



POWER OF POP

**WHAT TV GETS
WRONG ABOUT
GETTING BY**



The **Opportunity** Agenda

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ABOUT THE OPPORTUNITY AGENDA

The Opportunity Agenda was founded in 2006 with the mission of building the national will to expand opportunity in America. Focused on moving hearts, minds, and policy over time, the organization works with social justice groups, leaders, and movements to advance solutions that expand opportunity for everyone. Through active partnerships, The Opportunity Agenda synthesizes and translates research on barriers to opportunity and corresponding solutions, uses communications and media to understand and influence public opinion, and identifies and advocates for policies that improve people's lives. To learn more about The Opportunity Agenda, go to our website at www.opportunityagenda.org.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Opportunity Agenda wishes to thank and acknowledge the many people who contributed their time, energy, and expertise to the research and writing of this report. The report was researched and written by Porshea Patterson-Hurst, Charles Sherman, Wendy Li, and Wesley Huang, with guidance and editing from Adam Luna, Julie Fisher-Rowe, Elizabeth Johnsen, and Lucy Odigie-Turley of The Opportunity Agenda. The illustrations were created by Justin Nguyen of Yellow Panda and the design and layout were completed by Lorissa Shepstone, Being Wicked. Final proofing and copy editing were conducted by Margo Harris. Special thanks to Brian Erickson, Christiaan Perez, and J. Rachel Reyes for outreach and distribution coordination. Additional thanks to Caty Borum-Chattoo of American University and Josh Gwin of Marion Polk Food Share for field knowledge.

This report and the work of The Opportunity Agenda are made possible with funding from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Ford Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The JPB Foundation, The Libra Foundation, The Marguerite Casey Foundation, The Nathan Cummings Foundation, NEO Philanthropy, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Tow Foundation, Unbound Philanthropy, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund and would not be possible without the contributions of time, treasure, and talent from our many supporters.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In The Opportunity Agenda's Power of POP research series, we explore the impacts of pop culture vis-à-vis scripted television¹ and influencers² on social issues. The subject matter we address is related to our work in economic opportunity, immigration, racial justice, and democracy. By considering the leading social issues of the time within a framework of new, values-based narrative goals, we engage in study that we hope bolsters discourse.

We are currently living through a global reckoning on workers' rights, corporate greed, and economic justice. Across the headlines, we see examples of workers, from John Deere to the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), who are organizing and striking against exploitative corporate practices that leave them unable to maintain a cost of living or receive adequate health care and workers' compensation. This developing narrative around what employment should look like in a post-COVID, worker-centered world is also being captured in the scripted works airing on television to mass appeal. In fact, one of the breakout hits of 2021, *Squid Game*, centers on a character who is traumatized by his experience in a work strike turned violent by company owners and law enforcement—reminiscent of the real-world strike of SsangYong Motor in 2009.³

As a continuation of The Opportunity Agenda's Power of POP series, the focus of this report draws from the cultural moment in its aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of the portrayals of income differences within streamed and broadcasted television shows. We engaged in thorough television content analysis by designing a codebook, examining broadcasted and streamed television programs, and analyzing the data gathered. The research outlined within this report examines the representation and dominant storylines associated with household income, quality of life, and the culture surrounding different income levels within popular television programs during the **Fall 2017 to Spring 2018** television season.

With about one in seven Americans projected to have annual family resources below the poverty threshold and the projected poverty rate in 2021 being similar to the one from 2018 (13.7%), understanding the plight of low-income households is as important as ever. Although 4.4% of people live in deep poverty in the United States, 45% of households subsist on resources no more than twice the poverty threshold. This holds true for Black and Hispanic people whose rates of poverty—18.1% and 21.9%, respectively—are nearly twice as high as their white peers. Most of these families are projected to have fallen from above to below the poverty threshold due to job loss—a major occurrence with the onset of COVID-19 in the United States.⁴ It is in this economic landscape that people look for representation in the media they consume of the issues people face every day.

45% of households subsist on resources no more than twice the poverty threshold

The television analysis in this report is based on content analysis of 105 randomly sampled television episodes from popular television shows aired on broadcast, cable, and streaming services divided into 70 episodes reflecting the gamut of shows available during the Fall 2017 to Spring 2018 season, and an additional 35 episodes reflecting low-wage workers from this same period based on online episode descriptions. More than 1,200 codes were analyzed by variables including demographic details such as race/ethnicity, gender, and income, as well as observance of lack of social safety net, use of social services, or other indicators of financial hardship. The codebook dictionary and a sample of the completed codebook are available in the addendum of this report.

This report is intended to offer advocates, activists, entertainment executives and creatives, media commentators, and media literacy promoters a more holistic understanding of the dominant media narratives while adding a strong voice to a growing canon of study on the impacts of media representation on narratives about directly impacted populations. This report also offers guidance and tips for improving the portrayal of working class and lower income families in popular entertainment and best practices for using popular culture to advance a social justice cause and engage new audiences.

¹ <https://www.opportunityagenda.org/explore/resources-publications/power-pop>

² <https://www.opportunityagenda.org/explore/insights/more-just-fad-power-cultural-influencer>

³ <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/11/squid-game-ssangyong-dragon-motor-strike-south-korea/>

⁴ <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/2021-poverty-projections>

KEY FINDINGS:

Dominant Storylines and Themes Associated with Income and/or Its Disparity

Entertainment, as exemplified by these episodes, further plays into the comparative nature of finding the affluent aspirational and the poor as unfortunate.

In the TV show *The Middle*, the Hecks family proudly boasts of their make-do spirit because of their perceived “brokenness,” constantly measuring their own lifestyle against peers such as neighbors or their daughter’s best friend. What sticks out about this dynamic is that the Hecks are solidly middle-class and live within their means. Their neighborhood boasts well-built and maintained houses—although their own is in need of renovation and repair. Their daughter’s best friend comes from a wealthy family, lending a comparison given to their situation that bears questioning who can call themselves broke, or is the term to be relative in different financial situations?

Each television show avoids discussion of the precarious nature of meeting daily expenses—such as the ability to pay for utilities, phones, food, and other essentials—for those working with a low income.

We posit that this absence contributes to the culture of poverty narrative wherein stigma associated with asking for assistance when faced with obstacles to survival leads those impacted to be ashamed for shortcomings associated with the “bootstrap” narrative rather than holding the systems that deny them access to adequate housing or food.

Health care is the leading issue used by shows within the study to garner discussions about how low-wage workers are impacted by their lack of safety net.

Regardless of whether white or Black, Indigenous, People Of Color (BIPOC) characters drive the story, it’s their personal flaws—not societal ones—that land them in financially precarious circumstances.

Fall from grace for white characters as exemplified by CBS’s *Mom* and Showtime’s *Shameless*

Lack of bootstraps for BIPOC characters as presumed in NBC’s *Superstore*

Working Class and Lower Income Character Representation

Characters from the 2017–2018 season of television in the United States were significantly less likely to represent household incomes lower than \$41,000 than any higher income.

Low-wage workers tend to be centered as lead characters in comedic television shows, but not as much in other genres.

There is an overrepresentation of white and upper-middle to high-income characters that leaves a void in representation for BIPOC families of low means.

This is pressing in a nation consistently moving toward greater economic disparity, which is felt most drastically by the most marginalized.

RECOMMENDATIONS

If you are creating messages about economic justice issues in your advocacy work...

Know that many of your audiences are viewing incomplete and unbalanced portrayals of people with low incomes. And there are almost no portrayals of people experiencing poverty. The narratives available to audiences reveal few solutions to economic instability or poverty. At the same time, audiences are seeing that most people's basic needs are being met with a few scattered examples of true need. It is therefore important to start communications about economic justice with some context and big-picture thinking. Without doing so, we risk our solutions seeming unnecessary or even just strange.

Fill in the gaps by providing a larger vision of what the world could look like if we had real solutions in place. Show how that world would better align with your audience's core values. They are not seeing much of this type of expansive thinking in current TV, so we can step in and provide this big picture thinking, embracing themes like abundance, community, shared responsibility, and opportunity for all.

Frame the problem systemically. It is important to link personal stories to widespread problems, point to the systemic cause, and then move to the systemic solution. Fictional portrayals of any issue are almost always going to focus on an individual character. Watching those portrayals, as well as typical media coverage, can lead audiences to a very individualistic mindset that assumes if the problem is with the individual, so is the solution. By expanding audience's understanding of the problem and linking a character's challenge to the many other people experiencing that challenge, we can move them to understand the systemic solutions better.

Center solutions. None of the shows we sampled portrayed systemic solutions, such as how safety net programs can alleviate economic instability, how unions protect workers, or how paid family and medical leave make it possible for families to provide for their children. Leveraging storylines can help to spotlight problems, but economic justice communicators will need to bring the solutions to the table. When solutions are left out, audiences are likely to fall into the trap of thinking that poverty, income disparities, and other barriers to economic justice are inevitable.

If you want to leverage popular television to highlight economic justice issues...

Use storylines and characters to make a point. While they are few and far between—so much so that many did not show up in our sample—some portrayals of economic injustice and solutions to it do exist. Later seasons of *Superstore* focused on issues such as paid family and medical leave, healthcare expenses, and labor organizing, for instance. Talking about these issues through the lens of popular TV offers an opportunity to showcase solutions in a more interesting and unexpected way than fact sheets or tweets about legislation can.

It's also true that centering popular characters' experiences can help build an emotional understanding and connection to your issue. Research has shown that we develop parasocial relationships with characters we regularly watch on television, identifying them (in our brains) as friends of sorts. So, talking to some audiences about the economic experiences of Amy from *Superstore*, for instance, could help them see those experiences in a new light and likely with more empathy. As with any individual storytelling, however, doing this needs to be balanced with other kinds of stories that broaden the focus so that audiences aren't just focused on that individual's plight, strengths, and weaknesses.

