

Understanding Homelessness Through a Sociological Lens

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SOC 210:INTRODUCTION TO
SOCIOLOGY

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Slides 1–2: Learning to
Think Like a Sociologist
(Module 1)

PERSONAL CONNECTION

WHY DID HOMELESSNESS STAND OUT TO ME IN THIS COURSE?

HOMELESSNESS STOOD OUT TO ME BECAUSE IT IS SOMETHING THAT I'VE SEEN THROUGHOUT MY LIFE, AND NOW I SEE HOW IT IS CONTINUOUSLY GETTING WORSE. THIS CLASS HAS OPENED MY EYES AND MADE ME MORE AWARE OF THE COMMUNITY AROUND ME AND HOW I MIGHT HAVE BEEN IGNORANT OF THOSE INDIVIDUALS STUCK IN THE CYCLE OF HOMELESSNESS. WITH THIS COURSE, I HAVE REALIZED HOW HOMELESSNESS IS MORE THAN AN INDIVIDUAL'S ISSUE AND



HOW SOCIOLOGY CHANGED MY PERSPECTIVE

MODULE 1

Sociology has changed how I think about everyday problems and made me analyze them a bit more thoroughly. Before taking sociology, I thought that behaviors and personalities were based on individual choices, and now I have realized the true impact of how our environment and social interactions affect our lives. The concept that most impacted my perspective was socialization, which explains how people learn norms, values, and behaviors through society and how personal experiences relate to broader social issues. “Socialization is the process through which people are taught to be proficient members of a society. It describes the ways people come to understand societal norms and expectations, accept society’s beliefs, and become aware of societal values” (OpenStax, ch. 5). This made me realize that many of my personal habits, values, and goals are heavily influenced by the people and environment around me and are not formed solely on my own.

Slides 3–5: Groups, Inequality, and Social Forces (Module 2)

PERSONAL TROUBLE

- losing a job
- Losing a home
- Mental Health

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PUBLIC ISSUES

- Lack of affordable housing
- Low wages
- Limited resources

The sociological imagination helped me understand the difference between personal troubles and public issues. At the beginning, I believed that homelessness was caused by individual problems like losing a job or making bad decisions. Now I can see how those things may play a role in homelessness, which is also a public issue. Many face the same problems, such as high housing costs, low wages, and limited access to healthcare. Homelessness isn't only about a singular person's situation; it reflects the larger problems in society.

SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND HOMELESSNESS

Understanding homelessness means recognizing that inequality plays a major role. Those experiencing homelessness often face the challenges of low income, high housing costs, and limited opportunities. These are not only personal issues, but they are also part of a larger social system. In my discussion post 6, I talked about how, from a global perspective, people in low-income countries face even larger challenges, like job insecurity, and have less access to support. It connects to global inequality, which describes how wealth and resources are unevenly distributed around the world.

GROWTH REFLECTION

After learning about inequality and social forces, my perspective has changed. At first, I thought homelessness could be solved if people just worked hard, but now I understand how social systems and structural inequality play a major part in creating the barriers. The low wages, high housing costs, and limited access to opportunities create large barriers that make it very difficult for those people to avoid or escape the cycle of homelessness. With this shift, it helped me become more aware of how the system affects people's lives, and it made me less judgmental and more understanding of those who face these challenges.

Slides 6–8: Homelessness & Social Interaction (Chapter 4)

STATUS

The text explains that “term status to describe the responsibilities and benefits that a person experiences according to their rank and role in society” (OpenStax 4.3), and homelessness can often be understood as an achieved status. “Achieved statuses are obtained by choice, such as a high school dropout, self-made millionaire, or nurse” (OpenStax 4.3). This is usually the result of circumstances like job loss, rising housing costs, or health issues. The lack of housing is not the only reason, but a socially defined status is what carries labels and stereotypes. With these perceptions, it influences how people experiencing homelessness are treated in interactions and public spaces, and that often affects their access to resources and opportunities. Homelessness is shaped not only by individual circumstances and choices but also by social inequality and societal perspectives.

