

Homelessness through the sociological imagination

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Homelessness stood out to me during this course because as I learned more about sociology, I started to notice it in a different way when I saw it in Asheville. Concepts like inequality and social structure made me start to question what I was seeing rather than just passing it by. This change in my views is what made homelessness feel like an important topic to focus on.



(homeless man asking for money in Asheville)
(My photo)

How Sociology Changed My Perspective

Before module 1, I thought sociology was just common sense, but I now know that it is more than that; it helps us focus on deeper social forces that shape how others behave. The idea that changed how I see the world most was George Herbert Mead's theory that "how an individual comes to view himself or herself is based to a very large extent on interactions with others" (section 1.2 p16). This made me realize that identity is not just shaped by one person, but it is shaped through everyday interactions. Because of this, I now think more about how people treat others, especially those going through homelessness; it can have a big effect on how they see themselves.

Personal Troubles vs. Public Issues

Sociological imagination is “the ability to understand how your own past relates to that of other people, as well as to history in general and societal structures in particular” (pg 26). At first, I saw homelessness as a personal trouble; I thought it was caused by individual choices. But I now see it as a public issue shaped by larger structural factors like rising housing costs, very limited job opportunities, and troubles with healthcare. This perspective helped me realize that homelessness is not just about what individuals do but about the systems and conditions that influence their everyday lives; seeing homelessness this way changes the focus away from blaming individuals and toward understanding how society contributes to the problem.

Inequality, Conformity, or Social Movement

In module 2, I learned how inequality shapes people's opportunities and decisions. In my D6 "Spent" simulation, I saw how quickly financial stability can fall apart. "By day twenty-seven, I had lost around eight hundred dollars... I don't believe I would have made it another month". This showed me how limited choices become under financial pressure. This connects to homelessness because people are often responding to structural limits like low wages and high costs rather than simply making poor decisions, but are responding to structural limitations like low wages and high living costs. This perspective helped me understand that inequality plays a major role in shaping outcomes.

Growth reflection

At the beginning of this module, I did not fully understand how inequality affects people's decisions. After doing the spent simulation, I realized how limited choices become when someone is financially struggling. Even though I survived, I lost a lot of money and had to make lots of hard choices. This really showed me how difficult it is to stay afloat when you're in this position. I also noticed how my decisions were influenced by social expectations, especially in my role as a parent. I felt a lot of pressure to put my child first, even when I lacked the resources. This experience helped me understand that people's actions are often shaped by structural limits rather than their own failure. Overall, my thinking was changed from judging people to understanding the systems that influence their choices.

Status

In sociology, status is a person's position in society and how others respond to them. People experiencing homelessness are often seen as having a lower social status, which affects how they are treated in everyday interactions. The textbooks say status influences both opportunities and social relationships. This means that individuals who are homeless may be judged, ignored, or excluded based on their social status, which can limit their access to resources and support.

Role Strain, Role Conflict, and Role Performance

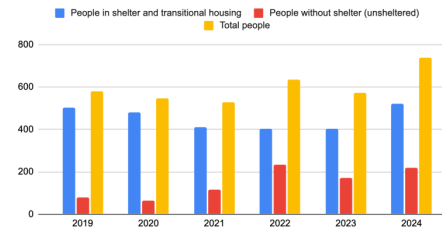
Section 4.3 of the OpenStax textbook explains how people manage different expectations in society through role strain, role conflict, and role performance. During my visit to Las Vegas, I observed parents struggling with homelessness, who were trying to care for their children while also coping with the challenge of not having a place to stay. This reflects role strain because they are trying to meet the expectations of a parent without having the resources to do it. At the same time, they may experience role conflict between finding work and shelter and caring for their children, which creates harsh demands; because of these challenges, their role performance may not match what society expects, not because they are failing, but because their situation limits what they are able to do. This example shows how social conditions can affect a person's ability to do their roles.

Looking glass self

The looking-glass self explains how people develop their identity based on how they believe others see them (section 4.3). In Asheville, I observed a man trying to talk to people walking by, but most people ignored him or avoided eye contact. This moment stood out to me because it showed me how people often respond to homelessness by acting like it is not there. According to my hd1 forum, this kind of interaction can affect how a person sees themselves because if someone is repeatedly treated like they don't matter, they may begin to really think that they don't matter. The reading and class discussion boards helped me understand that these everyday interactions are not small; they play a role in shaping the identity.

