

Looking Beyond The Streets: Homelessness Through a Sociological Lens

2026SP SOC-210-OALD2 By: Riley Moody

This course has taught me how to look at the world with purpose and care. This new habit I have learned has caused me to think of any situation with a Sociological view and to ask myself, “How would a Sociologist study this?” With this being said, the homelessness unit stood out to me because it is something I see every day. I used to just glance past homeless people in Asheville and other cities, thinking they had just failed as individuals, but now I see that the larger story, systems either work for them or directly against them. Another reason it has stood out to me is the statistics that I have seen regarding homelessness that show how it truly is just a systemic failure.



[Asheville Citizen Times](#)

How Sociology Changed My Perspective

One idea that continues to change how I see the world are the three paradigms, structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. They have proven to be a vital part of answering “fundamental questions” (eBook Section 1.3). The three paradigms can be put to use when studying topics such as Culture, aging, deviance, and crime. They take simple topics and provide a deeper conception of the innerworkings. They “come to dominate sociological thinking because they provide useful explanations” (eBook Section 1.3).

Personal Troubles vs. Public

Issues

The sociological imagination is “described as an awareness of the relationship between a person’s behavior and experience and the wider culture that shaped the person’s choices and perceptions. It’s a way of seeing our own and other people’s behavior in relation to history and social structure (eBook section 1.1).” The article “The Obvious Answer to Homelessness” does a great job of explaining the sociological imagination through the lens of homelessness. This article warns us that when we look at homelessness as a personal failure, we can become dismissive of their situation. When we look at the bigger picture, it is clear that yes, some personal choices impact a person's living situation, but personal choices are not the only determining factor here. There is a clear lack of affordable housing in the U.S. and in countries like Norway. The root cause of homelessness isn’t personal troubles or irresponsibility, but rather the lack of public policy that is in support of the most vulnerable.

Applying Inequality to

Homelessness

When referring to inequality, we often think of minorities or other underrepresented groups of people, but that's not the extent of it. Inequality refers to the lack of fair resource distribution between groups of people. Now, having a deeper sociological standpoint on homelessness, I can see just how unfairly governing systems are treating the homeless. Homeless people are often looked at as less important just based on their immediate appearance, as well as previously learned stereotypes. As discussed in D7, when it comes to class, it is apparent that the upper class has the upper hand. They are fully in control of their own lives as well as others' lives. The textbook states, "In contrast, the lower class has little control over their work or lives." (eBook Section 9.2). This shows us that the lower class has little to no control over what happens in their own lives, so imagine how much control people living in poverty or on the streets have.

My Growth

Within my module 2 reflection I talked a lot about my D6 Forum which was based on the inequalities of the poor. While writing this reflection post I was only discussing the three main class levels, upper, middle, and lower, but I didn't consider the inequality placed on the homeless. After going through HD1, HD2 and the concept map I now have a deeper understanding of the level of inequality the homeless experience. From social inequality, criminalization and even unequal employment opportunities homeless people are being set up to continue this bad path. The social inequality they face is based on stereotypes such as them being dirty, "crackheads" and even criminals. The Grants Pass article has helped me understand the deep level of criminalization and inequality set upon the homeless in that area. They have strict laws that prohibit people from sleeping on city property. The stories from the Grants Pass article have opened my eyes to see how inequality is everywhere.

Explaining Homelessness as A Status

-Status, as defined in the textbook, is “the responsibilities and benefits that a person experiences according to their rank and role in society.”(eBook Section 4.3) With this being said, when people become homeless, they lose their previous status and are often marginalized by the same community that used to support them.

Role Concepts

- **Role Strain-** “If too much is required of a single role, individuals can experience role strain”(eBook Section 4.3). Homeless people can experience role strain when they face struggles like not being able to afford housing or food even if they work.
- **Role Conflict-** “Similarly, a person can experience role conflict when one or more roles are contradictory.”(eBook Section 4.3).Homeless people can experience role conflict when figuring out what needs should come before others, such as deciding between working and taking care of a child or pet.
- **Role Performance-**“Role performance is how a person expresses his or her role.”(eBook Section 4.3). Homeless people have to frequently adapt to their living situation because of how often it can change. They may have to act a certain way around certain people to remain safe.

