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Critically consider the role played by power and control in the (re)production of inequality for a group of your choosing.

Homelessness in the United Kingdom represents a continuing form of inequality (Geraghty, 2025). It manifests as more than public rough sleeping, and as defined in the Housing Act 1996, also includes unreliable housing arrangements (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025b). Multiple causal structural factors include economic deprivation, unemployment, gentrification, and punitive policing and government policies; as well as individual vulnerabilities such as mental health concerns and childhood poverty (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2018). Changes in housing policy, specifically during Thatcher's tenure in government, resulting in the reduction of social housing and advocating and moralising of home ownership, widened class divides (Farrall et al., 2016). These dynamics, in conjunction with media narratives that stereotype homeless individuals, reproduce cycles of disadvantage (Hall, 2009). Bourdieu's theory of forms of capital, along with habitus, fields, and doxa, illustrates that homelessness is not solely a result of personal circumstance, but impacted by structural and institutional inequalities that limit access to opportunities and resources (Bourdieu, 1990). UK legislation, such as the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and further amendments, intend to remove these barriers (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025b). Socio-economic, cultural, and UK policies converge to influence and determine outcomes for homeless individuals.

Homelessness, also known as housing insecurity and housing instability, is an ongoing concern in the United Kingdom (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025b). It is one of the most observable forms of continuous social inequality. This issue affects a wide spectrum of individuals, with one in every 200 UK households facing homelessness (Geraghty, 2025). Defining homelessness can be difficult due to the ambiguous nature of housing circumstances. A person is not required to be living or sleeping in public spaces to be considered homeless (Shelter, 2025). In the UK, homelessness is legally defined by the Housing Act 1996 by six main categories; a person has no available accommodation to inhabit; is in danger of domestic violence or abuse; possesses accommodation but it is unreasonable to continue occupation; possesses accommodation but is unable to securely access it; cannot legally occupy possessed occupation; or possesses a houseboat or mobile home but no location to place it (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025a).

Understanding the causes of homelessness in the UK requires examining the multiple contributing factors which cause it (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2018). Socio-economic and political reasons, government policies, and mental health are all relevant. Individualistic causal factors such as addiction and vulnerability, and structural causal factors such as unemployment and poverty, are often applied as explanations; however, this risks connecting individualistic factors with personal agency and shifting the blame (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2018), causing self-defeating beliefs to happen. Childhood poverty is a strong indicator for adult homelessness, indicating a strong pathway of poverty leading to homelessness (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2018). One study showed that homelessness in the UK is not random, and instead is precipitated by early systemic disadvantages, resulting in such a pronounced rate of homelessness that it could be considered an expected outcome (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2018). While unemployment and poverty are regularly identified as causes of homelessness, they are also, simultaneously, the effects of it, making it difficult to obtain employment and move out of poverty (Gray et al., 2022). A questionnaire completed by rough sleepers, indicated that 93% were not in employment. 73% indicated that they were previously in employment, but it had been at least one year since that time (Gray et al., 2022). In some households, precarious employment such as zero-hour contracts which do not guarantee regular work hours, is risky for maintaining enough financial stability to retain housing. The universal credit benefit that supports individuals when unemployed or under-employed, also reduces in amount in relation to income received from employment, which can cause confusion in budgeting and planning for bills (Gray et al., 2022). Other barriers to exit homelessness are low self-esteem issues, mental health concerns, lack of training, and discrimination directed at homeless individuals and their ability to perform adequately in the workplace. These institutional barriers require a multi-pronged approach to address them, which necessitates sustainable funding; without funding, homeless individuals can become embedded in a structure of reproduced inequality (Homeless Link policy team, 2024).

