

# Capturing High Impact Urban Portraits

Part of the "Least of These" Series



Urban Portrait of a Homeless Man Taken in Seattle, Washington

## Introduction

Imagine yourself, camera in hand, walking through a busy metropolis. The sights, the sounds and the smells of a bustling city overwhelm your senses. People all around you are scurrying to and from work. Others are sitting in outdoor cafes enjoying lunch. You can see worn out shoppers, their hands filled with packages, moving from store to store. The city is alive with activity.

As you survey the scene, you spot an elderly man across the street sitting alone in a wheelchair. He holds a small cup out and thoughtfully watches the activity. You're amazed at how seemingly invisible he is. No one gives him a second glance. In fact people seem to be going out of their way to avoid him. As you look further you notice that this poor man has no legs and is missing part of his left hand. You can also see that he has been wearing the same clothes for quite some time.



Dodge

Have you ever considered approaching someone like this for an urban portrait? If not, why not? It's easy to fall into a rut

of photographing the same kind of stuff day in and day out. If you are a landscape or wildlife photographer, you may get up early for the sunrise and hike out to beautiful locations. Wedding photographers are all business on a bride's big day making sure to capture all the memorable moments. Sports photographers create compositions that help tell the story of how a game was won or lost. It is easy to get locked into one or two specific subsets of photography (especially if you're a professional photographer). Most of us began with a simple passion for photography. When I seriously starting taking pictures (using an old hand-me-down Canon SLR), I photographed everything in sight! My girlfriend at the time (now my wife) had to put up with me stopping every couple of minutes to take photographs. I know it drove her nuts (although she would never say so). I had no idea what I was doing, but I was passionate so I shot everything I laid my eyes on.

Shooting urban portraits is a great way to shake things up and break out of the passionless photography rut we sometimes find ourselves in. In this guide, I am going to share how to create high impact urban portraits of perfect strangers. My experience centers on photographing homeless and destitute people; however I encourage you to read with an open mind as you can apply many of the same principles photographing virtually any stranger (homeless or not) in an urban setting.

## Remember Your Safety

We can't have a discussion about approaching strangers in a city environment without first talking a bit about safety. Safety is an important part of taking urban portraits so please stick with me. Approaching strangers for portraits can come with a bit of risk – especially if you decide to photograph the destitute and individuals living on the streets. Lugging expensive camera gear around in not-so-great parts of town paints a target on your back for robbery. People who are high or intoxicated and those with mental health issues can react unpredictably. There isn't a photograph in the world worth getting hurt over.

Keep in mind that crooks are typically looking for easy targets - people not paying attention to their environment. The best thing you can do to reduce the risk of getting hurt is to take someone with you. Your field of view narrows as you begin engaging people for urban portraits. It's very easy to lose track of what's happening around you. It is impossible to look through the viewfinder and pay attention to your environment. A second person can step back, watch the overall scene and ensure that nobody surprises you from behind. If things start going side-ways during a contact on the street, your partner can call the police, run for help, or make noise to draw attention to what's happening. Your partner can also help watch your equipment.

## More on Safety

Avoid venturing into extremely isolated areas and consider taking a cellular phone with you so that you can quickly call for help. It is also a great idea to bring a whistle along so that you can easily draw attention to yourself if necessary.

Body language speaks volumes. Over 80% of communication is non-verbal. I always try to pay attention to what people are saying with their body language. People with their head down or who refuse to look at you generally don't want to be approached. Respect that and move on. I usually avoid contacting people with extreme mental health issues (e.g. talking to self, screaming at the air, etc.) and heavily intoxicated individuals. A good rule of thumb is to remember that **intoxication = unpredictability**. I am not suggesting that you never approach someone who has had a bit to drink; just be cautious of approaching people who are extremely blotto.



