power” (OpenStax, Section 9.1). Income inequality, lack of affordable housing, lack of stable support systems, and the criminalization of homelessness, which can be seen in the “Grants Pass v Johnson” article, all help to highlight how the crisis is a result of persisting inequalities and negative social stigmas. In D6, I addressed what living in a situation of “absolute poverty,” or “an economic condition in which a family or individual cannot afford basic necessities...so that day-to-day survival is in jeopardy” (OpenStax, Section 9.2), may look like: constantly struggling to make ends meet, trying to decide what I can afford to sacrifice in order to survive, and the general experience of the difficulty of living on a very limited income or as a homeless individual.

The intersection theory can also be applied to the Homelessness Crisis. Developed by Patricia Hill Collins, the intersection theory explains that “we cannot separate the effects of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other attributes” (OpenStax, Section 11.2). Connecting this to homelessness, as well as the sociological imagination, one can see how the crisis is a complex issue that is a product of multiple overlapping personal and structural factors. In D7, I explained how the intersection theory and the interactionist theory combine to help explain what it means to be a certain individual. While I used the #MeToo Movement to illustrate this fact, the homelessness crisis exposes similar issues within society’s structural system.

# Growth Reflection

Throughout Module 2, I was able to better connect ideas from Module 1—socialization, the three main sociological theories (interactionism, conflict, and functionalism), culture, and social institutions—to ideas concerning social groups, inequality, and social movements. These connections also helped me to analyze my own experiences, as well as the reasoning behind certain behaviors and perspectives. Through the application of Module 2 terms/ideas, I was able to more deeply analyze the role social institutions, norms, stigmas, etc. and how they play into the development of inequality, and in the case of homelessness, can even prevent social change or progress.

In my Module 2 Reflection, I analyzed the effects of conformity (D5 – The People’s Temple and Chapter 6), social stratification (D6 – The SPENT Game and Chapter 9), and the effects/experiences of social movements (D7 - #MeToo Movement and Chapter 11). Throughout my reflection, I connected my discussion posts to many different aspects of society that contribute to a person’s socialization and their self-development. All the discussion posts had one thing in common: they all had some connection to how a person acts based on the pressures society puts on them. In noticing these qualities, I was able to better analyze the role sociology plays in putting into perspective how our values, beliefs, and actions are influenced by what we experience, such as through work, religion, peers, education, family, etc.

# Status

Status is used to describe “the responsibilities and benefits that a person experiences according to their rank and role in society” (OpenStax, Section 4.3). There are different kinds of status: ascribed status and achieved status. Homeless individuals are considered to have an ascribed status, or a status that is a result of factors that are out of person’s control. Homelessness relating to ascribed status helps to explain the structural reasoning behind the crisis. The social status of homeless individuals, though, is considered to be a result of harmful stigmas and misconceptions, all resulting from the process of socialization. The status of a homeless individual often means they are in need of access to long-term housing and welfare services. As a result of combating both the social and physical struggles of homelessness, many individuals experience role-strain, strain that occurs when “too much is required of a single role” (OpenStax, Section 4.3). In the “Grants Pass v Johnson” article, Laura Gutowski experiences role-strain because she is experiencing homelessness and, in the Grants Pass community, she is acting as the main spokesperson for the current movement for better treatment and care of the city’s homeless.

Gutowski highlights a common struggle for many individuals who have the status of “homeless”: homeless individuals often must fight for their own survival while simultaneously fighting social stigmas that limit their access to long-term aid and support.

# Role Strain, Role Conflict, and Role Performance

Role strain is stress that is caused when “too much is required of a single role...” (OpenStax, Section 4.3). An example of role strain could be the many overwhelming jobs a parent can have while raising a child: cook, clean, work, provide guidance, and even more. Role strain, in this instance, highlights the challenge of having multiple jobs/responsibilities within the definition of one role, which in this case would be the “parent.”