Highlight shows that showcase themes like community care, abundance, and even joy, in addition to those that provide portrayals of economic injustice. While more recent releases such as Netflix's *Maid* and *Squid Game* provide some of the low-income character representation we would like to see more of, audience appreciation for *Ted Lasso*—a show equally about rich people and being a person who cares for others—shows that audiences are primed for more representation of community care. By building upon the abundance narrative over scarcity, creators can build worlds that show how communities support their own with love, care, and joy, bringing this positive energy into their advocacy for a better life for everyone. ABC's upcoming television show *Abbott Elementary* appears to be a potential example of what the integration of community care, Black joy, and advocacy for better financial support can look like on television.

Monitor shows that offer opportunities to spark conversation about income inequality or instability. To keep up with opportunities to leverage relevant plotlines, formally select a few shows that appeal to your target audience and follow them. Watching whole episodes is not even necessary as there are many recaps available online on sites such as Vulture, EW online, and ShowSnob.

Choose your timing carefully. On the one hand, things move quickly online and issues come in and out of focus at a rapid pace. It is typically a good idea to respond within a 48-hour window for simple social media engagement and within a week for more detailed media pieces. On the other hand, social media engagement with television content spikes significantly at certain points within a show's schedule. For series that consistently engage in narratives about poverty and economic instability, look for opportunities such as premieres and finales. Significant episodes and major award shows also draw significant audiences. Use these moments to live tweet, host a Twitter chat, or host an online watch party.

If you want to influence portrayals of income instability and poverty...

Give positive reinforcement for good portrayals. This could be as simple as encouraging fans to thank show writers and networks for an authentic character or storyline via social media. Or, you could create an award to the networks or individuals using their platforms to tell compelling stories about people with low incomes or that promote a social justice narrative. Positive reinforcement is a good place to start to both encourage good storytelling and lay the foundation for relationships with creators.

Create your own hashtags or memes to draw attention to representations. For example, #StarringJohnCho memes went viral as people photoshopped John Cho into famous movie posters that starred white male actors, creatively criticizing the lack of diversity in Hollywood. The #OscarsSoWhite hashtag was started by April Reign to raise the same issue and sparked a national debate that resulted in changes in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Engage progressive fandoms. Find the online communities of popular shows where fans are already gathering to talk about them. Create toolkits or messaging guides around a particular series to spark fan engagement.

Encourage networks to engage with and hire people who have experienced economic instability. We need more stories centered on low-income characters written by people who have lived through poverty for prolonged periods. This is particularly true for houseless representation and should be a component for any creative work related to this issue, whether it is a television program or advocacy campaign. Directly affected writers can bring their lived experiences to light in a way that helps us move from a voyeuristic, socially distanced interaction to one of better relatability and nuanced understanding. After all, if the producers and writers of *Modern Family* and *Maid* can bring their personal issues into scriptwriting, why can the same not become true for character portrayals unseen in other recent television shows?

Build relationships with script writers, producers, and show runners. Introduce script writers, producers, and show runners to stories that not only are personal and compelling but also are diverse and affirmative and more fully depict the experience of people living in economic instability. Note that to be effective, this strategy may require more significant long-term investments in both time and resources.

If you want to add positive portrayals to the mix...

Rewrite shows or plots to show how they could tell a fuller story of economic insecurity and what we can all do about it. You can use social media to spread your ideas about what popular TV could look like in this regard. To do this, put yourself in the shoes of a Hollywood writer who wanted to ethically depict characters experiencing poverty and imagine what they would come up with. You can also engage in a “what if?” exercise online, inviting your audience to help fill in how a show could depict the low-income experience more realistically and compassionately. Or suggest a whole new TV show that would accurately show the causes and solutions to poverty.

Partner with artists and creatives to tell new stories about economic instability and poverty. Artists should be included in strategic conversations early because their perspectives often lead to out-of-the-box innovations. Just like graphic designers, researchers, or anyone else with a specialized skillset you wouldn’t ask to work for free, keep in mind that artists should also be paid. Consider budgeting ahead of time to be able to include their talents.

Produce your own content. Creating your own content is now more accessible than ever. Creatives with limited resources are making use of content-sharing platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and SoundCloud and crowdsourcing sites like Kickstarter to launch independent projects and tell otherwise untold stories. Videos, web series, and podcasts are within reach, although we recommend partnering with a creative that is skilled at storytelling in your chosen format to maximize the impact.

If you want to help audiences become educated consumers of entertainment and other media...

Organize watch parties and discussion groups. Assemble around helpful, harmful, and nuanced portrayals.

Provide guides. Develop study guides and curricula that help support young people to become more educated consumers of entertainment and other media.

Make your organization a resource. Offer cultural critiques of select shows on a regular basis. Pitch yourself as a resource to media who cover pop culture and are interested in how portrayals interact with real-life experiences.

METHODOLOGY

TELEVISION CONTENT ANALYSIS

The television analysis in this report is based on content analysis of 105 randomly sampled television episodes from popular television shows aired on broadcast, cable, and streaming services divided into 70 episodes reflecting the gamut of shows available during the Fall 2017 to Spring 2018 season and an additional 35 episodes reflecting low-wage workers from this same period.

For the purpose of this study, popular television shows were defined as shows that attracted a large general audience when originally aired on broadcast and cable networks in the United States and/or shows that were ranked high on Parrot Analytics’—the singular source compiling international demand for streaming platforms—*The Global Television Demand Report: Full Year*

2018.⁵ In an effort to better capture these emergent consumer habits, our population of popular television shows was generated using a combination of traditional rating metrics from consumer habits research firm Nielsen⁶ and viewership measurements compiled in the Global Television Demand Report.

After compiling a sample reflective of the most in-demand shows, we utilized the Microsoft Excel function `RANDBETWEEN` to select the first 40 episodes. To remain consistent in the manner of sample selection within the Power of POP series, we made use of Research Randomizer, an online random sampling tool, to generate a random number sequence to the remaining episodes for in-depth content analysis.

SAMPLE

The 105 episodes included in our random sample include 44 comedies, 15 action shows, 16 dramas, 14 crime shows, six comedy-dramas, three science-fiction shows, two mysteries, two horror-dramas, one action drama, one reality television show, and one comedic crime drama. Forty-one shows aired on broadcast television (CBS, ABC, NBC, Fox, and CW), two were aired on cable television (AMC and Showtime), and 11 originally aired on streaming services (Amazon Prime, CBS All Access, Hulu, and Netflix).

Part of the overall sample includes 35 episodes selected based on the marketing of certain shows portraying the experiences of low-wage to working-class characters. A brief list of these shows was compiled, and the randomizer tool mentioned above selected episodes from the following programs: *Bob’s Burgers*, *Mom*, *On My Block*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *Roseanne*, *Shameless*, *Sneaky Pete*, *Speechless*, *Superior Donuts*, *Superstore*, and *The Middle*.

CODING & TERMINOLOGY

To ensure inter-coder reliability,⁷ the coding team created and then trained using a project codebook (see Appendix I), which established guidelines for the specific episodic and character variables to be analyzed. The codebook includes 12 episode variables, including genre, tone, and depiction of low-income lifestyle, and 27 character variables used to identify the likely income of a character. To ensure more accurate character counts per episode, we made use of both coder notes and IMDb databases.

In the coding of episodes, a low-income character was defined as any person working in a position whose pay fell within Pew Research Center’s definition for low-wage work (below or at \$40,100 per year).⁸ Middle-income characters were defined as those who made between \$41,000 and \$120,400 per year, and high-income characters earned more than \$120,400 per year. Using Glassdoor, coders used character job roles and location to define their yearly income expectancy.

⁵ <https://insights.parrotanalytics.com/svod-demand-market-share-2018>

⁶ <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/05/most-watched-tv-shows-2017-2018-season-roseanne-this-is-us-walking-dead-1201968306/>

⁷ As noted by Matthew Lombard and colleagues, inter-coder reliability describes the “extent to which independent coders evaluate a characteristic of a message or artifact and reach the same conclusion.” Inter-coder reliability is a central part of content analysis and helps to control for coding accuracy and the quality of findings. See: Lombard, Matthew, J. Snyder-Duch, and C. C. Bracken. “Inter-coder reliability.” 2010. Retrieved April 3, 2017.

⁸ <https://money.usnews.com/money/personal-finance/family-finance/articles/where-do-i-fall-in-the-american-economic-class-system>

In addition to the wage observation, the following qualitative criteria were used to identify characters working for low wages:

An explicit reference was made to a character's low-income or working-class status in the context of the show or storyline.

Particular social markers were used by show creators to implicitly signify low-income characters. Signifiers identified include poor or insufficient housing, food insecurity or scarcity, lack of social safety net when confronting money insecurity, and dependence on social programs.

LIMITATIONS

The goal of this research is to provide insights into patterns of representation in popular television shows and the potential use of these representations to mobilize audiences. As such, this research makes use of both qualitative and quantitative content analysis methods. However, because of the relatively small sample size compared to the overall population, it is important to note limitations in the generalizability of our research findings. In future studies, we aim to analyze a larger sample size, including a survey of the impact of these representations on the directly impacted.

Because streaming platforms are constantly changing contracts and provision of different TV series, we are only able to document the streaming services utilized in our development of the study. For instance, while *Superior Donuts* may be available on the Paramount Network in 2021, we notated usage of Amazon Prime to gain access to the episode during the timeline of our study within the codebook.

Episodes included in this study were the result of random selection, which means background information about show premise or characters was not strictly observed. Therefore, some of the information collected may miss details that only long-time consumers of a program would know. Where possible, the coders relied on search engines for each program to clarify details like job titles during the season, utilizing fan encyclopedia websites when necessary. All levels of education not stipulated on the screen were instead determined by minimum job requirements.

The goal of this research is to provide insights into patterns of representation in popular television shows and the potential use of these representations to mobilize audiences.