ROLE CONFLICT

CHOOSING BETWEEN JOB RESPONSIBILITIES AND SURVIVAL NEEDS

“SIMILARLY, A PERSON CAN EXPERIENCE ROLE CONFLICT WHEN ONE OR MORE ROLES ARE CONTRADICTORY.”
(OPENSTAX 4.3).

AN EXAMPLE OF ROLE CONFLICT IS A STUDENT EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS STRUGGLING TO MAINTAIN THE BALANCE OF GOING TO CLASS OR DOING SCHOOLWORK WITH FINDING FOOD OR A SAFE PLACE TO SLEEP. THESE EXPECTATIONS CONFLICT WITH EACH OTHER,

ROLE STRAIN

STRUGGLES OF MEETING EXPECTATIONS, LIKE WORKING AND NOT BEING ABLE TO AFFORD RENT
“IF TOO MUCH IS REQUIRED OF A SINGLE ROLE, INDIVIDUALS CAN EXPERIENCE ROLE STRAIN.”

(OPENSTAX 4.3).

AN EXAMPLE OF ROLE STRAIN IS A PARENT WITHOUT STABLE HOUSING WHO STRUGGLES TO MEET EXPECTATIONS, SUCH AS PROVIDING FOOD, MAINTAINING HYGIENE, OR ENSURING CONSISTENCY

ROLE PERFORMANCE

Society expects individuals to fulfill roles such as being a worker, and homeless individuals are often seen as “failing roles.”

“Role performance is how a person expresses his or her role.” (OpenStax 4.3)

AN EXAMPLE OF ROLE PERFORMANCE IS THAT A PERSON MAY BE JUDGED FOR NOT MEETING SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS OF ROLES, SUCH AS EMPLOYEE OR RESIDENT, EVEN THOUGH THEY FACE STRUCTURAL BARRIERS LIKE A LACK OF HOUSING AND¹¹ RESOURCES, WHICH MAKE IT

How public reactions shape identity

In my HD1 post, I talked about how section 4.3 had a sociological concept that deepened my understanding, and it was the “Looking-glass self.” According to Cooley, we base our image on what we think other people see (Cooley 1902). We imagine how we must appear to others and then react to this speculation. This explains how and why people shape their identity based on how others see them, and those homeless individuals who are ignored, judged, or avoided can negatively affect how they see themselves and their self-worth. Also from section 4.3, it states that “we imagine how we look to others, draw conclusions based upon their reactions to us, and then we develop our personal sense of self. In other words, people’s reactions to us are like a mirror in which we are reflected.” (OpenStax 4.3) This opened my eyes to how everyday interactions, like avoiding eye contact or making assumptions, play a role in reinforcing stigmas. I have seen how many people choose not to engage with homeless individuals and ignore them completely, which creates a sense of invisibility and insignificance.

Slides 9–11: Comparing Social Responses

Asheville (Continuum of Care)

- Emergency Shelters
- Transitional Housing
- Support Services

Approach: Reactive

Efforts to move homeless individuals out of public areas and treat them as an inconvenience rather than providing long-term solutions to help them out of homelessness. They focus on the appearance of the cities and getting those homeless individuals help, which shows how society tends to push the issues out of sight rather than solve them. Helps, but doesn't prevent homelessness

Norway (Housing First)