Role conflict occurs “when one or more roles are contradictory” (OpenStax, Section 4.3). An example of role conflict could be a full-time college student who also works full-time in order to provide for themselves. People who fit into the definition of role strain often experience stress and struggle more because they are carrying out the responsibilities of multiple roles at once.

Role performance is “how a person expresses his or her role” (OpenStax, Section 4.3). An example of this can be seen in the way people switch their behaviors depending on their audience. People behave differently when they’re around their friends/peers versus their parents, or the difference between being with family versus being with coworkers. Role performance isn’t about changing your entire personality; it’s just about shifting your behavior to match the accepted behavior of the environment you’re in. Role performance is a result of the existence of informal norms and socialization.

# Looking-Glass Self

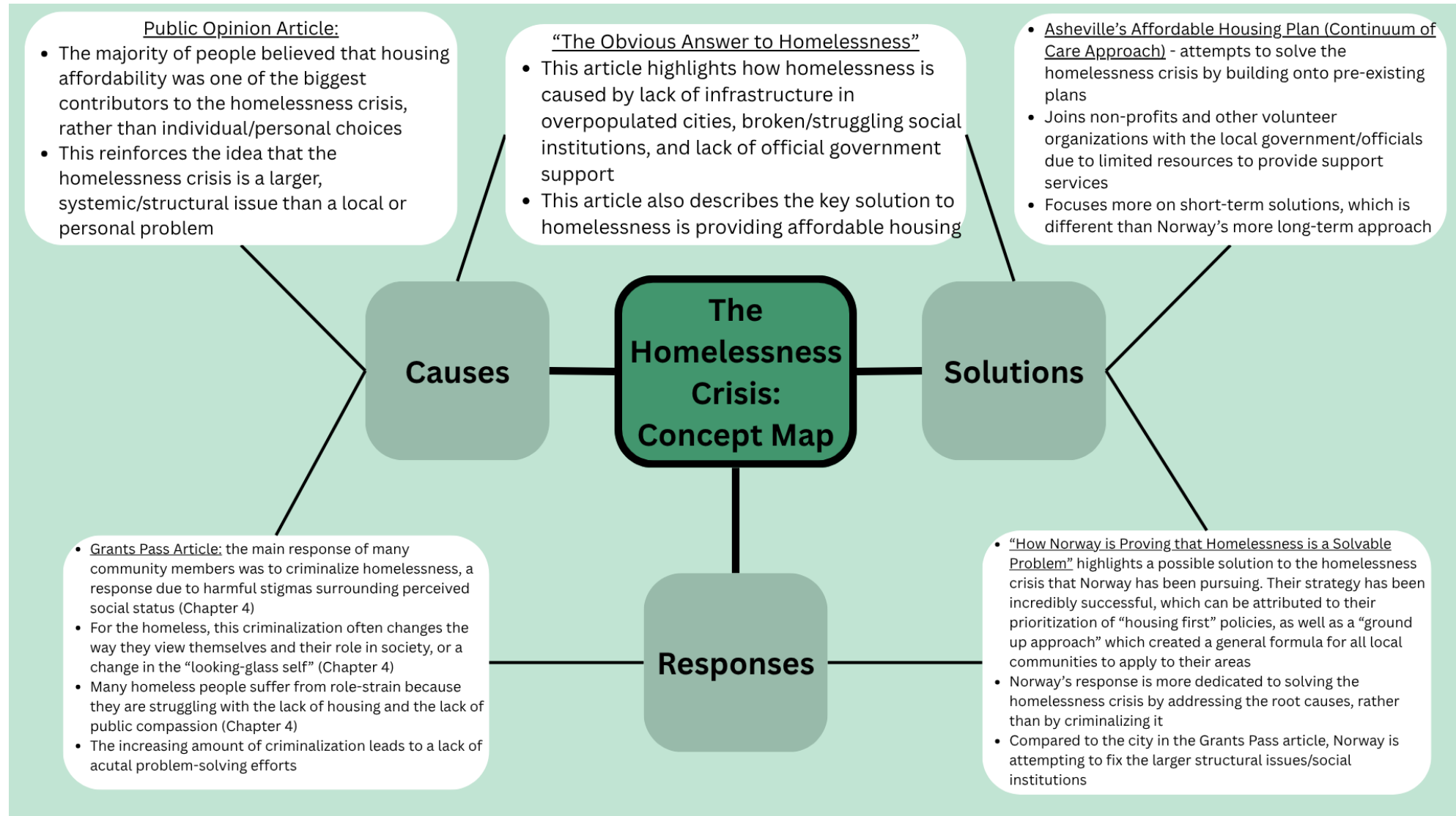
Cooley explains the “looking-glass self” as the way “we base our image on what we think other people see...We imagine how we must appear to others, then react to this speculation” (OpenStax, Section 4.3). Public reactions shape identity because, depending on how society might or “is supposed to” react to us, we fill the role they expect. Public reactions and interactions can often reinforce stigmas, informal norms, or roles, even if those roles aren’t an accurate reflection of the individual. Labels and interaction are big contributors to how one ends up perceiving themselves.