TABLE 1: SAMPLED PRIME-TIME AND ON-DEMAND TELEVISION SHOWS

	SHOW TITLE	NETWORK	SEASON	EPISODE	AIR DATE
1	13 Reasons Why	Netflix	2	4	May 18, 2018
2	911	Fox	1	2	January 10, 2018
3	American Housewife	ABC	2	4	October 18, 2017
4	American Housewife	ABC	2	7	November 15, 2017
5	Black-ish	ABC	4	5	October 31, 2017
6	Blue Bloods	CBS	8	12	January 12, 2018
7	Bob's Burgers+	Fox	8	4	November 5, 2017
8	Bob's Burgers+	Fox	8	5	November 19, 2017
9	Bob's Burgers	Fox	8	10	March 18, 2018
10	Bob's Burgers+	Fox	8	11	March 25, 2018
11	Bob's Burgers+	Fox	8	15	April 22, 2018
12	Bosch	Amazon Prime	4	5	April 13, 2018
13	Castle Rock	Hulu	1	1	July 25, 2018
14	Chicago Fire	NBC	6	9	January 18, 2018
15	Chicago Med	NBC	3	11	March 6, 2018
16	Chicago PD	NBC	5	2	October 4, 2017
17	Chicago PD	NBC	5	8	November 29, 2017
18	Chicago PD	NBC	5	17	March 14, 2018
19	Code Black	CBS	3	8	June 13, 2018
20	Criminal Minds	CBS	13	19	April 4, 2018
21	Dark	Netflix	1	2	December 1, 2017
22	Dark	Netflix	1	5	December 1, 2017
23	Designated Survivor	ABC	2	21	May 9, 2018
24	Empire	Fox	4	6	November 15, 2017
25	Grey's Anatomy	ABC	14	17	March 29, 2018
26	Hawaii Five-O	CBS	8	21	April 20, 2018
27	Iron Fist	Netflix	2	5	September 7, 2018
28	Iron Fist	Netflix	2	6	September 7, 2018
29	Kevin Can Wait	CBS	2	20	March 26, 2018
30	Law & Order: SVU	NBC	19	23	May 23, 2018
31	Lethal Weapon	Fox	2	9	December 5, 2017
32	Lethal Weapon	Fox	2	19	April 17, 2018
33	Life in Pieces	CBS	3	6	December 7, 2017
34	Life in Pieces	CBS	3	18	April 19, 2018
35	Lost in Space	Netflix	1	9	April 13, 2018
36	MacGyver	CBS	2	13	January 12, 2018
37	MacGyver	CBS	2	23	May 4, 2018
38	Marvel's Daredevil	Netflix	3	9	October 19, 2018
39	Modern Family	ABC	9	7	November 15, 2017
40	Modern Family	ABC	9	13	January 17, 2018
41	Mom+	CBS	5	6	December 7, 2017
42	Mom+	CBS	5	8	December 21, 2017
43	Mom	CBS	5	9	January 4, 2018
44	Mom	CBS	5	19	April 26, 2018

	SHOW TITLE	NETWORK	SEASON	EPISODE	AIR DATE
45	NCIS	CBS	15	16	March 6, 2018
46	NCIS: New Orleans	CBS	4	21	May 1, 2018
47	On My Block+	Netflix	1	1	March 16, 2018
48	On My Block+	Netflix	1	10	March 16, 2018
49	Orange Is the New Black+	Netflix	6	3	July 27, 2018
50	Riverdale	CW	2	6	November 15, 2017
51	Riverdale	CW	2	15	March 14, 2018
52	Riverdale	CW	2	16	March 21, 2018
53	Roseanne+	NBC	10	8	May 15, 2018
54	Scandal	ABC	7	3	October 19, 2017
55	Scandal	ABC	7	6	January 18, 2018
56	Scandal	ABC	7	18	April 19, 2018
57	Scorpion	CBS	4	2	October 2, 2017
58	Seal Team	CBS	1	11	January 10, 2018
59	Seal Team	CBS	1	13	January 31, 2018
60	Seal Team	CBS	1	14	February 28, 2018
61	Shameless+	Showtime	8	4	November 26, 2017
62	Shameless+	Showtime	8	8	December 31, 2017
63	Shameless+	Showtime	8	11	January 21, 2018
64	Shameless+	Showtime	8	12	January 28, 2018
65	Sneaky Pete	Amazon Prime	2	2	March 9, 2018
66	Sneaky Pete+	Amazon Prime	2	3	March 9, 2018
67	Sneaky Pete+	Amazon Prime	2	5	March 9, 2018
68	Speechless+	ABC	2	5	October 25, 2017
69	Speechless+	ABC	2	6	November 1, 2017
70	Speechless	ABC	2	8	November 29, 2017
71	Speechless+	ABC	2	13	January 17, 2018
72	Speechless	ABC	2	16	March 14, 2018
73	Star Trek: Discovery	CBS All Access	1	4	October 8, 2017
74	Star Trek: Discovery	CBS All Access	1	10	January 7, 2018
75	Station 19	ABC	1	3	March 29, 2018
76	Superior Donuts+	CBS	2	1	October 30, 2017
77	Superior Donuts+	CBS	2	18	April 16, 2018
78	Superior Donuts+	CBS	2	19	April 30, 2018
79	Superstore+	NBC	3	2	October 5, 2017
80	Superstore+	NBC	3	3	October 12, 2017
81	Superstore+	NBC	3	6	November 2, 2017
82	Superstore+	NBC	3	13	March 1, 2018
83	Superstore+	NBC	3	15	March 15, 2018
84	Superstore	NBC	3	19	April 12, 2018
85	Superstore+	NBC	3	20	April 19, 2018
86	Superstore+	NBC	3	22	May 3, 2018
87	The Big Bang Theory	CBS	11	6	November 2, 2017
88	The Big Bang Theory	CBS	11	7	November 9, 2017
89	The Big Bang Theory	CBS	11	21	April 19, 2018
90	The Blacklist	NBC	5	17	April 4, 2018

	SHOW TITLE	NETWORK	SEASON	EPISODE	AIR DATE
91	The Blacklist	NBC	5	20	May 2, 2018
92	The Crossing	ABC	1	2	April 9, 2018
93	The Flash	CW	4	7	November 21, 2017
94	The Flash	CW	4	9	December 5, 2017
95	The Gifted	Fox	1	9	December 4, 2017
96	The Middle+	ABC	9	2	October 10, 2017
97	The Middle+	ABC	9	5	October 31, 2017
98	The Middle+	ABC	9	7	November 14, 2017
99	The Middle+	ABC	9	13	January 16, 2018
100	The Middle+	ABC	9	14	February 6, 2018
101	The Middle+	ABC	9	16	March 13, 2018
102	The Middle	ABC	9	21	May 8, 2018
103	The Walking Dead	AMC	8	15	April 8, 2018
104	This Is Us	NBC	2	9	November 21, 2017
105	Will and Grace	NBC	9	11	February 1, 2018

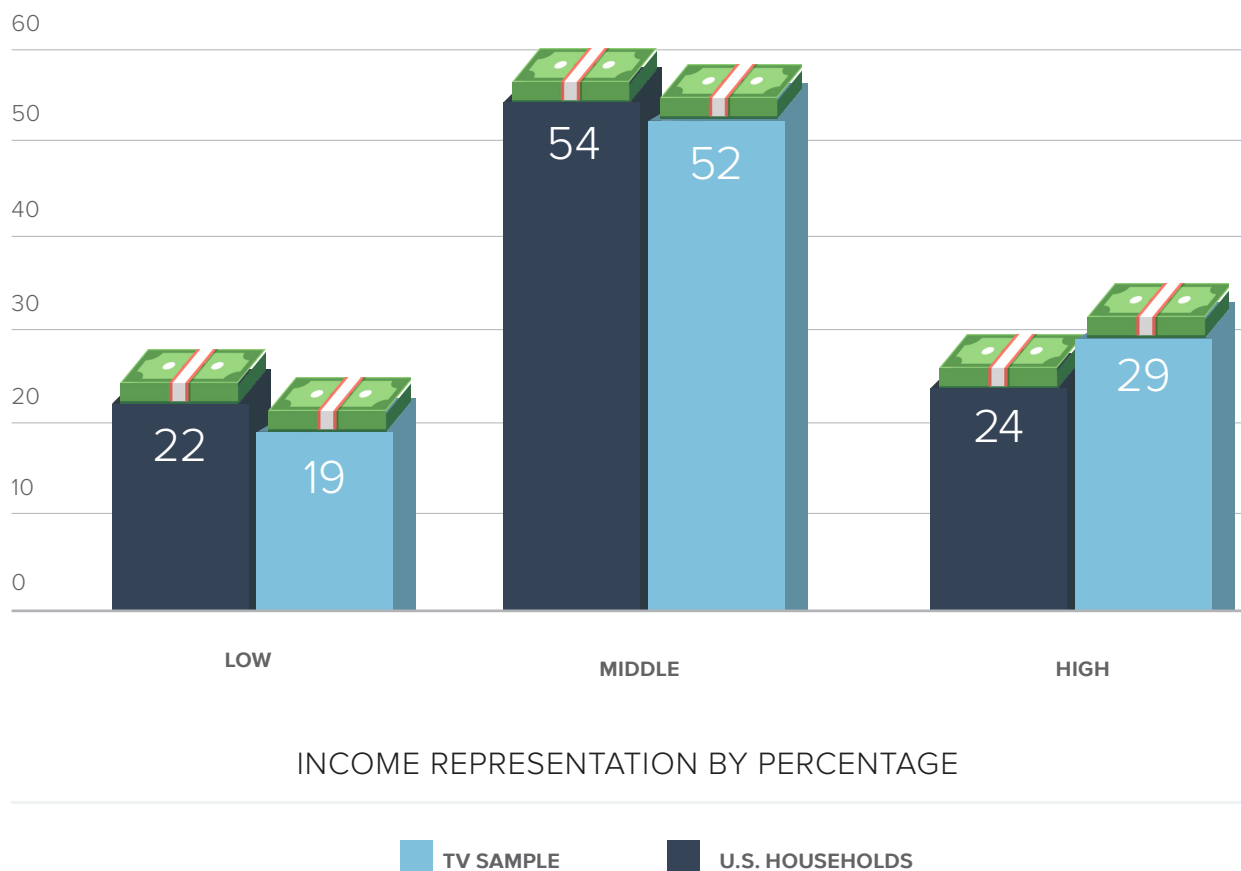
+DESIGNATES AN EPISODE THAT WAS PART OF OUR SELECT SAMPLE OF TV SHOWS
DEPICTING LOW-WAGE WORKERS AND HOUSEHOLDS.



