

Sociology Final Project

Homelessness Through The Sociological Standpoint

Homelessness stood out to me because of how it connects to the bigger social issues; like poverty, housing costs, and access to jobs. Homelessness shows how people's lives could be affected by things that aren't in their own control. Homelessness is an issue that most everyone can see in their community.



*Report: How will Asheville end homelessness?
See the recommendations from a \$73K study. (n.d.). The Asheville Citizen Times.
<https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2023/01/23/asheville-nc-homeless-shelter-study-housing-people-help-beds/69825340007/>*

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How Sociology Changed My Perspective

Sociology has changed my perspective because it has opened my viewpoint about what is going on around me. Not just the things that you can see from the outside, but the concepts as well as the deeper meaning of why things may occur within society. One of the concepts was the idea of socialization and your self-concept. Everyone within society has a different way of how they view themselves and with that, how society views you as an individual as well. People in society develop in different ways, which can influence how they interpret things and the expectations they form. This also extends to the varied traditions and beliefs held by different individuals. Many different things within society can impact the lives that surround it. “Values are not static. They change across time and between groups as people evaluate, debate, and change collective social beliefs.” (Section 3.2). Society’s actions, whether big or small, shape the world around us. These influences come from many sources, including behaviors, thoughts, culture, norms, media, family, and other institutions. Recognizing the complexity of these forces, both on the surface as well as deeper levels, helps us better understand what is happening around us. People face a wide range of social issues, and increasing awareness of these challenges leads to a more informed perspective.

Personal Troubles vs. Public Issues

Sociological imagination helps connect a person's experiences to larger social patterns, showing how personal troubles are tied to public issues. Personal troubles, like losing a job, family conflict, or mental health struggles, may seem like individual problems, which is why homelessness is often blamed on personal choices. However, public issues such as high housing costs, limited healthcare, and systemic inequality play a major role. For example, losing a job is a personal trouble, but low wages and expensive rent are broader societal problems that can lead to homelessness. This perspective shows that homelessness isn't just about individuals, but how society is structured. Understanding this reduces blame on individuals, highlights inequality and supports more effective solutions.

Inequality, Conformity, Or Social Movements

In sociology, inequality refers to the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and power within a society. This means that not everyone has the same access to essentials like housing, employment, healthcare, or education. Homeless individuals often experience multiple forms of inequality, with economic inequality being one of the most significant. While some people earn enough to comfortably afford rent, others work low-paying jobs that fail to meet even their basic needs. As housing costs continue to rise without matching wage increases, many individuals fall behind on rent, face eviction, and may ultimately become homeless. This highlights the widening gap between those with financial stability and those without. Overall, inequality plays a major role in homelessness by limiting access to income, housing, and opportunities. Those with fewer resources are at a much greater risk of housing instability, showing that homelessness is not simply a personal choice, but the result of broader social and economic disparities.

Growth Reflection

Inequality, the uneven distribution of resources and opportunities, strongly contributes to homelessness. People with low incomes often can't afford housing, healthcare, or basic needs, trapping them in a cycle of poverty that's hard to escape. "The poor often experience inadequate healthcare, limited education, and the accessibility of birth control. But those born into these conditions are incredibly challenged in their efforts to break out since the consequences of poverty are also the causes of poverty, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantages," (Section 10.2). An example of this is the SPENT simulation highlights how tough choices are shaped by structural limits, not just personal decisions. This shows homelessness is rooted in social systems as much as individual actions. Social movements can raise awareness and drive change, emphasizing that homelessness is a deeper societal issue that shapes how society responds.

Status

Status refers to the position a person holds within society. When someone becomes homeless, that status can strongly influence how others perceive them. In sociology, certain statuses carry stigma, meaning they are associated with negative labels and stereotypes. People experiencing homelessness are often unfairly judged, which can limit their access to opportunities like employment or housing. Society frequently makes assumptions about homelessness without understanding the underlying causes. This shows that homelessness is more than just a condition; it is also a social position that shapes how individuals are viewed, treated, and how they navigate daily life. Recognizing homelessness as a status helps highlight that it's not only about lacking shelter, but also about identity, social perception, and inequality. Ultimately, this perspective emphasizes the role society plays in both contributing to and responding to homelessness, rather than placing the responsibility solely on the individual.