In HD1, I analyzed the different factors that go into homelessness crisis. While there are tangible reasons, such as lack of housing or lack of welfare services, there are also many intangible reasons that the homelessness crisis has continued for so many years: stigmas and public reactions to the homeless have caused a lapse in care or a desire to ignore responsibility altogether. One specific example of this can be seen in the “Grants Pass v Johnson” article, where the community of Grants Pass criminalized homelessness: “Grants Pass says civil and criminal punishments are necessary for enforcing laws banning homeless individuals from public spaces” (Hayden). For years, the residents of Grants Pass have viewed the homeless more as a “problem” than the crisis that it is. This continued criminalization can lead to, and has led to, a lower perception of oneself if they are facing homelessness. The constant internalization of these negative ideas can lead to a belief in a lower self-worth and makes a person feel a sense of exclusion from society. Relating this more directly to the “looking-glass self” idea, the homeless in the Grants Pass community are beginning to view themselves differently because of the constant mistreatment and negativity they are receiving from permanent residents.

# The Three Approaches

City/Country	Norway	The City of Asheville	The Grants Pass Community
<p>Plan/Method to Address the Homelessness Crisis</p>	<p>The Norway Plan, on the other hand, is taking a <b>“ground-up approach</b>, supporting local authorities to draw up action plans for housing and support services” (Yeung). Norway’s plan involves building entirely new plans to address the homelessness crisis, and it has been incredibly successful, with Norway having one of the world’s lowest rates of homelessness (Yeung).</p>	<p>The City of Asheville has developed its own approach to the homelessness crisis, which they have labeled as the “Affordable Housing Plan” or the <b>“Continuum of Care”</b> plan. Asheville’s plan to address the crisis involves building off of preexisting legislation/policies while simultaneously involving non-profit organizations to provide the city’s homeless with more immediate care.</p>	<p>The Grants Pass community has taken an entirely different approach: <b>criminalize</b> homelessness to satisfy angry permanent residents. In the “Grants Pass v Johnson” article, a Grants Pass city council member commented on their strategy: “The point is to make it uncomfortable enough for them in our city so they will want to move on down the road” (Hayden). The Grants Pass community’s solution isn’t a solution at all; the point of the Grants Pass approach is to appeal to the city’s council and permanent members.</p>
<p>Long-Term or Short-Term Approach?</p>	<p>Norway’s “Housing First” policy that aims to rehouse homeless individuals before providing any kind of welfare service. Norway focuses on a <b>long-term care</b> approach. Though Norway doesn’t focus on immediately providing welfare services, they still strive to care for the individual.</p>	<p>Asheville has been prioritizing providing welfare services to its citizens on a more <b>short-term care</b> basis. Similarly to Norway, the goal of the plan is to provide critical care to individuals.</p>	<p>The Grants Pass community hasn’t created any plan to aid in the rehabilitation of homeless individuals; their focus in on pushing out the homeless from their community entirely. Unlike Asheville or Norway, the Grants Pass community’s method does not focus on the well-being of the individual at all.</p>