In England, during the 1970s, social or council housing accounted for three out of ten households, with the majority of tenants not being considered poor (Kemp, 2025). On average, one hundred thousand new social housing homes were being built each year. However, the availability of social housing has declined significantly since 1980. As of 2025, social housing by local authorities in England accounts for one in sixteen

households, with most of those tenants considered poor or disadvantaged (Kemp, 2025). The number of social housing occupants has decreased from 5.5 million in 1979 to 4.1 million as of 2021 (Wilson and Barton, 2022). Local authorities currently build a few thousand homes each year. In the 1970s, the housing system was comprised of a minor amount of non-profit housing associations; today, these associations are a significant provider of social housing (Kemp, 2025). Less available social housing reduces access to accommodation, as well as redirecting low-income individuals into the private rental sector. This shift has fewer safeguards to prevent homelessness from being a constant risk, with irregular income, costlier rents, and unreliable landlords increasing the precariousness of this option (Kemp, 2025).

When the conservative government came into power in 1979, with Margaret Thatcher winning election for Prime Minister, this coincided with the timeline of social housing changes. Conservatives strongly promoted the idea of owner-occupiers; people buying and living in their homes (Holmans, 2021). Thatcher's government moralised property ownership, equating owning a home with being an upright member of society, while those in social housing were framed as being failures or lacking aspiration (Farrall et al., 2016). This moralisation also caused a portion of society to not only aspire to home ownership, but to also politically align with conservative values, which became increasingly vocal about the virtues of home ownership and framing social housing as an option for those who choose to not participate in society (Farrall et al., 2016). The Housing Act 1980 introduced Right to Buy, permitting social housing tenants to purchase their council property with significant discounts, further creating an ideological divide between those who aspire for home ownership and those who accept government supported housing (Farrall et al., 2016). As more people took advantage of this opportunity, identities were created between owner and renters; owners were societal achievers, while renters were reliant on government assistance. This idea was amplified by the coalition Conservative and Liberal-Democrat government in 2010, in their White Paper, *Universal Credit: welfare that works*. In this document, the coalition government equates a "culture of work" (Department for Works and Pensions, 2010, p. 60) as a societal norm in households, and that worklessness impacts the potential productivity of the UK (Department for Works and Pensions, 2010).

This normalisation of home ownership as the ideal, reinforces capitalist hierarchies, dividing society along class lines, stigmatising social housing tenants and private renters as societal failures, while valorising homeowners (Carr et al., 2022). Viewing a home or property as capital, positions owners as holding both economic and symbolic power, while non-homeowners are marginalised, reproducing inequality systemically (Marx and Engels, 2011). From this perspective, if renters are considered morally inferior to owners, non-domiciled individuals, such as those experiencing homelessness, would be viewed as significantly less moral than renters. This demonstrates how homelessness is sustained thorough a reproduction of inequality and individuals are subjected to forms of control such as legal, social, direct, indirect, and internal (Chriss, 2013). The visible nature of homelessness often causes individuals to be subjected to regulation of their activities in public spaces (Johnsen et al., 2018). Policing of areas to prevent homeless people's presence and creating "defensive architecture" (Johnsen et al., 2018, para 2) in the area to be less conducive to what is viewed as undesirable activities, criminalises and controls this population. Accessing the means to change one's living situation, especially in a capitalist society, requires participation in the collective institutional rules in place, that structure daily life. However, opening a bank account or applying for employment without a fixed home address, become immediate obstacles to attaining the resources required to exit being homeless. It becomes a difficult cycle of needing a home to access the means to have a home (Prescott, 2021). This predisposition creates structural constraints on homeless people, increasing the difficulty for them to change their circumstances, access opportunities for stability, and acquire the capital necessary for upward mobility (Prescott, 2021).

Bourdieu's concept of capital applied to the condition of homelessness, illustrates how the commodification of housing as social leverage rather than an intrinsic human right, dispossesses the homeless of economic capital, removing an asset that can aid in upward mobility (Bowman, 2024). Property is an asset that can be leveraged to achieve other goals. Owning a house also represents a significant form of symbolic capital, as society assigns prestige and moral value to home ownership, while labelling those without property as failures (Bourdieu, 2021). Homeless individuals may experience a habitus or inclination shaped by precarious life experiences which predisposes them to navigate society in a manner which makes them vulnerable to