- Housing provided first
- Services like jobs and health second

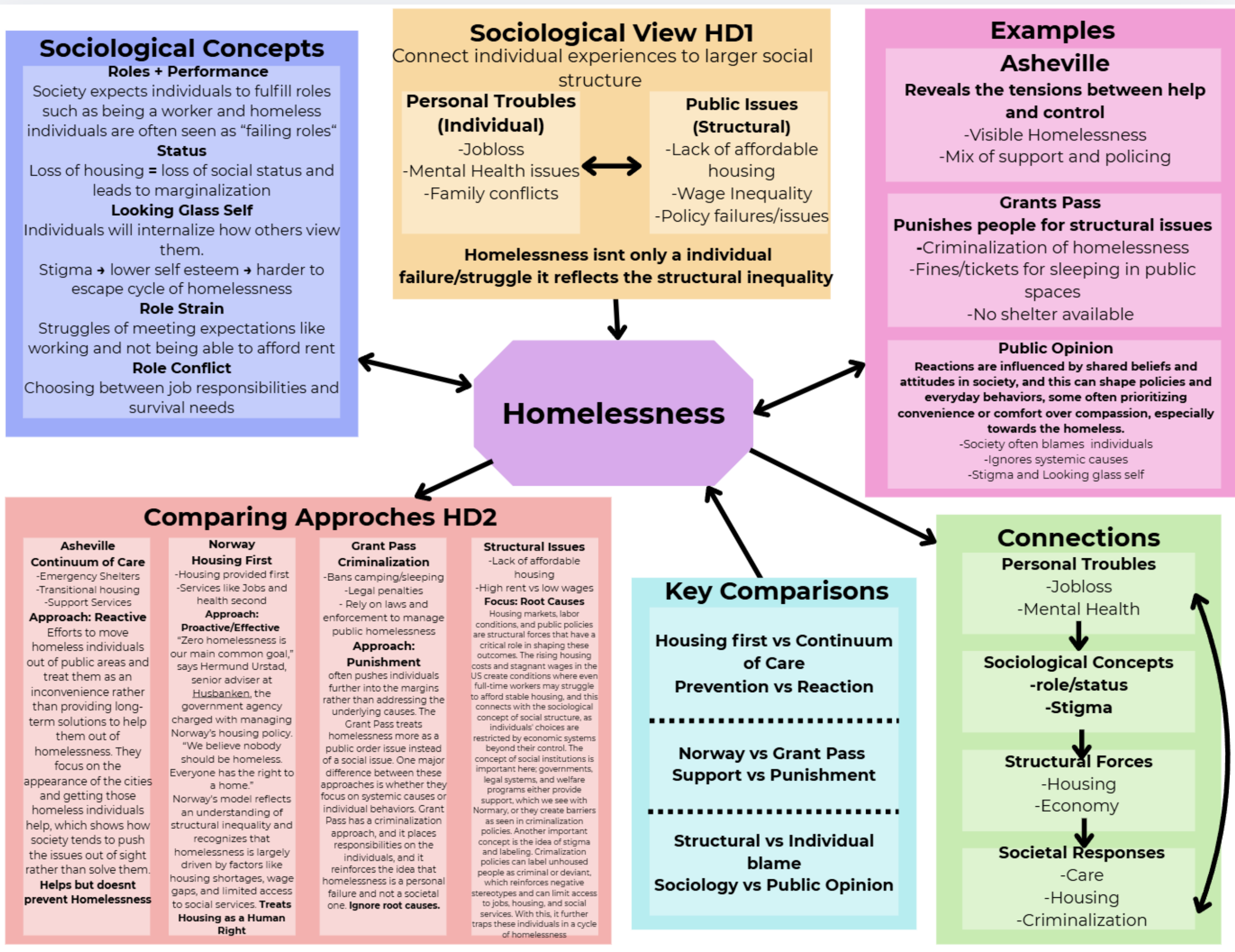
Approach: Proactive/Effective

“Zero homelessness is our main common goal,” says Hermund Urstad, senior adviser at Husbanken, the government agency charged with managing Norway’s housing policy. “We believe nobody should be homeless. Everyone has the right to a home.” Norway's model reflects an understanding of structural inequality and recognizes that homelessness is largely driven by factors like housing shortages, wage gaps, and limited access to social services. It treats housing as a human right.

Criminalization (Grants Pass)

- Bans camping/sleeping
- Legal penalties
- Rely on laws and enforcement to manage public homelessness

Approach: Punishment often pushes individuals further into the margins rather than addressing the underlying causes. Grants Pass treats homelessness more as a public order issue instead of a social issue. One major difference between these approaches is whether they focus on systemic causes or individual behaviors. Grants Pass has a criminalization approach, and it places responsibilities on the individuals, reinforcing the idea that homelessness is a personal failure and not a societal one. It ignores root causes.



Structural Causes &

CAUSES:

Solutions

WHICH APPROACH BEST ADDRESSES ROOT CAUSES AND WHY?