CHARACTER REPRESENTATION

FREQUENCY OF LOW-INCOME CHARACTER REPRESENTATION

With the median U.S. household income in 2017 being \$62,626 and more than 50% of the U.S. population falling below or at this income, we hypothesized that a significant amount of television episodes would reflect this level of income distribution. However, in our analysis of more than 100 randomly selected TV episodes from the 2017–2018 season, we found that the lower brackets of income were underrepresented in favor of overrepresentation of middle to upper-middle income households.⁹



⁹ Explore this in greater detail within, "Breaking Down Portrayed Income," of this report.

While there was an abundance of representation for middle-income individuals within our sample (indeed, most characters in this study represent this social stratum at 54%), we found that most of the characters from our sample fell on the higher side of the middle-class range, which includes those making incomes from \$41K to \$120K.¹⁰

Within the select sample of 35 episodes specifically centered on low- and lower-middle wage workers, characters held a range of low-paying job roles, including handyman, health inspector, mechanic, speech aide, bail bonds person, server, and big box store associate. A not insignificant amount of the job roles captured had a pattern of being elevated in pay based on the minimum level of education required to fill the job role. However, investigator and detective pay, in particular, seemed to have no cumulative tie to higher education requirements and was the most consistent job role within the dataset to be ascribed a level of pay within the \$100K+ pay range.

This level of overrepresentation is counterintuitive to the trending issue of wealth disparity, wherein the middle class is shrinking in favor of a wider gap between low-income households and upper-income families.¹¹

CHARACTERS QUALIFIED
AS LOW INCOME

10% AFAB
characters

11% AMAB
characters

CHARACTERS QUALIFIED
AS MIDDLE INCOME

21% AFAB
characters

31% AMAB
characters

CHARACTERS QUALIFIED
AS HIGH INCOME

10% AFAB
characters

13% AMAB
characters

GENDER* REPRESENTATION BY INCOME

*U.S. population by gender is still measured in binary—male or female—without any other categorical representation in U.S. Census data. The gender breakdown for the U.S. remains approximately 50% for both assigned genders. More details about differences in pay in 2018 can be found here: <https://dqydj.com/2018-income-by-sex/>

AFAB = Assigned Female at Birth, **AMAB** = Assigned Male at Birth

¹⁰ Explore this in greater detail within, “Breaking Down Portrayed Income,” of this report.
¹¹ Explore this in greater detail within, “Breaking Down Portrayed Income,” of this report.

No significant disparity among income level was found within demographics. Actors with perceived male – Assigned Male at Birth (AMAB) - or female gender assignment at birth (AFAB)¹² had near equal representation within each income level. AFAB characters made up approximately 42% of the characters studied, whereas AMAB represent 54%.¹³ With a ratio of 3:4 where for every three AFAB characters there are four AMAB characters, representation is relatively constant across the board. That is not to say that the $\pm 6\%$ of characters are not indicative for change in this area. Within an entire sample of more than 1,200 codes, there are only two examples of gender nonbinary characters and there is still much to be done on better inclusion of AFAB characters as a whole.

Relative to income representation, 10% of AFAB characters qualified as low income to AMAB's 11%. Middle income has a greater difference in gender disparity, with AFAB characters yielding on 21% to AMAB characters 31%. Parity for high-income characters shows AFAB characters make up 10% of these characters, while AMAB characters represent 13% of those observed.

Similar relationships can be found in racial representation within the study, with the caveat that there was absolutely no representation of Indigenous American or Native characters within the episodes watched.¹⁴ White characters make up the majority of character representation, consisting of 65% of characters in the study. Meanwhile, Asian (5%), Black (16%), Hispanic (6%), and Other (6%) occupy significantly less space within the shows sampled. For additional details about this dynamic and the level of representation within key vs. recurring roles, please see Breaking Down Portrayed Income.



Within an entire sample of more than 1,200 codes, there are only two examples of gender nonbinary characters and there is still much to be done on better inclusion of AFAB characters as a whole.

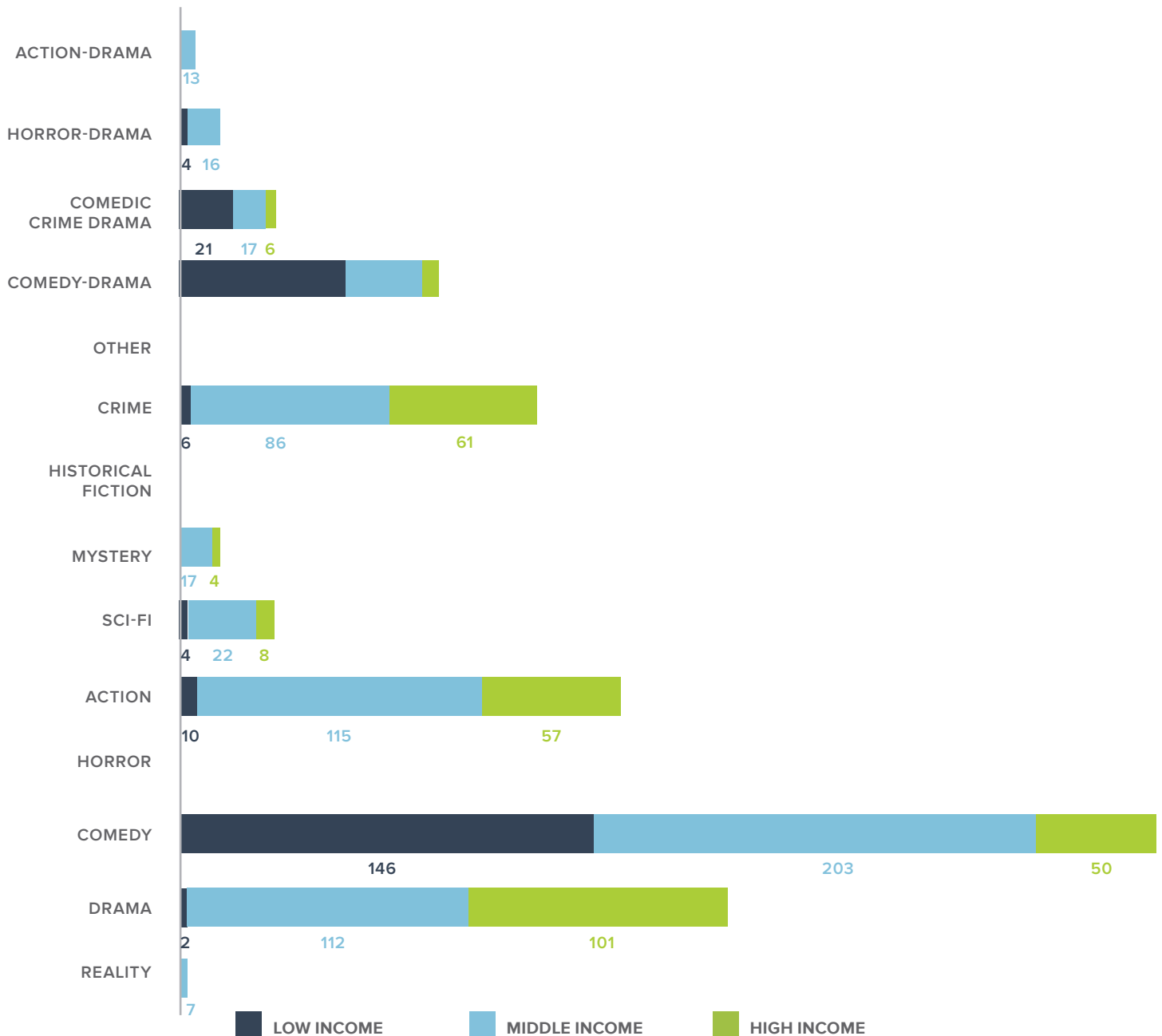
¹² These terms used to best encapsulate gender nonbinary individuals and those with undisclosed gender designation and reflect the ways genders exist beyond binary observation.

¹³ The 4% not accounted for here represent missing data within the dataset.

¹⁴ At least none of the characters identified themselves as such.

DOMINANT STORYLINES & THEMES

This section provides an overview of the dominant genres, storylines, and themes associated with low-income characters and the lifestyles of characters making low wages more broadly. As the graph below attests, character representation among those making this level of income is not widely covered in most genres. One genre does reign supreme, however, dominating representation of low-wage workers and their strife. That genre? Comedy.



CHARACTER INCOME BY GENRE

As a quote attributed to Mindy Greenstein goes: “Comedy is not the opposite of darkness, but its natural bedfellow. Pain makes laughter necessary; laughter makes pain tolerable.”

This concept seems to generate a great deal of steam within the television industry, as each of the shows focused on characters receiving low income within this study fall under the comedy genre—51 out of the 105 episodes in this sample are some form of comedy. Even the grittier, cross-genre (i.e., critically listed as comedy-dramas) shows like *On My Block*, *Orange Is the New Black*, and *Shameless* make sure to include the absurd and darkly comedic sides of their stories in each episode. For instance, in the *Shameless* episode “A Gallagher Pedicure,” Debbie Gallagher suffers a foot injury while training as a welder. Because she is a student without healthcare coverage and used to less ethical work-arounds to major issues in her life, she asks her middle school-aged brother to ply off the dead toes as she has no means to afford the surgery the doctor told her she needed.