Role Strain, Role Conflict, & Role Performance

Roles are the behaviors, duties, and privileges tied to a status. Role strain occurs when someone struggles to meet expectations within a single role. For a person experiencing homelessness, even being an employee can be difficult due to lack of access to hygiene, transportation, or safe sleep. Role conflict, on the other hand, happens when multiple roles clash, such as being a parent while also trying to find housing or work, especially when shelter rules interfere with schedules. Role performance is how well someone fulfills a role compared to societal expectations. People experiencing homelessness are often judged as unproductive, but they are managing survival, seeking services, and maintaining relationships or employment. Overall, these concepts show that homelessness is not just about lacking housing, it makes meeting societal expectations much harder, even when individuals are trying their best.

Looking-Glass Self

The Looking-Glass Self explains how people build their identity based on how they believe others see them. Individuals imagine how they appear to others, interpret others' reactions, and use those perceptions to shape their own self-concept. This concept relates to homelessness because homeless individuals are often viewed negatively by society, which can influence how they view themselves as well. Over time, they may begin to internalize these negative judgments or already see themselves through that lens. Public stereotypes can also develop, further widening the gap between homeless individuals and the rest of society. Overall, this process can reduce self-confidence and make it more difficult for individuals to improve their circumstances, demonstrating how strongly societal perceptions can shape a person's self-image.

Three Approaches

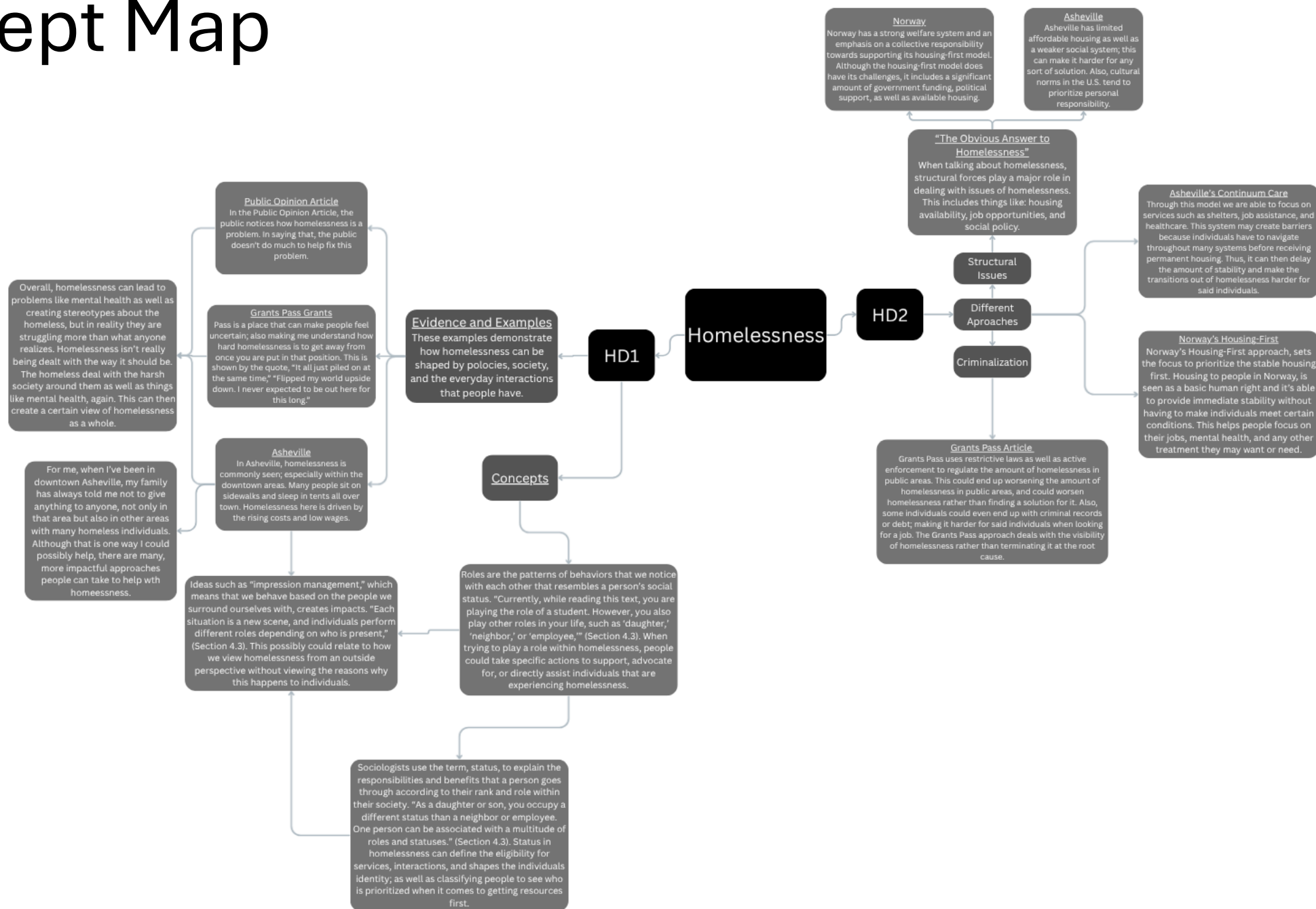
All these approaches recognize homelessness as a social issue that requires an organized response. However, they differ in how they address and treat individuals experiencing homelessness.