THE HOUSING FIRST APPROACH IS COLLECTIVELY THE MOST PROGRESSIVE BECAUSE IT ADDRESSES THE ROOT CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS AND TREATS HOUSING AS A BASIC NEED RATHER THAN A REWARD. IT IS EVIDENT THAT, WITHOUT STABLE HOUSING, IT IS DIFFICULT FOR PEOPLE TO MAINTAIN EMPLOYMENT, ACCESS HEALTHCARE, OR IMPROVE THEIR SITUATION. BY SOLVING THE HOUSING ISSUE FIRST, OTHER PROBLEMS BECOME MANAGEABLE. AS SEEN IN "THE OBVIOUS ANSWER TO HOMELESSNESS" ARTICLE, IT IS ARGUED THAT PROVIDING HOUSING IS MORE EFFECTIVE THAN PROVIDING TEMPORARY SHELTERS OR PUNITIVE POLICIES BECAUSE IT ADDRESSES THE STRUCTURAL ISSUES OF HOUSING ACCESS RATHER THAN BLAMING THE HOMELESS INDIVIDUALS. IN NORWAY'S

ARTICLE, THEY ALSO FOCUS ON THE BELIEF THAT HOUSING SHOULD BE A PRIORITY AND

Housing Shortage & Cost: Rising rent, lack of affordable housing, Wages not keeping up with housing prices
Employment & Income Inequality: Low wages, unstable jobs, Limited access to stable employment
Healthcare: Mental health services are pricey or inaccessible, and addiction treatment is underfunded
Policy failures: Limited assistance and long waitlist, criminalization of homelessness

Solutions:

Housing First Approach: Permanent housing before addressing other problems
Increase Affordable Housing: Government funded housing, Rent control
Improve Healthcare access: Universal mental health care, addiction recovery programs
Policy Reform: Shift from punishment to support, eviction protection, and emergency aid

Slides 12–13: Local Application

Local Evidence

LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS IN ASHEVILLE:

Homeward Bound of WNC: Providing Homeless Services, Permanent Supportive Housing, Rapid Rehousing, and Homelessness Prevention

Western Carolina Rescue Ministries: Emergency shelter and Addiction Recovery

Transformation Village: Housing for women and children

Safe Shelter: Low-barrier emergency shelter

Beloved Asheville: Food, Outreach and community support

Community Action Opportunities: Rental Assistance and prevention

Mountain Housing Opportunities: Affordable housing development

Sociological Analysis

STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

MOUNTAIN HOUSING

OPPORTUNITIES: SHOWS THE LACK OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Community Action Opportunities: Need for rental and financial assistance

Both show how unequal access to housing and income creates homelessness.

Sociological Imagination

Homeward Bound of WNC:

Housing first connects with personal struggles to larger systems

Homelessness = Public issues not just personal failure

STIGMA

SAFE SHELTER: HELPS THOSE WHO ARE OFTEN EXCLUDED FROM STRICTER PROGRAMS

In society, it is seen how those homeless individuals will be labeled, and it limits their opportunities.

Social Stratification

Transformation Village: Focuses on vulnerable groups such as women and children

Beloved Asheville: Supports individuals at the lowest levels of society

Different groups experience inequality differently and some populations are more vulnerable within the social hierarchy.

Slides 14–15:
Reflection &
Meaning

Personal Growth

At the beginning of the semester, I saw homelessness as something that was caused by individual choices, and I didn't really think about how large systems like housing costs or wages could largely affect someone's situation. As I continued the class, my thinking and opinions changed. I now understand how homelessness is strongly connected to structural factors like the decrease in affordable housing and unequal access to resources. I have become more aware of how stigmas can affect people experiencing homelessness and how it makes it more difficult for them to get the help that they need. Overall, I believe that this course has helped me shift from a judgmental perspective and understand the bigger social forces that shape people's lives.

Why This Matters

Understanding homelessness from a sociological standpoint is important because it shifts how we think about the issue. Rather than viewing it as an individual failure, we can see it as a structural cause, such as housing affordability, low wages, and limited access to resources and healthcare. This perspective helps reduce stigma and challenges the idea that people are homeless because of personal failures or choices. It encourages finding better solutions that are progressive and effective. When we understand the root causes, we are more likely to support the policies and programs that will actually address the problems rather than just managing them. This course has shown me that real change comes from understanding and directly addressing systems, not just the individuals.