In fact, most of the examples we found of characters confronting an issue without enough money to cover a direct need centered around medical care. On the “Health Fund” episode of *Superstore*, the health concerns of various staff members are confronted when Mateo discusses his inability to see a doctor for his ear infection due to a lack of health coverage and his undocumented status. He, too, resorts to using nonmedical means of recovery, despite the mutual aid fund concept that floats around during the episode. The episode ends by touching upon the real-world similarity to Walmart’s infamous canned food drive for its own employees¹⁵ by having Mateo’s co-workers chip in one hundred dollars for a cure. Yet even this show of goodwill is twisted when he announces that he will instead use it to purchase a bag, possibly highlighting the fickleness of capitalistic interest versus self-care, as one hundred dollars is likely to cover more expense for a low-end designer bag than it ever would in the costs of healthcare coverage.

THEME: BROKE CULTURE

Comparative experiences between keeping up appearances and satisfying an actual need is yet another storyline that occurs in many of the episodes that cover low- or low-middle income characters. Episodes “Please Don’t Feed the Hecks” and “Thanksgiving IX” of *The Middle* show the upwardly mobile Hecks family working through their moments of “brokenness” despite generating enough household income to have sent two of their children to college. In “Please Don’t Feed the Hecks,” Sue, a sophomore in college, and her best friend/roommate Lexie are forced to live in Lexie’s car for a few nights due to the people they’d sublet their apartment to during the summer renting their place out as an Airbnb. They are stymied from booting the Airbnb renter out themselves because Sue is conflicted about getting into the good graces of the professor who is renting their place. By the end of the episode, they are back in their apartment and their brief experience with houselessness is little more than an anecdote.

The Hecks family continues to show that their proximity to being broke is relative in the “Thanksgiving IX” of *The Middle*. At the beginning of this episode the father, Mike, disputes a charge that he later finds out was his wife treating herself to a coffee. When the company shuts down usage of the card because of the claim, the family trip to a relative’s house for the holiday is put into turmoil. They run out of gas on the drive to the relative’s house and have no cash or other means to pay for or borrow the money they need to return to the road without the credit card they usually rely on. It is by their daughter Sue’s ethically unclear ingenuity to take money from the water fountain of a nearby mall that they are able to get on the road again.

By the end of the episode, they are back in their apartment and their brief experience with houselessness is little more than an anecdote.

¹⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rickungar/2013/11/18/walmart-store-holding-thanksgiving-charity-food-drive-for-its-own-employees/?sh=29172af32ee5>

Outside of these circumstances, we ran into no storylines centered around characters struggling for an immediate need. As with the cases exemplified by *The Middle*, being broke is often related to the level of means available to any character at any given period of time rather than a fear of having actual utilities or other needs cut off. In fact, we found few episodes even mentioned a concern for food or shelter. When adjusting for the household income, we find that each parent—Frankie and Mike—bring in around \$65,000 annually, which is later upgraded when Mike receives a promotion toward the end of the series, now making \$74,975—an estimate we deduced from Glassdoor averages for this job title in the character’s home location. This is in addition to knowledge that they could afford sending their first child to college and business school and sell ownership in a family business to pay for their second child’s college tuition. Their first child, Axl, is able to depend on the safety net of his family such that while he lives with his parents, he goes from making \$41,600 as a bus driver in episode 2 of their final season to \$49,463 as an entry-level plumbing supply salesperson in episode 21. Not only does he have the safety net of living with his parents—albeit in cramped circumstances—but he also is able to pursue work in his field of choice within his first 6 months out of school without fear of being houseless or unable to pay for necessities.

The fact that the Hecks family still sees themselves as broke despite showing all indication of maintaining a lifestyle commiserate with their cost of living bears questioning of the concept of “brokenness” and who truly meets it.

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THEME: WORTH

As discourse around wages and how people find themselves on the various rungs of the class ladder persist in society, many of the stories in our study that followed characters living within the low to low-middle rungs tend to explain why their pay does or does not reflect their actual “worth” as humans.

For the Gallagher family of *Shameless*, they are making the best of a hopeless situation as children of a conman and an addict living in a home falling apart in South Side, Chicago. The siblings often endure dehumanizing situations that limit their self-worth, such as an instance in “Gallagher Pedicure” where Debbie Gallagher waits in a dingy basement line with her toddler in tow to pick up a mismatched box of food at a local food pantry. They also resort to crafty means because they have learned not to trust in good from the world yet strive to remain good at heart so that they are at least morally superior to their unscrupulous father. Similar to their real-world counterparts, the Gallaghers hold distaste for the wealthy while also striving to become financially successful themselves—a great irony of morality under a capitalist system.

In *Mom*, the mother and daughter relationship between the series’ main protagonists, Bonnie and Christy, presents as a narrative around rehabilitation both in health and life with Christy learning to forgive and understand her mother’s transgressions as an addict during her childhood. The mishaps and adventures that the two go on serve to “heal” the rift between them and show that anyone is worthy of a comeback, even if that comeback isn’t under the most ideal of circumstances.

The issue with these sorts of tales is that they frame these primarily white families as falling upon hard times or having drawn a bad lot in life to now depend on low-income options. Comparatively in *Superstore*, their cast members, with a fairly representative spread of BIPOC characters, don’t get a lot of exposition for how they ended up in low-wage jobs. Even this show provides reasoning for why one of its white characters, Jonah, works at *Superstore*, buying into this thematic framing that is rooted in the comfort of intrinsically linking race and class.

THEME:

OTHERING AND VOYEURISM

While it is the nature of capitalist society to treat engagement or watching of the affluent as stoking ambition within people with lower levels of income, the opposite, the rich having a level of fascination in consuming the experience of people from lower classes, is downright voyeuristic. In season 8 of *Shameless*, we see Carl Gallagher get entangled in a relationship with a young addict, who we later learn is from a well-to-do family and pulled herself into the Gallagher's orbit because she is enticed by their lower-class struggle to survive. This character's journey is reflective of the phenomenon of "slumming drama," wherein the rich become interested in, and even sexually attracted to, the poor. It is also a blatant usage of the culture of poverty narrative, which insists on presenting issues faced by low-income characters as personal rather than structural developments.

"The rich sense that the poor have something they lack—bodily strength, excitement, unrestrained sex, or a simple authentic life—and want to possess it. Presented in a sensationalist mode, slumming dramas elicit a titillating reading or viewing experience."¹⁶

Not only does the exploitative nature of these relationships harm lower income people, but it also furthers their victimization. Yet, it is a practice that has remained somewhat acceptable in popular society as it plays into the "culture of poverty" narrative that has influenced social scientific research for decades and has informed both politicians' (predominantly Republicans') and the public's understanding of poverty. This concept posits that living in persistent poverty results in the formation of a specific culture that, passed on over generations, produces attitudes and values that yield to dysfunctional behavior.¹⁷

Ironically, with the people behind the camera of these television programs coming from circumstances completely unlike their low-income characters, they also ask the audience to view these characters in a voyeuristic, judgmental lens—without their consent.

THEME:

PERSONAL FAILURE PREVAILS, NOT STRUCTURAL EXPLOITATION

Indeed, prevailing narratives of individualism determining one's lot in life (i.e., every person having the ability to pull themselves out of abject circumstances into a more favorable lifestyle) lead to findings in the Power of POP study looking much like those of Conrad et al., wherein individual causes of homelessness are attributed to individual or group decisions, actions, or behaviors, including criminal behavior, mental illness, substance use, disability, or failure to meet bills.¹⁸ There were very few instances where characters living within these circumstances ever aligned their issue with a systemic shortcoming or oversight, sparing the sarcastic and inauthentic Frank Gallagher of *Shameless* or the "Health Fund" episode of *Superstore*, which relies on the audience to pick up on the dysfunction of the health insurance industry.

¹⁶ Gandal, K. (2007). Gandal's Class Representation in Modern Fiction and Film.

¹⁷ Lewis, O. (1959). Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty.

¹⁸ Conrad-Pérez, D., Chattoo, C. B., Coskuntuncel, A., & Young, L. (2021). Voiceless Victims and Charity Saviors: How US Entertainment TV Portrays Homelessness and Housing Insecurity in a Time of Crisis. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 22.

This bias stems from the “culture of poverty” frame, which blames the individual for failing to obtain a better life, consequently shifting the blame of addressing the problem of poverty on the individual. This approach furthers a centuries-old binary of “the deserving” and “the undeserving” poor, which is equally rooted within white American racist attitudes that insist Black people are naturally inferior. With a focus on the failings of the individual, this narrative emphasizes personal inadequacies including addiction, laziness, or “making the wrong choices” or “bad decisions.” By instigating a separatist culture, those with influence and power are exonerated from responsibility for discriminatory laws and institutions.¹⁹

This furthers an argument for the use of charity to maintain the status quo of systemic behavior among the classes. In fact, the television episodes in the Conrad-Perez et al. study found 44% of the resolutions presented to counter homelessness centered on charity—going so far as to present charity as the solution to institutional issues for characters like a disabled veteran and a runaway foster child. The fact that the charitable solutions found for both of these cases were only stopgap measures makes clear that charities are often not organized to change the structural conditions upon which homelessness rest. Nevertheless, this frame went unchallenged, instead opting to pull on the heartstrings of viewers who want to see the main characters as heroes, not perpetrators of bad systemic practices. Centering storytelling directly on houseless characters could instead use their brushes with charity to highlight the many stopgap measures that persist within these systems without providing long-term solutions to eradicating poverty.

44%

of the resolutions presented to counter homelessness centered on charity—going so far as to present charity as the solution to institutional issues for characters like a disabled veteran and a runaway foster child

BREAKING DOWN PORTRAYED INCOME

In the 2017–2018 season of television, character representation across race and ethnicity skews overwhelmingly white. This disproportionate sample means that each level of income holds double-digit percentage rates of white representation, whereas their BIPOC peers remain 8% or less in any income representation. The greatest distribution of income representation by race/ethnicity occurs at the middle-income tier—with white characters making up 37%, Black characters 8%, Hispanic 3%, and Asian and Other at 2% each. This is unsurprising, given the wide range of income this designation covers.