Fernando

I ignored this rule one day when I noticed a Hispanic man sitting alone in the middle of a secluded alley (see the images below and above). He was just finishing a 40-

ounce beer and was clearly intoxicated. Ignoring the red flags, I walked down the alley and contacted him. Within a few moments of conversation, he suddenly stood up and came within a short distance of my face. First he demanded to know if I was a cop and then asked for money. Next he reached out and firmly grabbed my right arm. I was totally alone in the alley with this guy. At one point I actually wondered if he was going to hit me with the nearly empty beer bottle he was still holding. I was able to calm him down and avoided getting hurt; however this situation could have turned very ugly. This guy was obviously very intoxicated. He was situated in a very secluded alley (where help was not readily available) and I was working alone. I should have never approached him under these circumstances.



Fernando

Safety in the field is important enough that I have condensed it into the following bullet points:

- Take a partner. Remember there is safety in numbers.
- Consider taking a cellular phone so that you call for help.
- Consider taking a whistle so that you can draw attention to yourself if necessary.
- Avoid going into extremely isolated areas.
- Avoid contacting extremely intoxicated subjects and those with extreme mental health problems.
- Pay attention to body language. Don't approach people who have their head down and those who seem to be going out of their way to avoid making eye contact with you.
- Be careful not to invade personal space during your contacts. A good rule of thumb is to stay three to five feet away from people.
- Stand bladed at 45 degrees with your feet planted shoulder width apart and your knees slightly bent. This should help keep you balanced on your feet and afford you some stability if you need to react quickly or escape.
- Make brief eye contact with the people around you (but don't stare). Let people know that you see them.

- Be aware of your surroundings.
- Listen to your intuition and move out of the area if you start feeling uncomfortable.

## The Equipment

I travel very light while working in an urban environment. I usually only bring a single DSLR and lens. Currently I am shooting most of my urban portraits with a Canon 5D and a 24-105mm lens. I pack it in a Lowe Pro shoulder bag (slung crossways around my body). Traveling light allows for quick access to my gear and makes it a snap to walk many city blocks without tiring out. Occasionally I bring a monopod if the weather is dark and gloomy (e.g. cloudy winter weather). I like to shoot tightly cropped portraits. A medium length zoom lens comes in handy for capturing close up portraits without getting right in the person's face. Another benefit of traveling light is that it won't be necessary to put your gear down while you shoot.

Generally I avoid using a flash while shooting urban portraits. This is contrary to the traditional rule of thumb of using fill flash for environmental portraits. In an urban environment a flash is usually very distracting to the person you are trying to photograph and it is possible to get high quality results using natural light. I will discuss lighting in more detail further along.

## Attire

Does your clothing matter? You bet it does. Blending into your environment is

crucial. On more than one occasion I have had a street person comment on my jacket – "Is that a North Face? That sure looks nice." It makes sense to do whatever you can to reduce class differences if you are planning to photograph the homeless and less fortunate. Walking up to a homeless person dressed in expensive clothing only serves to remind that person that they are poor. Questions and comments about your clothing make it much more difficult to establish the initial rapport that is so important. Consider dressing down a bit before going out. Instead of wearing an expensive leather coat, throw on an old work jacket. Ditch the \$200 sneakers and wear old shoes. I am not suggesting that you wear uncomfortable clothes – just pay attention to what you put on.



James

## Shutter – Aperture – ISO

The first thing I do before I start pounding the pavement is to set my camera to Aperture Priority mode and adjust my exposure for the available light. I generally choose a wide aperture such as f4 or f5.6 and try to keep my shutter speed at 1/125 or higher. Having a

slightly faster shutter speed helps reduce camera shake (since I shoot most of my images hand held) and it helps freeze the portrait. I have found that almost all of my "urban clients" look around nervously while I am shooting. If your shutter speed slips down to 1/80 or lower, you may find that a lot of your images are blurred from the movement (especially if you are using a longer focal length). Pay close attention to the lighting as it can change dramatically depending on whether you are in an alley or a more open street environment. Using a lens with a built in stabilizer or anti-shake option is a plus.



