

Homelessness Through the Sociological Imagination

Sophia Smith | Sociology Final Project

Homelessness stood out to me in this course because I've seen it in my own community in Asheville and Charlotte, especially in downtown areas where people are visibly living outside or asking for help.

Instead of seeing homelessness as just an individual issue, I now understand it as something shaped by larger social forces like housing costs, inequality, and policy decisions.



Boyle, J. (2021, March 2). *A homeless encampment under I-240 on Lexington Avenue in downtown Asheville* [Photograph]. [The Asheville Citizen Times](https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2021/04/10/boyle-column-homeless-mecca-not-image-asheville-wants/7148687002/)

The Asheville Citizen Times

. [https://www.citizen-](https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2021/04/10/boyle-column-homeless-mecca-not-image-asheville-wants/7148687002/)

times.com/story/news/local/2021/04/10/boyle-column-homeless-mecca-not-image-asheville-wants/7148687002/

How Sociology Changed My Perspective

Before this course, I mostly saw social issues as personal problems. Now I understand that sociology helps explain how society shapes individual experiences.

One idea that changed my thinking was symbolic interactionism. I learned that meaning is created through interaction, not just individual behavior.

As the textbook states:

“People’s behavior can be determined by their subjective construction of reality rather than by objective reality” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, Section 4.3).

This helped me realize that how society labels people can actually influence how they see themselves and how others treat them.

Personal Troubles vs Public Issues

Homelessness is a great example of C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination.

A **personal trouble** might be someone losing their job or housing.

A **public issue** is the larger system causing housing instability, like rising rent, low wages, and lack of affordable housing.

This shows that homelessness is not just individual failure, but a structural issue connected to society.

Inequality and Social Forces

Homelessness is strongly connected to **social inequality**, especially unequal access to housing, healthcare, and stable income.

People experiencing homelessness are often judged as “irresponsible,” but inequality limits their real choices.

In the D6 simulation, I experienced this directly:

“I could only choose certain apartments because many were too expensive for my income level.”

This connects to inequality because people in lower economic positions have fewer options, even when they make responsible decisions.

Growth Reflection

My thinking about inequality changed a lot during this module.

Before, I thought inequality mostly came from personal choices. Now I understand it is deeply connected to social structures like wages, housing systems, and class stratification.

The simulation helped me realize that even careful decisions don't matter much when resources are limited.

I also started to understand how society often blames individuals for problems that are actually structural.

Status

Homelessness can be understood as a **social status**, meaning it affects how people are viewed and treated in society.

People experiencing homelessness are often given a lower status, which influences how others interact with them in public spaces.

This status can shape access to opportunities, respect, and support.

Roles (Section 4.3)

Section 4.3 explains that people have multiple roles that shape behavior, and sometimes these roles conflict.

Someone experiencing homelessness may still have roles such as parent, worker, or community member, but those roles become difficult to perform due to lack of resources.

For example, a parent without stable housing may experience **role strain** trying to provide food, safety, and stability.

They may also experience **role conflict** between finding shelter and meeting responsibilities like childcare or employment.

Their **role performance** is judged by society, even when structural barriers make success extremely difficult.

Looking-Glass Self

The looking-glass self explains how identity is shaped by how others treat us.

In HD1, I observed that people often avoid eye contact with unhoused individuals or ignore them completely.

This kind of reaction can shape how someone experiencing homelessness sees themselves over time.

If society constantly treats someone as invisible or unwanted, it can affect their self-image and confidence.

Three Approaches

Homelessness policy approaches:

Asheville (Continuum of Care)

- Focus: emergency → transitional → permanent housing
- Goal: gradual stabilization