37%

WHITE
CHARACTERS

8%

BLACK
CHARACTERS

3%

HISPANIC
CHARACTERS

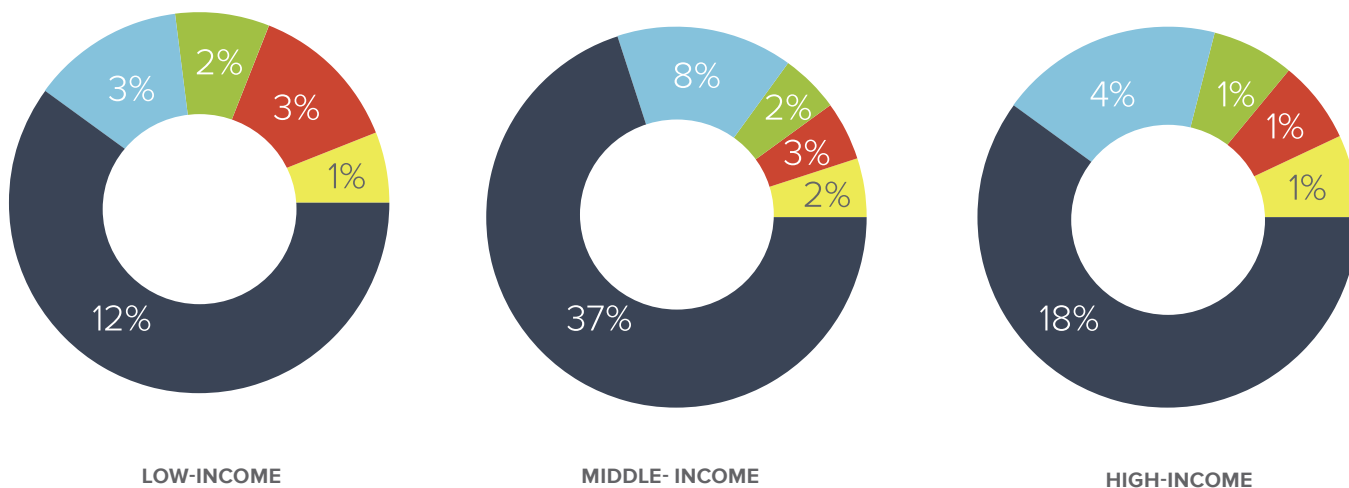
2%

ASIAN
CHARACTERS

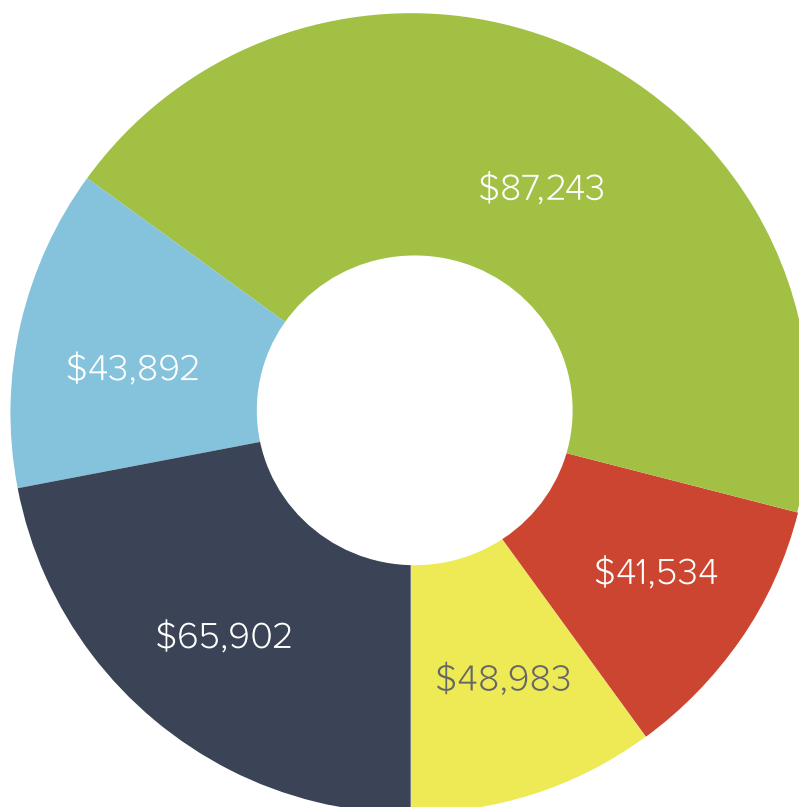
2%

OTHER

¹⁹ Lemke, S. (2016) *The Nation: American Exceptionalism in Our Time*. In: *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.



WAGE REPRESENTATION BY RACE



U.S. MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY ETHNICITY



[All data taken from the most recent estimates of the U.S. Census American Community Survey taken during 2018 in cases except for the estimates taken for the Hispanic population, whose most recent estimates were taken in 2010. Links for each ethnicity can be found in footnotes below.]

The overwhelming whiteness of the 2017–2018 TV season means that all calculations of race and income for this study are more likely to represent white characters and households. White characters out-ratio Black characters such that we see 4 white characters for every 1 Black character, 11 white characters to every 1 Hispanic character, 13 white characters to every 1 Asian character, and 14 white characters to every character included in the “Other” category—which typically identifies persons of mixed ethnicity or race. There is, in fact, no representation at all in the entire sample of Native/Indigenous characters, an extremely excessive oversight on behalf of casting in Hollywood.

Approximately 75% of all characters included in this sample were part of the main cast of their respective shows, while 23% of the sample filled either recurring or guest spots. Much of the same race/ethnicity breakdowns remain the same in this breakdown, with 52% of key characters being white to 15% recurring, 12% key Black characters to 4% recurring, 5% key Hispanic char-

acters to 1% recurring, 4% key Asian characters to 1% recurring, and equal amounts of characters representing key and recurring roles for those categorized as Other at 4% each. Here the overrepresentation of white characters stands without overrepresentation of any other race in either key or recurring roles.

As far as income, key characters represent 18% of low-income characters to recurring characters’ 3%, 39% of middle-income characters to 13%, and 17% of low-income characters to 6% of high-income characters.

To better encapsulate the circumstances these characters represented, we conducted an analysis of characters representing recurrent or low wage-bearing professions by their local or regional wage representation via Glassdoor. This includes common roles that place characters within the upper-middle income range of pay—such as investigators and detectives—as well as families of three or more living on lower middle to low incomes.

52% | KEY CHARACTERS: WHITE

12% | KEY CHARACTERS: BLACK

5% | KEY CHARACTERS: HISPANIC

4% | KEY CHARACTERS: ASIAN

4% | KEY CHARACTERS: OTHER

SAMPLE JOB ROLES AND INCOME

CHARACTER NAME/SHOW	JOB ROLE	PROJECTED INCOME*
Thorne/ <i>Bosch</i>	LAPD officer	\$81,624
Chris/ <i>Chicago Fire</i>	Firefighter	\$64,039
Danny/ <i>Blue Bloods</i>	NYPD Detective	\$120,043
Rainbow/ <i>Black-ish</i>	Anesthesiologist	\$250,004
Leonard/ <i>The Big Bang Theory</i>	Experimental Physicist	\$96,008
Bob/ <i>Bob's Burgers</i> **	Restaurant Owner	\$44,029
Mateo/ <i>Superstore</i>	Sales Associate	\$19,558
Lip/ <i>Shameless</i>	Mechanic	\$50,450
Frankie/ <i>The Middle</i>	Dental Hygienist	\$66,560
Jimmy/ <i>Speechless</i>	Airline Agent	\$54,321

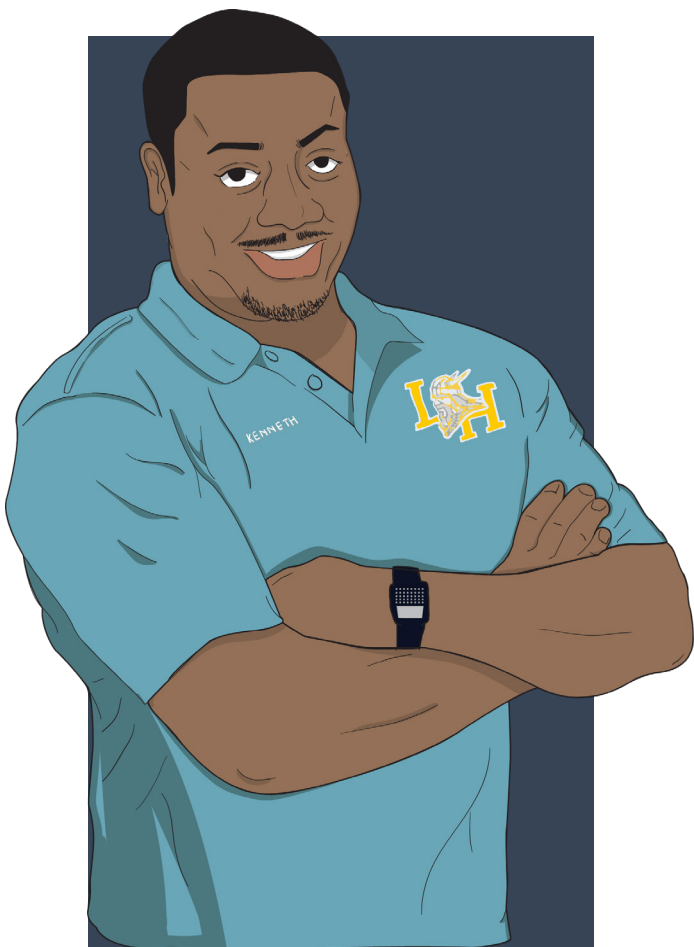
*All income tabulated according to Glassdoor averages for job title by character location and perceived skill

**Bob's income estimated based on 10K Productions analysis: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x87yL-CrcMs>

The spread of income presented in the table must be further scrutinized by the number of people in each household who also generate income as well as cost of living per locality. What we overwhelmingly found is that those with higher salaries tended to live in households with partners who generate similar income or on their own, leaving them free to afford cost of living in the cities they inhabit. For example, Rainbow Johnson from *Black-ish* not only generates high income as a physician, but she also is also married to a senior advertisement executive who helps their family of five children, two retired grandparents, and two working adults to pay for college, private school, and a lifestyle befitting the suburbs of Los Angeles. This representation is in direct juxtaposition to the DiMeo family in *Speechless*, who get by on the single income of the father, Jimmy DiMeo, and any disability aid that supports one of the three kids, JJ, who has cerebral palsy.