Jorge

The key to getting the right aperture/shutter speed combination is setting the ISO appropriately. Don't be afraid to raise your camera's ISO to 800 or higher. A bit of digital noise usually enhances the overall feel of street portraits anyway. It is much better to have to deal with some digital noise than to have a series of great shots completely ruined because they are blurred (as a result of using a slow shutter speed). On more than one occasion I have

deliberately under exposed a string of images by a stop or two when the ambient light has been low. This buys me extra shutter speed. Since I shoot everything in RAW format, it's a cinch to regain the exposure later on in Photoshop or Lightroom.

The histogram is a great way to keep tabs on how well exposed your images are. I shoot just about everything with the histogram preview option selected. I know that if I can keep the majority of the histogram curve between the two sidewalls, I will have most of the highlight and shadow detail to play with later on in Photoshop and Lightroom. Being able to quickly glance at the histogram and know that my exposure is correct also frees me to focus on the composition. If the dynamic range is too great, I lean toward exposing for the highlights and try to capture as much of the dark values as possible (without blowing out the shot). Plugged up shadows usually introduce extra noise and conceals crucial detail.

## Where to Start

I've captured many of my urban portraits within a five-block radius of downtown shelters. I also have a lot of luck making contacts with panhandlers in dense shopping districts. Panhandlers take up positions in areas where heavy pedestrian traffic passes by. Every city is unique. Jump on the Internet and discover where the shelters, food banks and city services are located. This should help get you pointed in the right direction.

## The Approach

There are some that advocate taking urban photographs of people from a distance or shooting off the hip in an attempt to conceal the fact that you are taking a picture of them. Some even suggest that you should just walk up to people and take the photographs you want without asking (paparazzi style). I think this extremely rude - not to mention dangerous. Admittedly there are times when a unique situation involving strangers unfolds and it makes sense to photograph it. These situations are usually observed from a distance and qualify more as a kind of photojournalism than portrait photography. For urban portrait work (as discussed in this paper), I almost always get permission first. Connecting with the person you are photographing usually translates into much better images anyway. I try to create micro-relationships with each individual I photograph (just like you would with a regular portrait client). I want to put the person at ease and capture their portrait when they are feeling the most comfortable with me taking the photographs. This is not always easy to do; however when you are successful connecting with the person, you end up with much better shots.

I have found there are two main ways to make contact with people on the street. The easiest kind of contact is one where the individual approaches you. The second type of contact is a cold approach where you identify an individual and make contact with them. This is the hardest kind of contact and requires a bit of work.

I regularly use both strategies. I will start by explaining the first approach.

## They Approach You

The simplest way to start taking urban portraits is to deliberately position yourself in places where you will be solicited by panhandlers. This is a great way to get started if you are afraid of making cold contacts with people. I can walk through several blocks of a shopping district in Seattle and get solicited for spare change multiple times. Instead of ignoring these folks, look at it as an opening.



Spare Change

Here is how a typical exchange might go:

**Panhandler**

"Can you spare some change...?"

**You**

"Sure... (drop some change in the cup) What's your name?"

**Panhandler**

"Todd"

**You**

"Todd, I am Steve." "Are you from Seattle Todd?"

### **Panhandler**

"I am originally from Chicago..."

### **You**

"Oh really, what part...?"

Obviously there are quite a few different ways a conversation like this can unfold. If you are successful, within a few minutes you will have created a rapport with the panhandler. The key to starting a conversation is having an opener. As the conversation moves along it is not too uncommon for the panhandler to ask where you are from and what you are doing. This is a great opener for telling them you're a photographer, which then leads to asking to take their photograph. Oftentimes I carry my camera in hand so that they can easily see that I am a photographer. On more than one occasion I have had panhandlers ask if I was a photographer.



Brian

Read this next paragraph carefully if you want to be successful taking urban portraits.