unequal treatment (Bourdieu, 2021). Habitus hysteresis can occur, in which the individual's habitus conflicts with institutional expectations (Bourdieu, 1990). Someone whose habitus is formed by growing up in poverty or educational instability, may not be equipped with the expectations of society, and the requirements of navigating bureaucratic institutions; for example, understanding complex tenancy agreements or credit check requirements. A social closure can occur when these barriers restrict access to resources; in this case, housing (Bourdieu, 2010). Fields, or structured social spaces, each have their own rules in which society competes for resources and status (Bourdieu, 1990). In the field of housing, homeless and housing insecure individuals, are disadvantageously positioned, lacking protective forms of cultural, economic, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2021). Simultaneously, doxa, or collective beliefs and values which are assumed correct but are societally constructed, interprets home ownership as virtuous; justifying structures which continue inequality (Bourdieu, 1990). This doxa can mask power inequalities as societal norms, which may influence homeless individuals to experience misrecognition of external causal factors and place blame solely on themselves (Bourdieu, 1990).

An obvious external causal factor to consider is the process of gentrification. Gentrification is the dramatic process of an urban area being economically and socially transformed by a sudden influx of affluent residents, and financial investment in the neighbourhood, increased rents, more expensive retail prices, and usually resulting in the displacement of the original residents (Thompson, 2019). The term, gentrification, was first used by sociologist Ruth Glass, in 1964 to describe the transformation of London from working-class neighbourhoods into middle-class and professional areas, displacing existing lower income residents and altering the social and economic personality of the city (Glass, 1964). Glass describes how one after the other, working-class neighbourhoods were invaded and taken over by middle and upper-class residents, changing and upgrading homes into more privileged addresses, until the original character of the location no longer existed (Glass, 1964). Urban gentrification can act as a violent form of un-homing, causing severing of ties between people and place, and removing individuals' right to dwell (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2019). Gentrification is tied to economies and markets, and occurs to benefit capitalism, and can be viewed as socially unjust. Usage of the term gentrification carries such negative connotations that it is often, instead, described as urban renewal or regeneration

(Elliott-Cooper et al., 2019). Gentrification increases social inequality and economic displacements in changing neighbourhoods, raising levels of homelessness. (Singh and Pandey, 2025).

Sharon Zukin's examination of gentrification as a mode of exclusion and inequality, dissects the causes and effects of urban transformation that results in the systematic exclusion of marginalised groups and increases housing insecurity for the underprivileged (Zukin, 2016). In Zukin's three paradoxes of gentrification theory, the first step in the process is that gentrification is often unanticipated (Zukin, 2016). A disadvantaged area may appear as an undesirable location for transformation. It is when a small amount of people of modest means decide to move into a deprived, but affordable to them, area. These are the initial gentrifiers (Zukin, 2016). Original residents, including homeless individuals, and the initial gentrifiers might integrate and tolerate each other as the process begins (Doucet, 2009). However, as the cost of housing increases and availability of housing decreases, competition for resources can force people into housing insecurity and homelessness (Zukin, 2016). The second paradox is labelled as unimportant; the gentrifying changes in a neighbourhood are seen as inconsequential when compared to other social issues, but the impacts felt by those affected in the community are significant as they face a loss of local accessible resources (Zukin, 2016). The third paradox is that gentrification is seen as uneventful. Changes unfold over time, and are rarely dramatically visible, such as a single mass displacement (Zukin, 2016). Landlords raising rents and property renovations creates an erosion of affordable housing, and predisposes a community for increased homelessness (Hochstenbach, 2023). Increased visibility of law enforcement in public areas, policing those who are made homeless by gentrification, makes it more difficult to leave a cycle of deprivation, as this is punitive rather than supportive (Collins et al., 2021). Studies show that low-income and homeless residents are significantly criminalised and removed during gentrification (Collins et al., 2021). Public sleeping or laws prohibiting acts such as begging or loitering in public parks are employed to control the homeless in gentrified areas (Collins et al., 2021).