This is significant not only for offering a snapshot of the general spread of income representation and why outliers like the Johnson family influence the sample's observed income by race, but also because studies indicate that many lower-middle to low-income families are simply one economic emergency away from being impoverished—with 45% of families having resources no more than twice the poverty threshold.²⁰

²⁰ <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/2021-poverty-projections>



PERSONAL AIDE

*projected annual income: \$34,111

“I love the kid, but the pay’s not that great, so I do this [part-time job at grocery store] to make ends meet.”

KENNETH CLEMENTS SPEECHLESS

PERSONALITY

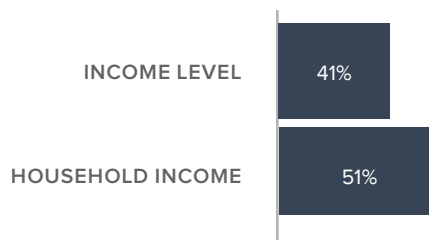
Upbeat Considerate
Helpful Kind

OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND

Formerly school groundskeeper
First-time Speech Aide for JJ DiMeo
Part-time Grocery Store manager

INCOME CHARACTERISTICS (COMPARED TO U.S. AVERAGE**)

Kenneth’s earnings place him within the top 41% of Americans reporting individual income in 2014 and among 48% of people who make middle income wages in the Sacramento area.



KEY EPISODES

- SHOWCASING PAY & LIFESTYLE

SEASON 1: Episodes 1 - 2, 5, 9, 11, 15, 18, 20

SEASON 2: Episodes 4, 10

STORYLINES SHOWCASING FINANCIAL HARDSHIP:

- DEBT - Alimony payments to former spouse along with capability to maintain apartment needs
- INABILITY TO MEET BASIC NEEDS - Has to work two jobs to make ends meet

*Based on Glassdoor results for city/region: https://www.glassdoor.com/Salaries/sacramento-personal-aide-salary-SRCH_IL.0,10_IC1147229_KO11,24.htm

**Supported by quintile calculations from: <https://graphics.wsj.com/what-percent/> and <https://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/are-you-in-the-middle-class/>

MATEO LIWANAG

SUPERSTORE

PERSONALITY

Shrewd Selective
Competitive Personable

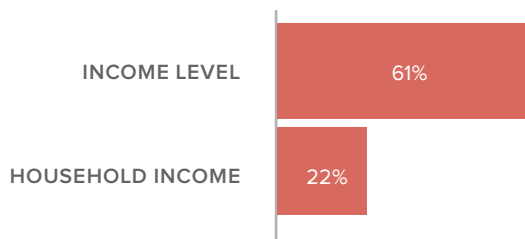
OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND

Formerly sale associate
Recently executive assistant
Unemployed when store closed by end of series

INCOME CHARACTERISTICS

(COMPARED TO U.S. AVERAGE**)

Mateo's earnings place him below 61% of Americans reporting their income in 2014 and among 22% of people who also make low-income wages in the St. Louis, MO area.



KEY EPISODES

- SHOWCASING PAY & LIFESTYLE

SEASON 1: Episodes 5 & 10
SEASON 2: Episodes 1, 8, 10 - 11, 18
SEASON 3: Episodes 5, 6, 8, 14, 16, 18, 19
SEASON 4: Episodes 4, 8, 9, 10, 15, 19, 20, 22
SEASON 5: Episodes 1 - 5, 8
SEASON 6: Episodes 10, 14 - 15

STORYLINES SHOWCASING FINANCIAL HARDSHIP:

- **DEBT** - Is houseless due to financial precarity stemming from his undocumented status
- **INABILITY TO MEET BASIC NEEDS** - Has to obtain pro bono immigration lawyer to counter deportation and seek ill-advised remedies for earache due to lack of healthcare coverage



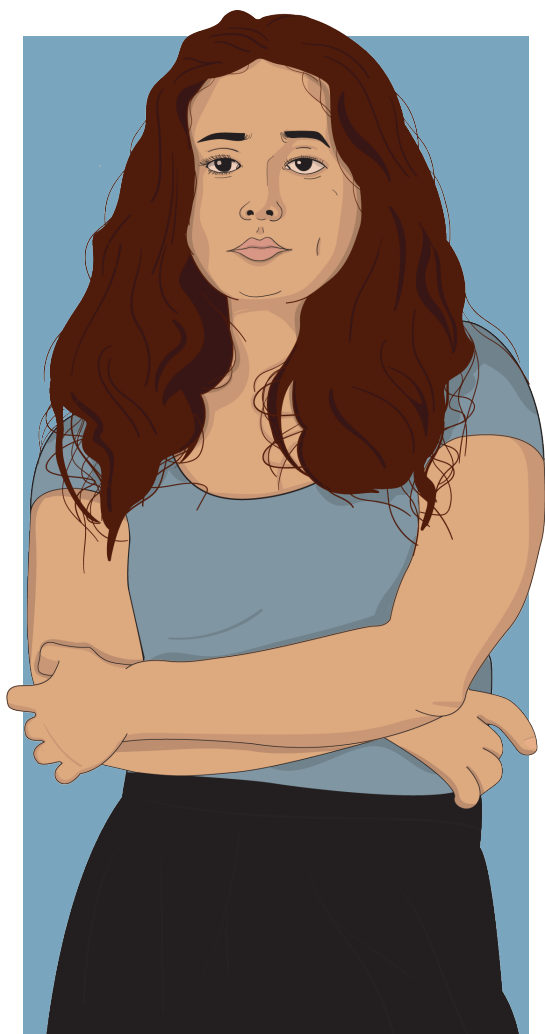
SALES ASSOCIATE

*projected annual income: \$19,558

[When required to show documentation for store transfer]
“So...that’s it.
Corporate is going to find out that my documents are fake. I’m gonna get deported.”

*Based on Glassdoor results for city/region: https://www.glassdoor.com/Salaries/st-louis-part-time-sales-associate-salary-SRCH_IL.0,8_IM823_KO9,34.htm

**Supported by quintile calculations from: <https://graphics.wsj.com/what-percent/> and <https://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/are-you-in-the-middle-class/>



UNEMPLOYED

*projected annual income: \$32,112

[When faced with
toe necrosis]
“What happens if
I can’t afford the
surgery? I just die?”

DEBBIE GALLAGHER SHAMELESS

PERSONALITY

Candid

Creative thinker

Daring

Realist

OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND

Welder in training

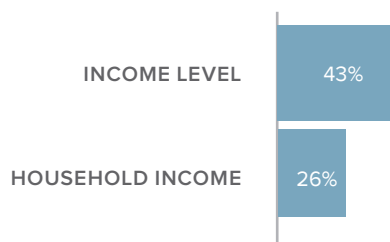
Unemployed

Mother to toddler

INCOME CHARACTERISTICS

(COMPARED TO U.S. AVERAGE**)

Debbie’s earnings place her within the top 43% of Americans reporting their income in 2014 and among 26% of people who also make low-income wages in the Chicago area.



KEY EPISODES

- SHOWCASING PAY & LIFESTYLE

SEASON 2: Episodes 1 - 2, 4

SEASON 3: Episodes 7 & 8

SEASON 5: Episode 12

SEASON 6: Episode 1, 6, 7, 11, 12

SEASON 7: Episode 1 - 8, 10, 12

SEASON 8: Episode 6, 8, 9 - 12

SEASON 9: Episode 1, 2, 8 - 10, 14

SEASON 10: Episode 1, 3 - 5, 7 - 8, 10

SEASON 11: Episode 1 - 3, 9

STORYLINES SHOWCASING FINANCIAL HARDSHIP:

- **DEBT** - Regularly scrounges up funds to pay for utilities and mortgage with siblings
- **INABILITY TO MEET BASIC NEEDS** - Has to visit local food bank and seek dangerous health care alternatives; turns to shoplifting for necessities

*Based on annual unemployment benefit for an individual with child dependent in Chicago area:
<http://illinoislegalaid.org/legal-information/getting-unemployment-benefits>

**Supported by quintile calculations from: <https://graphics.wsj.com/what-percent/> and <https://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/are-you-in-the-middle-class/>

Indeed, observations from hunger experts like Josh Gwin of Marion Polk Food Share shows that people who are only one missed utility bill away from hunger or eviction often depend on social services like food drives,²¹ which bears questioning of the ways income have been calculated by scholar and the general public alike given inflation, stagnant wages, and increases to the cost of living throughout the United States. If someone who is considered middle income by current estimates is only one debt away from facing denial of food or shelter, is the income bracket underestimating poverty?

In terms of this report's sample, while we found the levels of income tied to racial representation as a whole, we would like to note that the only key BIPOC character of *The Big Bang Theory*, Raj Koothrappali, works in a field that pays significantly less than his fellow scientists, at \$60,056 to his peers' income upwards of \$90,000. While he is shown to be supported by his parents, who bring in significant wealth, this was an observance of significant difference by race within one show included in the sample.

While the above observations sum up the report sample, they do not represent the reality or scope of racial disparity in economic opportunities. In a 2021 Urban Institute report, two-thirds of white children were estimated to be born into advantageous circumstances, while only one in five Black children and one in three Hispanic children are born into advantageous circumstances. This study further projected that 50% of all children born into disadvantaged circumstances versus more than 66% of those born into advantaged circumstances are on track toward healthy development and economic security at age 30. This disparity in reaching economic stability by 30 is further stratified by race, where 58% of white children from disadvantaged circumstances are on track but only 37% of Black, non-Hispanic and 50% of Hispanic children from similar circumstances meet this projection.²² With structural economic and social stakeholders like residential segregation, unequal access to educational opportunities, and unequal treatment by law enforcement contributing to this ongoing disparity, the 2017–2018 season severely misrepresents reality.

