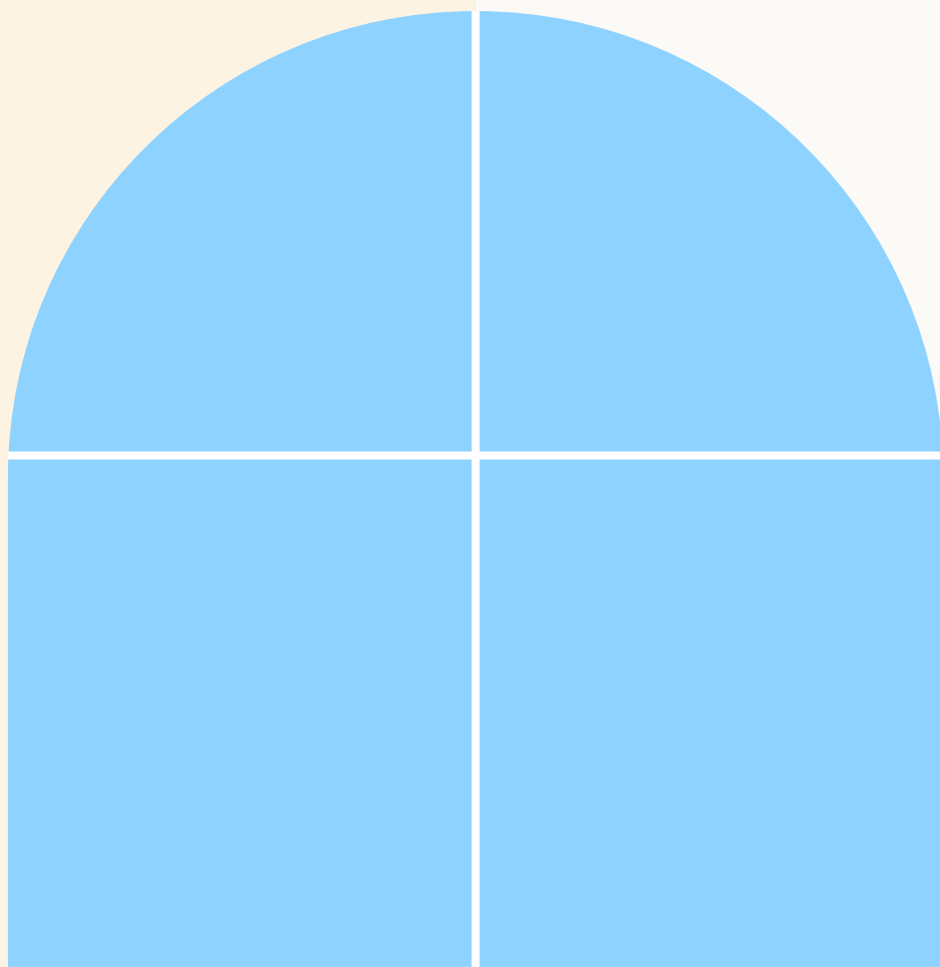


Reframing Homelessness

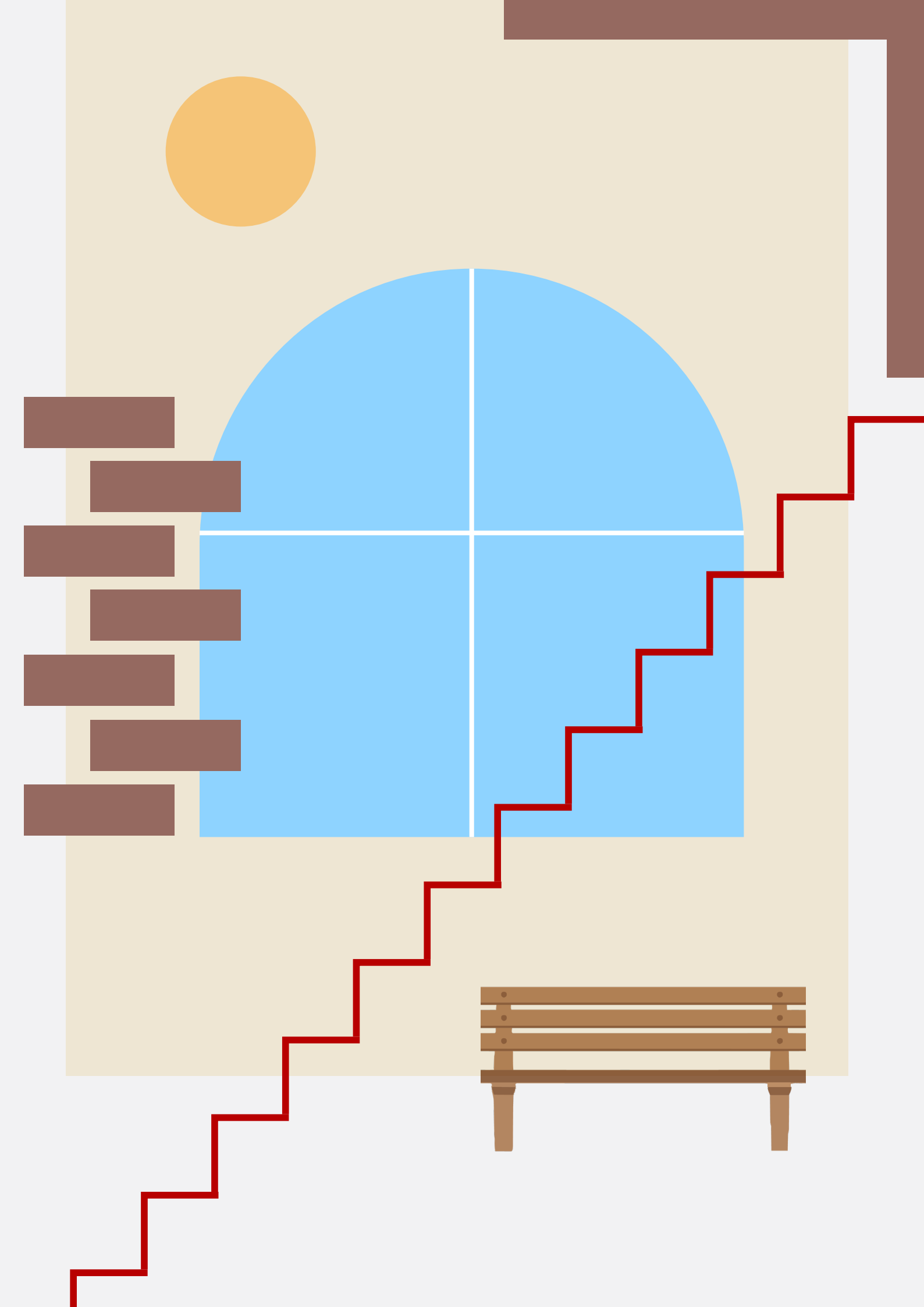


A Guide to Ethical Representation

Introduction

Images of homelessness shape public perceptions about the lives of people who are or have been homeless. It's easy to repeat visual stereotypes, such as images of people sleeping in doorways. Yet homelessness often looks very different to this, and the people who experience it are as diverse as any other group. When we repeatedly portray people as helpless or pitiful, we risk reinforcing an 'us versus them' divide that can inadvertently cause harm. Research shows that images evoking pity can make it seem as though homelessness happens to people who are completely different from the viewer.

Alternative approaches to depicting homelessness already exist. With this in mind, we've created a series of questions and prompts to encourage a more positive, respectful approach to photographing and representing homelessness. They're intended to spark ideas, not set rules. Use them as a guide, and let your creativity take the lead.



Intentions

Why are you
producing or
publishing this
image?