Media representation of homelessness in UK, is another form of control and is often negative (Rea, 2022). In 2024, The Standard newspaper wrote an article covering criminal justice legislation, which contained negative bureaucratic dialogue about

homeless people's personal hygiene, choosing the inflammatory word "smells" as the leading descriptor on their headline (Fox, 2024). This article also contained a photo of a doorway, with a presumed homeless individual wrapped unseen in a sleeping bag, with a packet of cigarettes, and a Union Flag tied to a backpack (Fox, 2024). A Daily Mail article titled "The West End's 'Tent' Village" (Hammond, 2025), contrasted a homeless encampment near affluent West End theatres and the Savoy hotel, using derisive language, noting the placement of tents in a neo-classical archway of a Grade II listed building, and using a video focusing on a section of rubbish. This same article further used the homeless encampment to focus on the non-British migrant nationalities present while conversely quoting a homeless English man in the same encampment, stating his belief that if he were a foreigner he would have been given luxury accommodation and transportation, and that no one wants to help a native-born English person (Hammond, 2025). The Sun ran an article describing a homeless area as a "Bearpit" (Etherington, 2025), where homeless people congregate, near the expensive town of Avon. Again, imagery was selected to portray the homeless as untidy or disruptive. Even when interviewing a homeless man later in the article, who explains the cyclical structural obstacles he is facing trying to escape homelessness, describing his inability to rent due to not having a fixed address for two years and not being able to get a guarantor, the article pivots to include a statement from a homeless English woman that accuses local hostels of being full of Romanian occupants that are allowed to indefinitely remain, while there is no room for her, which the The Sun does not verify for its readership (Etherington, 2025), suggesting a deliberate attempt at sensationalism.

Portraying homeless groups with sensationalised and disparaging news articles, creates a propagandised message delivered to its audience (Best, 2010). It also creates "folk devils" (Cohen, 2011, p. 2); people that society has chosen to demonise, to be avoided, and to not follow their example. Folk devils become symbols of societal failure, scapegoats for housing inadequacy, and labelled as deviant or dangerous. This obscures the legitimate issues at the root of homelessness, redirecting complex structural and institutional causes, back to individual blame (Cohen, 2011). Applying folk devil status to homeless people also legitimises punitive actions against this group by police and law enforcement as a necessary response of control; reproducing marginalisation and reinforcing homelessness as a threat to society (Cohen, 2011).

This process is further explained by Stuart Hall's reception theory and model of encoding/decoding, which illustrates the power of this messaging (Hall, 2009). Forms of media, such as newspapers, news broadcasts, and social media, encode a narrative about a topic, in this case homelessness, which is then disseminated and decoded by the audience. Media outlets often encode their articles with an agenda or propaganda (Hall, 2009). The public, as the decoders of the message, choose which way they perceive the message. If the message is encoded negatively with inflammatory language and imagery, the audience can receive and decode that message as the media outlet intended, in a dominant-hegemonic fashion. (Hall, 2009). The audience accepts the ideological assumptions made by the media source as fact. This position leaves very little room for critical analysis of the message. In the case of homelessness, this can create a stabilised dominant perspective that stigmatises the homeless and establishes another form of structural control which becomes an obstacle (Hall, 2009). A negotiated reading of the media's portrayal of homelessness accepts some of the narrative about the homeless on face value; however, this decoding by the audience leaves room for critical reflection and partial resistance (Hall, 2009). This enables the audience to explore the factual basis of the story, while acknowledging that homelessness is not a reductive condition caused by moral failure. In an oppositional reading, the audience decodes the message by rejecting it, interpreting the ideology as false. This form of decoding can reject a negative narrative about the homeless, but it can also reject a positive narrative, depending on the receivers' political or cultural beliefs (Fuchs, 2023). Additionally, all forms of decoding can operate at the same time within one news article, with the public choosing how they decode aspects of a story (Fuchs, 2023). This alternating perception of homelessness creates an ever-changing standard which homeless individuals must contend with when navigating society.