Looking-Glass

Self

How public reactions shape identity- People base their image on what they think other people see. When it comes to homeless people, they have very little control over their physical appearance. The lack of available hygiene products, shelter and clean water creates a vulnerability for many. When people are living on the street or in tents they are most likely visible by the public which can cause insecurities within themselves. Along with their own insecurities the distance that the general public creates between themselves and the unhoused can make them feel alienated from their own city.

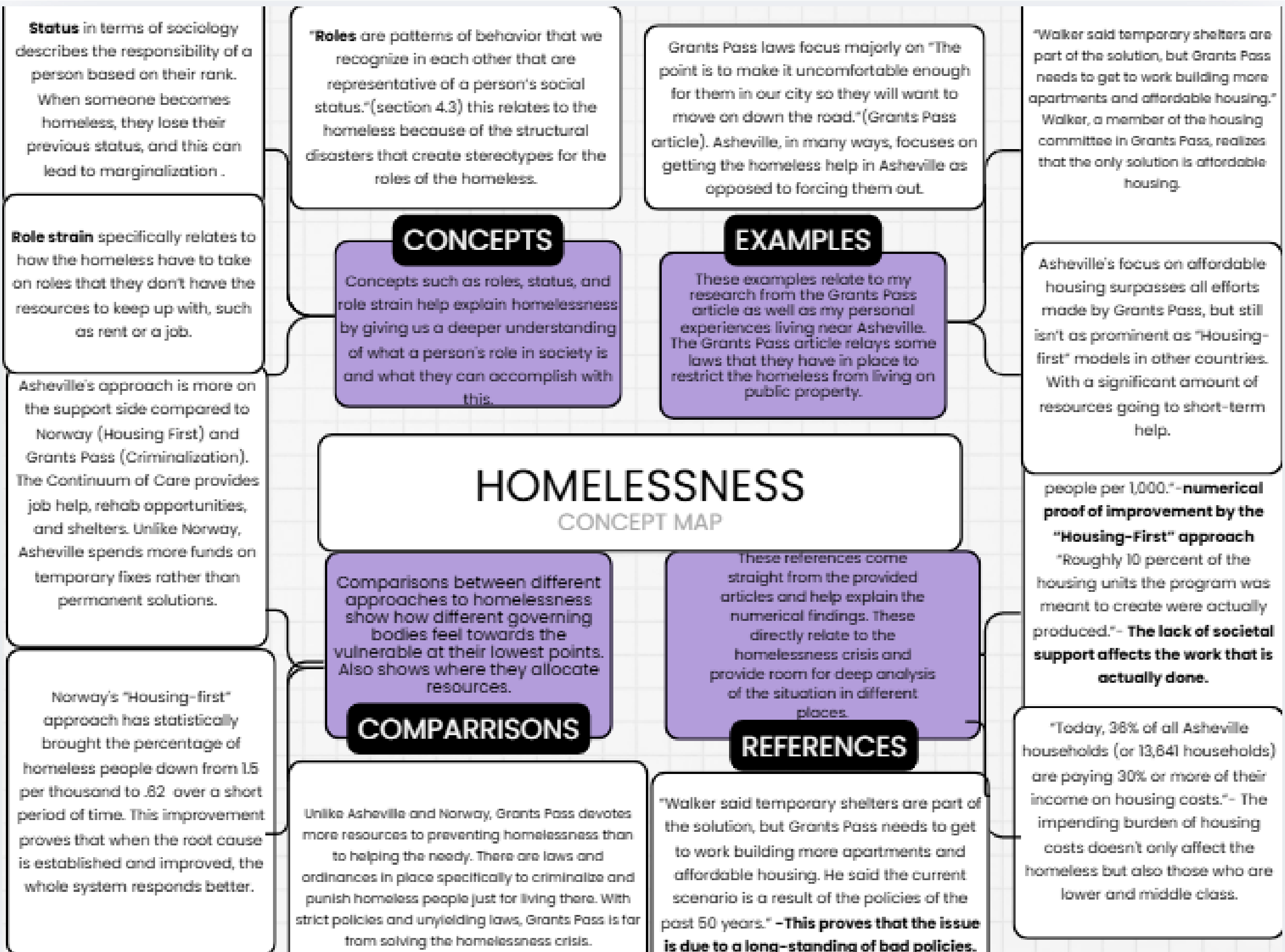
In my HD1 post I discussed how I have seen some homeless people who have mental health disorders that are blatantly disregarded by the public just because they act different than someone with the same mental health disorder on medication. Homeless people are often at their most vulnerable and with the public eye on them at all times it is incredibly difficult to not compare their lives to the lives of others.