You have actually to care about these people! You can't look at each person you contact as another potential

photographic notch on your belt. The key to making this work is showing empathy and true concern for the person and what they are saying. You will get turned down nearly every time if you simply walk up, throw change in their cup and ask to take their picture. People want to be treated with respect and know that you care. They don't want to feel like a sideshow. Keep in mind that most homeless folks are probably already feeling pretty low. It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor. Feeling cared for and respected is a universal need everyone has. You have to approach each contact with the mindset of creating a mini relationship and showing true respect. If you are successful, the photographs will come naturally.

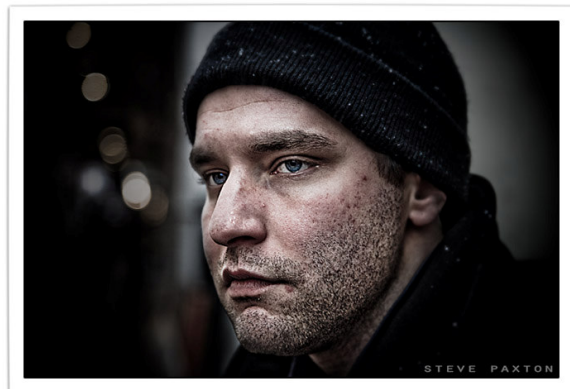
Once you feel comfortable and have established a rapport then it's appropriate to ask if you can take a few photographs. Sometimes I mention that I am a portrait photographer and offer them my business card. If they ask why I want to take their photograph, I simply explain that I enjoy taking pictures of the people I meet. Depending on the situation I might ask if they have an email address and offer to send them a few images (you might be surprised at how many homeless folks have an email address that they can check at the local library).

### **The Cold Contact**

The second approach involves making cold contacts with people on the street. This kind of contact requires more creativity. You may decide to make a cold contact when you see someone who catches your eye for some reason. This

could be an elderly person in a wheel chair, a man with an extremely wrinkled face sitting on a curb or a woman sitting alone on a park bench.

I am always drawn to people who have lots of character and emotion in their eyes and face. Whether it is happiness, sadness, despair, or fear, I love photographing people who wear their emotions on their sleeve.



Ivan

Once you spot someone you want to photograph, walk over and make contact with him or her. As I have already mentioned, you can't just walk up and ask to take pictures. Generally people are already going to be very suspicious of you (and why you are talking to them out of the blue). My main opener is usually to approach and ask for directions. This usually reduces their suspicion and is a great conversation starter. Here's how it might go:

**You**

"Hello....do you know where Washington Avenue is?"

**Street Person**

"Hmmm....I think it's two blocks that way."

**You**

"Thanks (looking around). Are you from around here?"

**Street Person**

"Why?"

**You**

"Oh...I am just a little turned around."

**Street Person**

"I am originally from Chicago."

**You**

"Have you been living in Seattle long?"

Despite it being deceptive on my part to ask for directions, I have found this is the best kind of opener for a cold contact. If you have a problem with this approach, the alternative is to simply walk up and introduce yourself. This approach tends to be much less successful. People are usually very suspicious of the, "Hi, where are you from..." or "Hi, I am Steve Paxton, what's your name..." question that seemingly comes out of nowhere. You have to ease into it. I recommend trying out a couple of different openers to see what works best for you.

## Composition and Lighting

I have talked about the two main ways I make contact with people on the street. You have to tailor your approaches so that they work for you (and that you are comfortable with). Once you get permission to take the portrait, it's time to

break out the camera and start taking photographs. Your time is going to be very limited (several minutes at the most). As I am talking to the subject, I slowly sidestep in a circle until the best light is landing on my client. As you move and talk, the person will naturally track you with their head and body. This puts you in complete control of the lighting and background. Tall buildings act as natural reflectors and often create wonderful fill lighting. Move around as you talk until you find the most ideal lighting.

Along with lighting I also pay close attention to the background. For example, I try to minimize horizontal lines cutting through the person's head and neck and other distracting elements. If the background is just too busy or distracting, bend down and shoot your portrait upward at a 45-degree angle. Remember to keep talking!