While perception about the homeless can be shaped by media and public opinions, the UK government operates under a legal framework to create protective legislation. Changes that have been made to government policies have aimed to offer further safeguards for the homeless and those with housing insecurity (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025b). The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 made significant reforms to homeless legislation in England, placing responsibility on

local authorities from crisis response to early intervention and prevention. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 stipulates that housing authorities must provide accommodation to all, not only those designated as a priority (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025b). Changes made include an increase in days of support from twenty-eight to fifty-six, in which local authorities must provide assistance when an individual is facing homelessness, allowing for earlier intervention to prevent a period of housing instability; and, a new duty of care to assist those already homeless for up to fifty-six days, and ensure accommodation (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025b). Other changes made include a duty to refer service users in need to local authorities of the user's choice and if the service user consented; a duty to offer advisory information about legal rights and help available; all applications for housing must be given consideration; assessments and personalised action plans to alleviate housing insecurity; prevention and relief of homelessness for fifty-six days; main housing duty which ensures accommodation through other options such as private tenancy; that accommodation is suitable for needs; advice for those intentionally homeless; referral to other authorities where the homeless individual may have a local connection; and, access to reviews and appeals of decision made by housing authorities (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025b).

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 amended part 7 of the Housing Act 1996, to improve existing support for domestic abuse survivors, ensuring a legal right to housing without having to prove vulnerability to qualify, and expanded the definition of what constitutes domestic abuse beyond only physical violence, to include emotional forms and coercion and control (Crisis, n.d.). In January 2023, the UK government amended existing laws in the Temporary Permission to Stay for Victims of Human Trafficking or Slavery appendix, guaranteeing housing when victims have been granted limited leave to remain status (Shelter, 2023). In Scotland, The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order was amended to ensure no one is housed in unsuitable temporary accommodations for more than a seven-day period (Crisis, n.d.). Additionally, Scotland's Homeless Persons (Suspension of Referrals between Local Authorities) (Scotland) Order 2022, local connection referral laws changed to allow individuals to access help from any local council (Crisis, n.d.). In Wales, the Renting Homes (Wales) Act in 2022, was amended to mandate that landlords give six months'

notice to tenants facing no-fault evictions. The 2022 Homelessness (Priority Need and Intentionality) (Wales) Regulations, gives more support to rough sleepers (Crisis, n.d.). These progressive changes in rules and regulations allows for more access to assistance for the homeless and housing insecure and increases the rates of prevention.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has increased homelessness services funding with an additional £233 million, resulting in a total of almost £1 billion; and the Deputy Prime Minister is working with government department, councils, and mayors to develop a new strategy to address homelessness, due for publication in late 2025 (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government et al., 2025c). Changes will include repealing the offence of rough sleeping, which is still illegal under The Vagrancy Act 1824, and criminalising organised begging, in which individuals are compelled to beg under duress by criminal gangs. Further clarification regarding begging was addressed in July 2025, when labour was questioned and answered, stating begging for self-sustainment would not be illegal (UK Parliament, 2025). The Vagrancy Act 1824 which criminalises inherent aspects of homelessness and has impacted homeless people for more than two centuries, is scheduled to be repealed by Spring 2026, but remains in effect until that time (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government et al., 2025c).

Homelessness in the UK exemplifies systemic, structural, institutional, social, and individual reasons which interact to create housing insecurity. Historical policy changes causing a reduction in social housing and the advocating and moralising of home ownership, have strengthened class divisions, stigmatising the homeless and poor. Gentrification has contributed to challenges faced by homeless individuals by increasing housing insecurity. Media representation reproduces inequality by stereotypical and stigmatising portrayals of the homeless. Forms of capital, as well as habitus and doxa misaligning with institutional expectations, serve to restrict avenues for upward mobility and secure housing. While legislative reforms, and promised repeals of antiquated vagrancy laws are encouraging, these actions alone are not sufficient to address entrenched systemic inequality. Long-term solutions require a holistic approach which includes structural interventions, reliable funding, and a reframing of housing as a human right and not a commodity, reserved for those seen

as deserving. Examining homelessness as a reproduction of inequality, highlights the necessity for coordinated government policy, societal, and cultural interventions to confront one of the most visible forms of social disparity in the United Kingdom.

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