Three approaches

(2026). Wp.com. <https://i0.wp.com/avwatchdog.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Screenshot-2024-04-26-at-12.17.24-PM.png?resize=780%2C392&ssl=1>



Asheville

(2025). Licdn.com. https://media.licdn.com/dms/image/v2/D5622AQH09atCUT1w0Q/eedshare-shrink_800/B56ZfMNbFaHQAo-/0/1751477761268?e=2147483647&v=beta&t=odOcsiQISgo_SD_c5F3j11xk03Y2BzLgrTKa6FUF4

The number of people experiencing homelessness in Norway has nearly halved since 2006

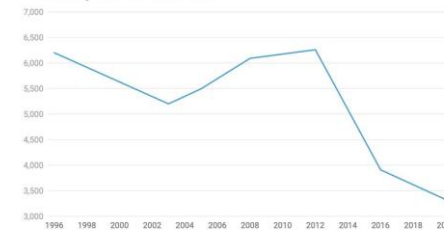


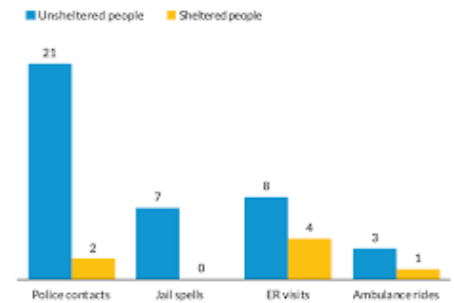
Chart: Peter Young - Source: Husbanken - Get the data - Created with Datawrapper

Norway

(2026). Rosehaven.org. <https://rosehaven.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Screenshot-2025-06-19-at-3.33.06%E2%80%AFPM.png>

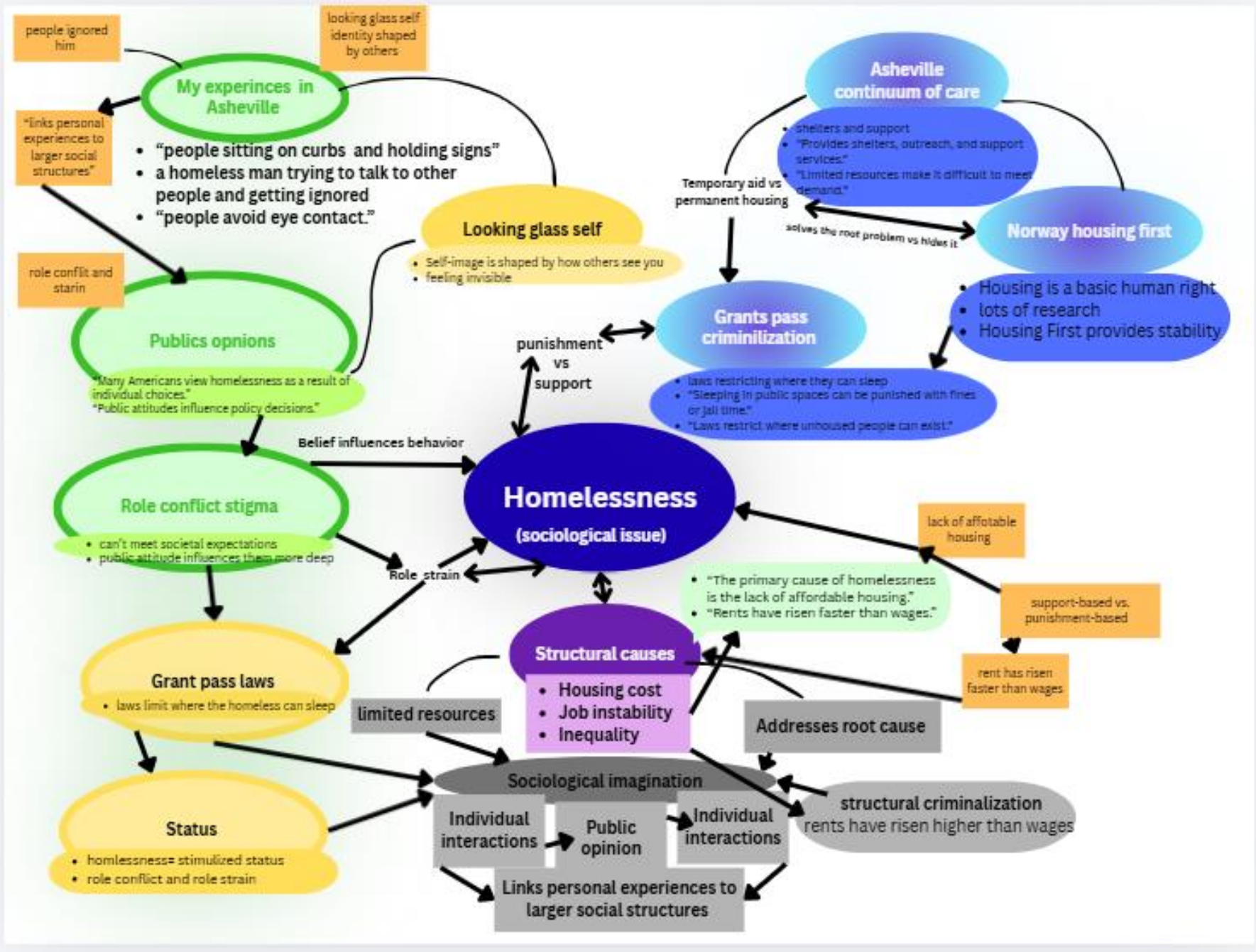
People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness Are More Likely to Interact with the Justice System and Emergency Services Than People in Shelters