## Keep Talking

I am always asking questions as I shoot my photographs. This helps the client relax and forget that I am photographing them. I usually ask questions like how long they have been in the city, where they grew up and how they ended up living on the streets. I take a lot of photographs. I may take 50+ shots of a single person I contact in just a few minutes. I do this because I am capturing tiny little moments of that person's life as they answer my questions. I am trying to capture the micro expressions that surface a fraction of a second at a time. These micro expressions are what separate mediocre

urban portraits from good ones. Taking a lot of photographs is also an insurance policy against the blink factor (capturing shots of the person blinking) and blurred shots from movement.

If they seem interested, I may show them a couple of the images (by letting them see the LCD on the back of my camera). This can break the ice even further and allow you to shoot longer. Most people will only put up with a few minutes of you pointing a camera in their face. Don't forget to move around and shoot from different vantage points. I always shoot tightly cropped photographs; however I may back up and shoot a wider view especially when there are objects nearby that help tell the story (beer bottles, a sleeping bag, garbage, etc.).



"T"

## Money

Sometimes I hand out a dollar or two near the end of a contact. Sometimes I don't offer money and simply thank the client and move on. Every person is different. I really don't like turning my urban contacts into a quid pro quo

situation where I am paying a homeless person to photograph them.

You certainly need to take some money with you. I usually take ten dollar bills and a handful of quarters. I keep the bulk of the money in my right pocket and a single dollar bill and few quarters in my left pocket. Since I shoot with my right hand, I can quickly reach in my left pocket and scoop out a dollar bill and a few quarters. Separating the money keeps me from pulling out too many bills at once and making it appear as if I have a lot of money on me. I almost always say, "This is all I've got..." as I hand them the dollar out of my left pocket. The money part of this goes right to the heart of safety. Remember that many of these people have warrants for their arrest, criminal convictions, are registered sex offenders, are intoxicated, or have mental health issues. It is not a smart idea to advertise that you're carrying gobs of money with you. I am very low key about giving away money and try not to make it a big deal. You might be surprised how many homeless people who will allow you to photograph them without asking for money.

## Tell the Story

I like to be able to document a little bit about each person I photograph on the street. Being able to tell a little bit of their life story makes your images stronger and more interesting. It also helps your viewers connect with the person on a deeper level. All the questions you have been asking during the build up and while taking the photographs is the story. Don't let the

information go in one ear and out the other. Remember their name and some of the basic details about their life. I have a terrible memory so I try to write out some basic notes immediately after each contact. It is not a bad idea to have a pen and small notepad in your camera bag (however don't take notes during the contact).



Andrew

## Processing Your Images

Capturing urban portraits is only half the fun! Once you have captured a few shots, the next step is process the images. This is where individual style and taste really come into play. I like to desaturate my urban images and give them a gritty feel. There are lots of ways to achieve the look you are after. I encourage to you play around and experiment.

During processing you can also fine tune the lighting through basic dodging and burning. My typical workflow includes lightening the eyes, lightening shadows on the face, desaturating the color and significantly darkening the background (to make the portrait stand out a bit).

## Conclusion

Urban portrait photography is as challenging as it is rewarding. Photographing strangers is sure to stretch most people outside their comfort zone. You will learn a lot about the people you contact, but you are certain to learn even more about yourself. Load up your camera bag and hit the streets!

## About the "Least of These" Series

The "Least of These" series is an urban portrait project with the central theme based on Matthew 25:34-40. Each image uniquely captures a person who is homeless, destitute or precariously in need. My goal has always been to capture the best in each person I photograph. This series has been no exception.

## Matthew 25:34-40

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or

needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40 "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

## About the Author

Steve Paxton lives with his wife and two children in the Seattle area. Steve has been a photographer for over fifteen years. His experience ranges from wedding and portrait work to landscapes and crime scene photography. You can find more of Steve's work at [www.paxtonprints.com](http://www.paxtonprints.com) and [www.paxtonportraits.com](http://www.paxtonportraits.com).



"Can you spare some change?"