Three

Asheville (Continuum of Care)- According to the City of Asheville's Affordable Housing Plan the CoC is focusing on expanding affordability and protecting against displacement. They are working towards the most immediate needs first then moving on to the other needs.

Norway (Housing-First)- Norway's Housing-First approach focuses on the root cause of homelessness. This approach has created a visible decline in the number of homeless people in Norway. According to the article, the rate of homeless people per 1000 has gone from 1.5 to .62 since 2020. This distinct decline proves how their approach is effective. When compared to Norway the U.S. homeless rate is 2.3 out of 1000, close to 4 times the rate in Norway.

Grants Pass (Criminalization)- Grants Pass relies on criminalizing and displacing the homeless instead of supporting them. By handing out 72-hour eviction papers and charging whoever doesn't comply to their sanitation ordinance they are putting these people in a place that they can't escape.



Structural Causes &

Solutions

In “The Obvious Answer To Homelessness” it is discussed multiple times that homelessness is caused by a lack on adequate housing. When other root problems like drugs, or mental illness are seen as the cause of homelessness there is not evidence that it is. Jerusalem Demsas Writes “I want to be precise here. It is true that many people who become homeless are mentally ill. It is also true that becoming homeless exposes people to a range of traumatic experiences, which can create new problems that housing alone may not be able to solve. But the claim that drug abuse and mental illness are the fundamental causes of homelessness falls apart upon investigation.”(Pg. 3) This reinstates that the root cause of homelessness isn’t drug abuse or mental health issues but rather a shear lack of affordable housing. In the Norway article they also believe that housing is a priority and their “Housing First” approach put structures ahead of less critical needs.

Local Evidence

BeLoved Asheville believes in the power of community and they are actively working and supporting Asheville through re-building programs and create affordable housing. This wonderful organization works with people directly to help find them housing in their very own BeLoved Village. Their goal is to mitigate the housing crisis and to build a community that people can count on.



[This is a picture directly from the BeLoved Asheville website that shows part of their affordable housing village](#)

Sociological Evidence

Structural Functionalism

-BeLoved Asheville is working to alleviate the housing crisis for local homeless people. Structural functionalism when it comes to homelessness looks at the way that the economy and unaffordable housing affect homeless people. But with support from local organizations they are being helped.

Conflict Theory -The conflict theory looks at the inequalities and power imbalances within a society. It is apparent that homeless people suffer from social inequalities but with groups like BeLoved Asheville and other local support homeless people are apart of something bigger. They focus on building community that everyone is welcome in to reduce inequality.

Personal

Growth

Before this class, I never thought about societal issues or social constructs with any real interest. This class has taught me why Sociology is important and how it can deepen understanding of what most people view as simple. For instance, social movements were something I enjoyed seeing, but now I know the 4 stages and the importance of having them to create positive social change in our society. Another example of how this semester has allowed me to think more deeply would be the concept map that I created. Connecting sociological concepts and approaches to my previous thoughts was enlightening.

Why This

Matters

Understanding homelessness sociologically matters beyond this class in many ways. First off, a deeper understanding of any situation makes us more empathetic, and specifically knowing that homelessness isn't a personal failure but a systemic one is touching. Having the ability to think deeper about societal issues allows for progression in today's world. If everyone had access to the information taught in this class, I think we would all be more understanding and compassionate.