# Comparing Social Responses: Concept Map



# Structural Causes & Solutions

The article “The Obvious Answer to Homelessness” by Jerusalem Demsas states that the main cause of homelessness is the lack of affordable housing. Demsas writes on how the lack of housing is a much larger structural issue in our society: “Yet when we have a dire shortage of affordable housing, it’s all but guaranteed that a certain number of people will become homeless...In real life, housing scarcity is more difficult to observe—but it’s the underlying cause of homelessness” (Demsas). Demsas argues that the lack of housing is due to the lack of infrastructure to support rapidly growing cities, as well as the complete lack of response from local politicians/legislators to the crisis.

If one were to agree with Demsas’ assertion, the best approach to address homelessness would be to solve the housing crisis. The best example of this type of approach would be Norway’s “Housing First Plan,” which corresponds well with Demsas’ claim that homelessness can be solved by providing affordable housing.

The reason why Norway’s plan is best to address the homelessness crisis is because it focuses on the root cause: the general lack of housing. Norway’s solution has proven that providing housing first makes providing other welfare services more successful in the long-term.

# Local Evidence

BeLoved Asheville is a local organization that has been helping to “build the community and to create home, health, equity, and opportunity” (BeLoved Asheville). This organization helps both with one-on-one requests, as well as with supporting the general community. The goal of BeLoved Asheville is to provide long-term care by remaining committed to “affordable housing, honoring families and elders, uplifting cultural arts and celebrations, and community care” (BeLoved Asheville).

The article “‘Bridge That Gap’: Mutual Aid in Western North Carolina Plays Lead Role in Community Needs” by Gerard Albert III discusses the concept of “mutual aid,” particularly after the destruction caused by Hurricane Helene. Albert describes the efforts of the local community to support one another: “The concept, mutual aid, is not a new one. Neighbors caring for neighbors in difficult times stretches back decades. After Hurricane Helene, communities relied on assistance from each other as they awaited government assistance” (Albert). Local stores/shops, neighbors, gyms, churches, and other local institutions helped to provide not just physical aid but also helped to provide access to critical information.

BeLoved Asheville Hyperlink: <https://www.belovedasheville.com/>

# Sociological Analysis

The Symbolic Interactionism theory could be applied to BeLoved Asheville because it strengthens the feelings of community members and promotes values of love, care, and understanding. BeLoved Asheville also represents a strong social institution that has dramatically shaped the lives of its members and the people they provide aid to.

The article “’Bridge That Gap’: Mutual Aid in Western North Carolina Plays Lead Role in Community Needs” by Gerard Albert III highlights the creation of a strong “in-group” among some of Asheville’s community members because it has brought together neighbors under the same cause: they want to help each other out in times of need. They feel like a tight-knit community/family.

# Personal Growth

At the beginning of the semester, I had less of an understanding about the many different factors that shape our society and the people in it. At the beginning of the course, I understood the concept of sociology much more broadly, but as I studied more throughout the semester, I learned how people, groups, movements, and conflicts are shaped by larger structural systems, social institutions, and institutional agents (family, peers, education, work, etc.). Throughout this entire course, I learned more about how our personal thoughts, perspectives, ideas, behaviors, and actions can all be influenced by what we experience in society. In completing this final project, I've come to learn even more about how society affects the development of one's "self" and how it changes our perspective about our environment.

# Why This Matters

Understanding homelessness sociologically matters beyond this course because it helps people to understand homelessness from a broader point of view; homelessness isn't a result of personal choices, but rather larger structural issues that have long been ignored or left unaddressed. Understanding homelessness as a larger social issue not only helps people to develop empathy, but it also helps people to analyze the effects society can have on people in general. Having a strong understanding of homelessness can also encourage people to be a part of the solution to the crisis.