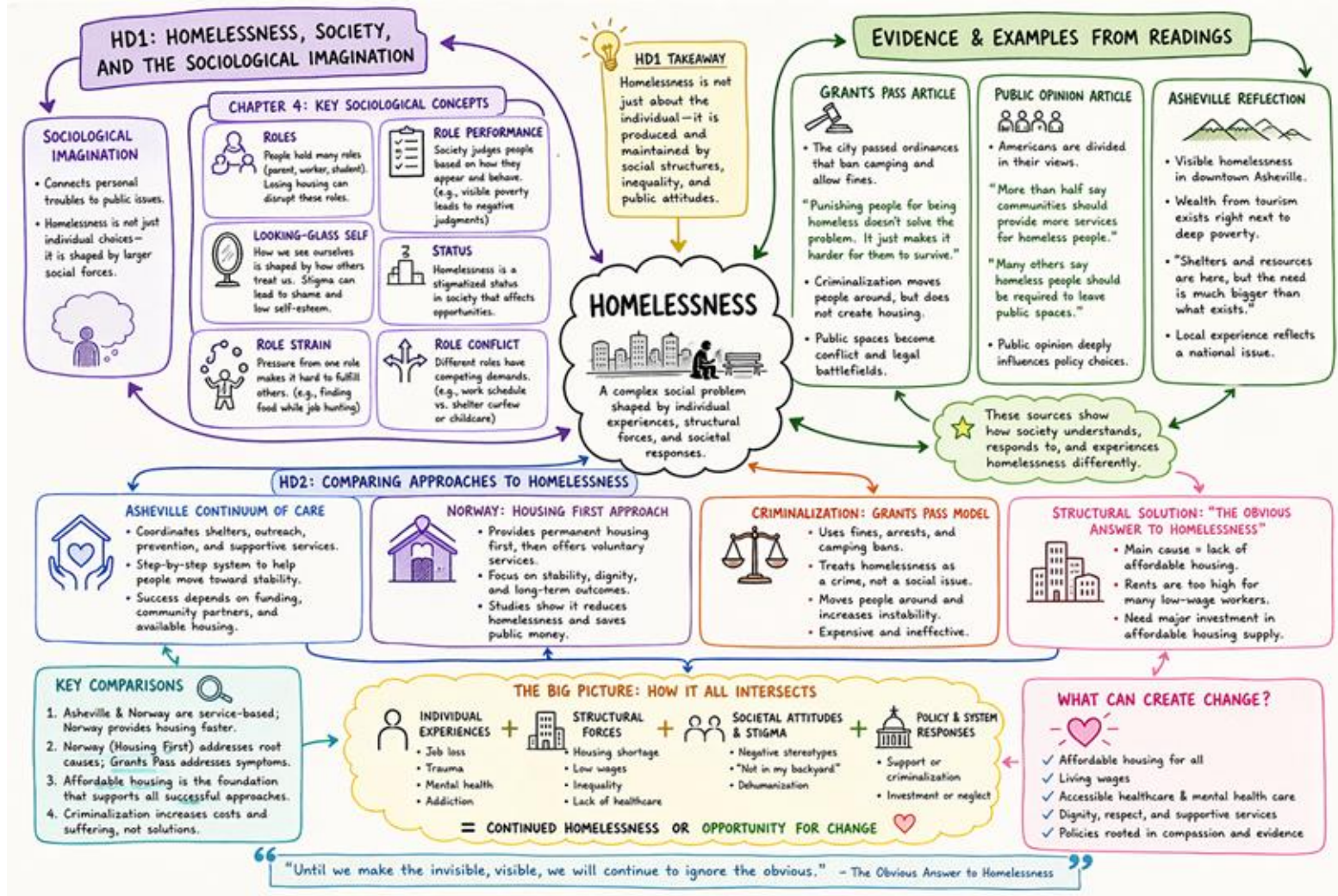
Norway (Housing First)

- Focus: permanent housing first
- ~80–90% long-term housing stability after placement (European Housing First studies)

Grants Pass (Criminalization)

- Focus: fines, camping bans, displacement policies
- Leads to repeated relocation rather than stable housing

Concept Map



Structural Causes & Solutions

The main structural causes of homelessness include:

- Lack of affordable housing
- Low wages compared to rent
- Limited healthcare access
- Weak social safety nets

“The Obvious Answer to Homelessness” argues that housing shortages are the root cause of homelessness.

From a sociological perspective, Housing First (like Norway) is most effective because it addresses the root problem directly: housing instability.

Other systems that rely on punishment or gradual support often fail because they do not solve the underlying structural issue.

Local Evidence

Local organizations in Charlotte/Asheville:

- Roof Above: <https://www.roofabove.org>
- Urban Ministry Center: <https://urbanministrycenter.org>
- Asheville Homeless Coalition:
<https://ashevillehomelesscoalition.org>

These organizations focus on:

- Emergency shelter
- Housing support
- Food access
- Outreach programs

Local Sociological Analysis

Using sociological concepts, these organizations show how homelessness is shaped by structure, not just individual choice.

For example, Roof Above provides shelter and housing pathways, which connects to the idea that housing is a basic structural need.

Looking-Glass Self: people experiencing homelessness may internalize stigma based on how they are treated in public.

Inequality: limited housing supply in Charlotte and Asheville makes homelessness more likely regardless of effort or work status.

Personal Growth

My understanding of homelessness has changed significantly.

At the beginning of the course, I thought homelessness was mostly about individual choices.

Now I see it as a result of structural inequality, policy decisions, and economic systems.

I also understand how everyday interactions, like ignoring or acknowledging someone, can affect how homelessness is experienced socially.

Why This Matters

Understanding homelessness sociologically matters because it changes how we respond to it.

If we see it only as an individual problem, solutions focus on punishment or temporary fixes.

But if we understand it as a structural issue, solutions focus on housing, policy reform, and long-term support.

This perspective helps create more effective and humane responses to real social problems.