Average number of interactions in previous six months



Grants pass

approach	Main idea	Evidence outcomes	Impact on homeless
Asheville continuum of care	Provide shelter health care and support service	As I explained in hd2 this system helps but depends heavily on funding and available recourses which limits how well it works	Provides short term support but not great for long term
Norway housing first	Provide housing before services	In HD2 I noted this approach directly addresses the lack of housing and reflects stronger social policies	Creates long term stability reduces homelessness
Grants pass laws	Laws to control where homeless can go	I talked about this in my hd2 this approach treats homelessness as a problem to control rather than solve	Pushes homeless away doesn't fix root cause



Structural causes and solutions

Homelessness is largely caused by structural issues such as the lack of affordable housing, unstable jobs, and limited access to health care. The article “The Obvious Answer to Homelessness” argues that providing housing is the best solution because it addresses the root causes directly. This connects to the housing first model used in Norway, where people are given stable housing before trying to solve other problems. This method stands out from others because it prioritizes long-term solutions over short-term ones.

Local evidence

One local organization addressing homelessness in Asheville is Homeward Bound of WNC. Their goal is to end chronic homelessness by providing permanent housing and resources to people in need. Their housing first plan focuses on getting people into stable housing as quickly as possible and offering support services.

Learn more about it at:

<https://homewardboundwnc.org>



(2026). Yimg.com.

<https://s.yimg.com/ny/api/res/1.2/6NBAoSjKcyvKKcWf5YHN.oQ--/YXBwaWQ9aGlnaGxhbmRlcjt3PTEyMDA7aD04MjU7Y2Y9d2VicA--/https://media.zenfs.com/en/asheville-citizen-times/5dd38bf8253c6e88585c3ac25efdccfc>

Sociological analysis

Looking at homelessness in Asheville through a sociological perspective, I can apply the concepts of social stratification and institutional discrimination. Social stratification explains how resources like housing and income are distributed unequally, which can lead to homelessness. Institutional discrimination helps tell how systems and policies may unintentionally limit opportunities for certain people. When combined with everyday interactions, these bigger structures shape how homelessness is experienced and understood in society.

Personal growth

At the beginning of this course, I didn't really think much about the deeper causes of homelessness, and I really just saw it as an individual issue. Over time, that changed as I started to see how things like inequality, social structures, and everyday interactions all play a role. I now realize that people's situations are not just based on their choices, but also on their opportunities and limits around them. This class helped me become more aware of how society shapes people's lives, and I find myself thinking more about it than just making quick assumptions.

Why this matters

Understanding homelessness through sociological perspectives goes beyond this class because it changes how we see real-world problems and how we respond to them. I've come to realize that homelessness is not solely the result of personal choices, but is instead shaped by larger factors such as housing costs, job access, and policies that influence people's situations. This perspective makes it easier to support solutions that address the main causes rather than the effects of the problem. It also affects everyday behavior because recognizing these factors can lead to more awareness and less judgment towards others. Overall, thinking this way helps not just with understanding homelessness but with seeing other social issues and making better decisions in society.