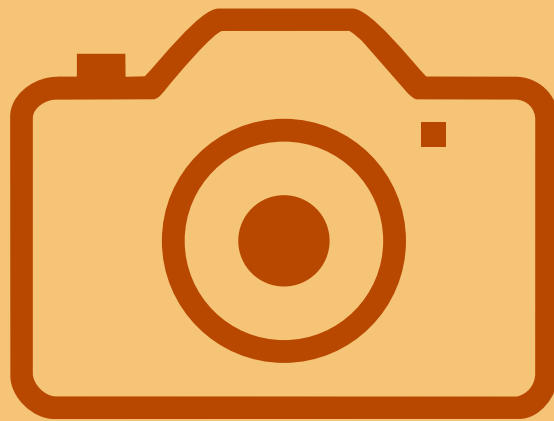


Before producing or publishing an image, take a moment to reflect on your intentions:

- **Who benefits from this image?** Think about everyone involved: the person depicted, your audience, and the individual or organization creating or sharing it.
- **What do you hope to achieve?** Are you aiming to inform, raise awareness, advocate, or tell a story?
- **Could the same goal be achieved without revealing a person's face, identity or vulnerability?** Sometimes silhouettes, hands, belongings or symbolic imagery can communicate just as powerfully.
- **Are you challenging or reinforcing stereotypes?** Consider whether the image portrays people as passive, helpless or dangerous, or as resilient and humanized.
- **Are you open about your intentions?** Sharing your goals with the person represented helps build trust and ensures they are participating knowingly.

Methods

How are you
creating this
image?

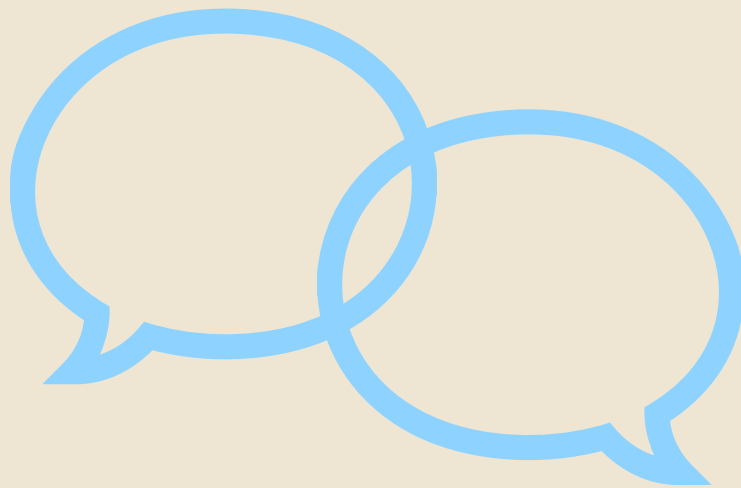


When making images, think carefully about how the process affects the people involved:

- **Are you involving the person in the process?** Collaboration can give them agency and a voice in how they are represented.
- **How are you addressing power imbalances?** Consider how your role as creator affects consent and the way someone is portrayed.
- **Do people have the space to refuse or influence participation?** Ensure they can say no or guide how they appear.
- **Have you explained the process clearly?** Make instructions accessible for people with language barriers or impairments.
- **Are you creating a safe environment for expressing discomfort?** People should feel able to raise concerns without fear of consequence.
- **Are you photographing or filming during another activity?** If so, consider how to respect the integrity of that space, such as a workshop or access to services.
- **Have you considered compensation?** Offering payment or other recognition for someone's time respects their contribution.

Consent

Has consent
been freely and
meaningfully
given?

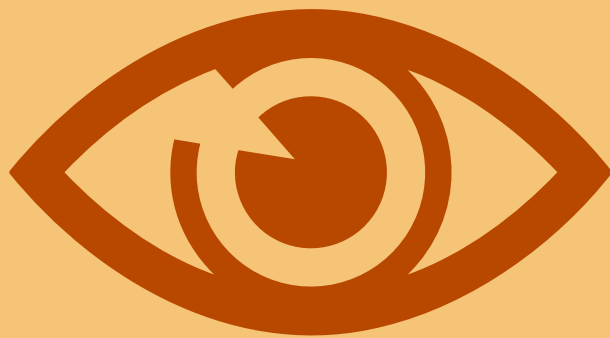


Consent is more than a simple 'yes'. It should be informed, voluntary and ongoing. When seeking consent, reflect on the following:

- **Have you explained where, why and how the image will be used?** Make sure the person fully understands the context and potential audiences.
- **Have you discussed timing?** Let them know how long the image may be publicly available and any potential future uses.
- **Can the person withdraw consent later?** Make the process for removing the image simple, clear and accessible.
- **Could the person feel pressured to consent?** Consider whether access to services, benefits, or perceived authority could influence their decision.
- **Does the power dynamic make it hard to say no?** Reflect on how your role as the creator may affect the person's comfort in refusing.
- **Have you offered alternatives?** They might prefer to be photographed from behind, partially, or not at all.
- **Will the person have final approval before the image is shared?** Give them the opportunity to review and provide feedback.
- **How will you document consent?** Keep a clear record while respecting the person's privacy.
- **Have you ensured accessibility?** Make sure the explanation and consent process can be understood by the people with language differences, literacy challenges or impairments.
- **Are you prepared to revisit consent?** Consider situations where the image might be reused or shown in a new context.

Content

What
are you
showing?

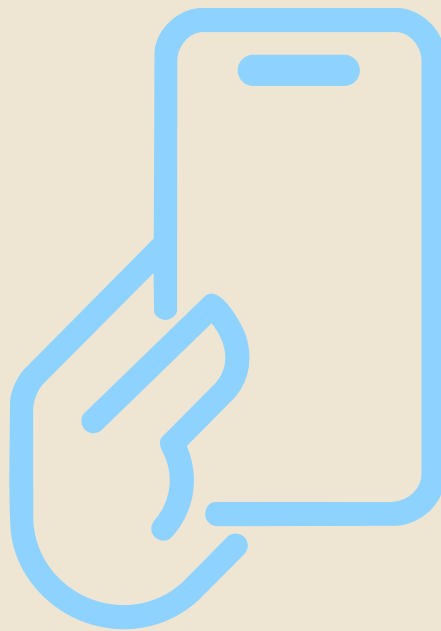


When deciding what to include in an image, think carefully about how it represents the people involved:

- **Does the image reduce the person to their experience of homelessness?** Consider ways to show aspects of their life beyond this single experience.
- **Could the subject have eye contact with the viewer?** Allowing connection can humanise and empower the person portrayed.
- **Are you showing someone in a vulnerable or distressing situation?** Reflect on whether this is necessary to convey your message.
- **Could the image be exploitative, triggering or humiliating?** Think about the potential impact on both the subject and audiences.
- **Might the person be embarrassed by this image later in life?** Consider the long-term implications of sharing it.
- **Does the image reflect dignity, agency and complexity?** Aim to portray the person as a full, multifaceted human being.
- **Are you avoiding visual clichés?** Be cautious of images that reinforce stereotypes, like people sleeping in doorways or looking pitiable or helpless.
- **Who owns the narrative communicated by this image?** Reflect on whether the story told is respectful and truthful to the person depicted.

Context and use

Where and how
will this image
appear?



When sharing or publishing an image, think carefully about the context and potential impact:

- **What message does the image convey in the context it is used?**
Consider how the surroundings, captions or accompanying content may shape interpretation.
- **Could it be misunderstood or taken out of context?** Reflect on how it might be interpreted by different audiences.
- **Will the subject see it unexpectedly?** For example, on social media, a website or a billboard. Consider how this might affect them.
- **Could sharing the image reveal the subject's location or personal details?** Think about privacy risks and how to avoid them.
- **When might it be inappropriate to show the person's face?** Consider whether partial images, silhouettes or symbolic shots could achieve the same goal.
- **Is the image being used for personal or organisational gain?** Consider how motivations might affect ethical representation.
- **Do other images, captions or articles reinforce narrow or stereotypical views of homelessness?** Reflect on how your image fits into the wider media landscape.
- **Will viewers understand the backstory and purpose of the image?** Make sure the context communicates the story clearly and accurately.
- **Are actors being used to create the image?** If so, disclose this openly to maintain transparency.

Join Forces

**Take the pledge to create ethical
images of homelessness.**

Sign up here:





Further information

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Reframing Homelessness

A Guide to Ethical Representation

Co-created with participants from the International Arts and Homelessness Summit 2025 and follow-up online workshops. **Written and compiled** by Owen Clayton, Anthony Luvera, and Rey Trombetta.

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