Asheville's Continuum of Care: Through this model, the focus is placed on services such as shelters, job assistance, and healthcare. This system can create barriers because individuals often must navigate multiple programs before obtaining any form of permanent housing. As a result, this can delay stability and make the transition out of homelessness more difficult.

Norway's Housing-First: In this approach, Norway prioritizes providing stable housing first. This allows individuals to concentrate on employment, mental health support, and any necessary treatment. Housing is viewed as a basic human right, offering immediate stability without requiring individuals to meet certain conditions beforehand.

Grants Pass Criminalization: In this model, laws and enforcement are used to regulate the presence of homelessness in public spaces. This approach may worsen the situation by penalizing visibility rather than addressing root causes. It can also lead to individuals receiving criminal records or accumulating fines, which may further hinder access to employment and long-term stability.

Concept Map



Structural Causes & Solutions

Homelessness is primarily driven by systemic issues like unaffordable housing, joblessness, and inadequate healthcare or policy support. Among various strategies, Norway's "Housing First" model stands out as particularly successful because it prioritizes stable housing as a foundational human right. The logic is simple: without a consistent place to live, it is nearly impossible for someone to manage their health or keep a job. As highlighted in "The Obvious Answer to Homelessness," structural factors are the core of the problem, and this model addresses them by providing a home first—without requiring people to meet specific conditions beforehand. While implementing this approach requires significant government funding, political willpower, and a steady supply of available units, it creates a much more reliable path to stability. Once the basic need for shelter is met, individuals are in a much better position to find employment and improve their quality of life.

Local Evidence

Asheville's Continuum of Care is a coordinated system that brings together shelters, healthcare providers, and government agencies to reduce homelessness. Its goal is to quickly resolve homelessness and prevent it through collaboration across services. However, while it offers support, it can also create challenges. People often must move through multiple systems before reaching permanent housing, which can slow down stability and make transitions harder. At the same time, the model treats homelessness as a broader social issue shaped by structural factors. By coordinating services, it also helps reduce stigma and addresses both individual needs and systemic inequality.

Sociological Analysis

Sociological concepts reveal that homelessness is a systemic product of societal organization rather than a random event. Inequality plays a central role, as low wages, unemployment, and high housing costs create a landscape where those with fewer resources lack the equal opportunities necessary to maintain stable housing. This structural disadvantage is compounded by social structures, like economic policies and bureaucratic systems, that force those at the bottom of the hierarchy to navigate immense hurdles just to receive aid. Furthermore, the psychological impact of negative stereotypes can be explained through the looking-glass self, where individuals internalize society's narrow perceptions. Together, these factors show how the very fabric of our economy and social systems can trap individuals in cycles of homelessness that are difficult to break.

Personal Growth

This course has significantly shifted my perspective, making me more aware of the diverse ways social systems shape lives. I have gained a deeper understanding of the unique experiences of individuals facing homelessness and learned concepts from the textbook to the broader world around me. This new lens has fostered greater empathy and a more nuanced understanding of society than what is visible on the surface. Ultimately, I now find myself looking at the "bigger picture" of how different societies function.

Why This Matters

Understanding homelessness from a sociological perspective is vital for uncovering the root causes of the crisis rather than just addressing its symptoms. By exploring various theoretical approaches, we can shift our viewpoints, reduce social stigma, and develop more effective, lasting solutions. This knowledge is crucial because homelessness impacts real people in our own communities; recognizing the systemic nature of the problem is the first step toward driving meaningful social change