Not even in our select sample of shows depicting low-income characters did we find representation of a low-income BIPOC family to help us exemplify the above finding. Thus, there is a void in scripted television for this arena of representation.

If someone who is considered middle income by current estimates is only one debt away from facing denial of food or shelter, is the income bracket underestimating poverty?

²¹ Asian, 2018: <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?t=ACSSPP1Y2018.S0201&hidePreview=true&t=012%20-%20Asian%20alone%20%28400-499%29%3A031%20-%20Asian%20alone%20or%20in%20combination%20with%20one%20or%20more%20other%20races%20%20%28400-499%29%20%26%20%28100-299%29%20or%20%28300-%20A01-Z99%29%20or%20%28400-999%29>

Black, 2018: <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?t=ACSSPP1Y2018.S0201&hidePreview=true&t=004%20-%20Black%20or%20African%20American%20alone%3A005%20-%20Black%20or%20African%20American%20alone%20or%20in%20combination%20with%20one%20or%20more%20other%20races>

Hispanic, 2010: <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=&t=400%20-%20Hispanic%20or%20Latino%20%28of%20any%20race%29%3AEarnings%20%28Individuals%29%3AIncome%20%28Households,%20Families,%20Individuals%29%3AIncome%20and%20Poverty%3ASNAP%2FFood%20Stamps&tid=ACSDP5YSPT2010.DP03>

Other, 2018: <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?t=ACSSPP1Y2018.S0201&hidePreview=true&t=070%20-%20Some%20other%20race%20alone%3A071%20-%20Some%20other%20race%20alone%20or%20in%20combination%20with%20one%20or%20more%20other%20races>

White, 2018: <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?t=ACSSPP1Y2018.S0201&hidePreview=true&t=002%20-%20White%20alone%3A003%20-%20White%20alone%20or%20in%20combination%20with%20one%20or%20more%20other%20races>

²² <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/identifying-pathways-upward-mobility>

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The primary aim of this study is to further the in-depth research conducted on this subject and its relation to overall character portrayal and audience impact. It is well documented and researched that media has the capability to wield profound power in altering public perceptions and opinion.²³ These perceptions and opinions, in turn, can lead to policies and actions that can have potentially significant social implications. With the advent of the digital age and the Internet, the role of mass media has become especially important and influential. In light of this fact, identifying and evaluating the media's portrayal of social issues may be more valuable than ever before. The following analysis incorporates results from similar literature as it relates to this report's findings.

Even when there is an oversample of television episodes displaying characteristics of lower income lifestyles, television programs do not include these storylines in a meaningful manner:

In a similar study, Conrad-Perez et al. found that only 22% of their sample episodes referred to homelessness or housing insecurity in some way and that, of this already small percentage of representation, a character experiencing homelessness did not contribute a single line of dialogue in one of every three episodes in which they appeared. This furthers the Power of POP report's inability to identify significant character dependence on social services or any other major indicators of financial instability. With nearly 70% of low-income adults reporting "a great deal" of concern about hunger and homelessness,²⁴ this is an egregious void in storytelling.

More unsettling, this study uncovered a prevailing depiction of houseless characters as outsiders to the social world of the shows that include them—only gaining contact with members of the main cast through unexpected encounters. Therein, people experiencing houselessness in popular television programs are more frequently "seen" or "spoken for" rather than "heard from." These incomplete portrayals only further marginalize the houseless in reality.

Societal hierarchy has bearing on the amount of representation devoted to each income range:

Depictions of characters represented within this study illuminated the class divide in who receives quality screen time. We can expect circumstances of low-wage existence, like falling behind on bills or not having adequate housing or food, to be completely absent from a protagonist's experience. The majority of the episodes in this study reveal a dependence on depicting lifestyles of upper-middle to higher income workers such as police commissioners, pharmaceutical scientists, police investigators, surgeons, and aerospace engineers. This is a capitalist approach of depicting those who do well under a free market economy as aspirational and, therefore, worthy of the most screen time. Lower income consumers further the dominance of this reasoning when they fall into the allure of what could be set in front of them. As noted in their 2016 study,

"Likewise, if the poor connect with the non-poor—outside of the workspace or social networks—they do so mainly through representations—circulating on television, online, on billboards, etc. Of course, their interest in the reality of the affluent, like the Kardashian family, is significantly higher than the prosperous class' interest in the social reality (sic) shows about the dispossessed—such as *Here Comes Honey Boo*, *The Wire*, or *Shameless*. The inequality in media access aside, representations play a pivotal role in our construction and understanding of class matters."²⁵

What, then, could be gained by depicting class distinctions in ways that help the audience to better articulate the growing wealth divide? How could a structural lens help viewers deconstruct narratives about their own struggles with financial barriers?

²³ Happer, C., & Philo, G. (2013). The role of the media in the construction of public belief and social change. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 1(1), 321-336.

²⁴ Conrad-Pérez, D., Chattoo, C. B., Coskuntuncel, A., & Young, L. (2021). Voiceless Victims and Charity Saviors: How US Entertainment TV Portrays Homelessness and Housing Insecurity in a Time of Crisis. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 22.

²⁵ Lemke, S. (2016) *The Nation: American Exceptionalism in Our Time*. In: *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Current depictions of class perpetuate the status quo rather than propose an alternative because those behind the depictions benefit from this system:

Class is about the unequal distribution of wealth and income—stratification—just as it is about the acquisition of prestige and cultural capital. It is ordered hierarchically. The norm in capitalist societies is defined by wealth and prestige, which positions those who lack either one or both at the “bottom” and subjects them to discrimination, stigmatization, and all forms of violence—real, symbolic, and otherwise. The “Other” of class is not only economically and politically excluded, but also socially excluded and silenced just as surely as its Black, female, disabled, or queer counterparts with which it often overlaps.²⁶

Bearing this framework in mind, it is of small wonder that poor characters are underrepresented on screen because their middle-class showmakers and writers are often unqualified to portray poverty. The experience and worldview of the poor are never fully intelligible to outsiders; Jones insists: “pauperism ... resists representation.” In other words, the economic subaltern cannot speak. Those who speak on behalf of lower income individuals without having shared the lifestyle run the risk of misrepresenting or othering low-income subjects.²⁷

It is of small wonder that poor characters are underrepresented on screen because their middle-class showmakers and writers are often unqualified to portray poverty.

It is for these reasons and those featured throughout this study that we recommend adding writers who have had prolonged experience with poverty into the writers’ room, giving them the opportunity to spearhead stories of their own. This would enrich the television-scape with nuanced portrayals of low-income characters in established shows while also offering us stories centered on these characters from their iteration. By adding these multifaceted portrayals to media, the audience will gain additional opportunities to interrogate their misconceptions about how financial strife affects the most marginalized, in addition to an understanding of structural inequality.

The connection that audiences maintain through frequent viewership creates space for narrative shift:

Parasocial relationships are affective bonds audiences foster with media characters and celebrities that last beyond episodic exposure. These relationships mirror real-life social relationships, but are unique in that they lack reciprocity. Much like real-life social relationships, individuals are more likely to report parasocial relationships with characters they perceive to be similar to themselves.²⁸ Even as early as kindergarten, people become attuned to parasocial relationships between themselves and their favorite characters—namely, those for whom they develop feelings of comfort, safety, trust, and relation in shared real-world circumstances.²⁹

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face socialization became heavily restricted, leading to an uptick in the intensity of parasocial closeness for those who experienced a decrease in their face-to-face social engagement. Within one study conducted during this period, even participants with strong ties to their close friends experienced significant growth in their parasocial relationships, suggesting that favorite media personae complemented rather than compensated social relationships.³⁰

²⁶ Lemke, S. (2016) *The Nation: American Exceptionalism in Our Time*. In: *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

²⁷ Jones, G. (2009). *Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840–1945*.

²⁸ Bond, B. J. (2021). The development and influence of parasocial relationships with television characters: A longitudinal experimental test of prejudice reduction through parasocial contact. *Communication Research*, 48(4), 573–593.

²⁹ Brunick, K. L., Putnam, M. M., McGarry, L. E., Richards, M. N., & Calvert, S. L. (2016). Children’s future parasocial relationships with media characters: The age of intelligent characters. *Journal of Children and Media*, 10(2), 181–190.

³⁰ Bond, B. J. (2021). Social and parasocial relationships during COVID-19 social distancing. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 02654075211019129.

Hence, the importance of parasocial relationships that audience members sustain with their favorite television characters not only has a bearing in their social lives but also in the impact of changing audience perspectives. For instance, one study conducted in 2020 found that participants who developed an affinity for gay characters in *Six Feet Under* significantly improved their attitudes toward white gay men after viewing the series over 5 weeks.³¹

In a joint report on frequent television viewers of the 2018–2019 season by Define American and the Norman Lear Center, regular viewers of *Superstore* who felt a level of friendship with the character of Mateo were more likely to support an increase in immigrants coming to the United States. This association was particularly pronounced among those who had little to no real-life contact with immigrants. Displaying an attachment to regular immigrant characters can compensate for the absence of real-life contact with immigrants. This could reduce support for restrictive immigration policies across the board.³²

White resentment toward the progress of BIPOC communities is rooted in racism directly tied to perceived racial status in a changing population:

Studies have shown that white resentment toward BIPOC communities gained significant growth after the election of Barack Obama as president and the perceived change in racial hierarchy. In fact, one study found that white people withdraw support for welfare programs—which disproportionately aid white people—when they perceive these programs to primarily benefit people from marginalized backgrounds.³³ Hence, showrunners hoping to influence this particular audience would have had a vested interest in low income characters being portrayed on television, as we found in our sample of the 2017–2018 TV season, remaining majority white for ongoing seasons of television. This may indeed answer why we did not find significant representation of BIPOC families of limited financial means in our study.

³¹ Bond, B. J. (2021). The development and influence of parasocial relationships with television characters: A longitudinal experimental test of prejudice reduction through parasocial contact. *Communication Research*, 48(4), 573-593.

³² <https://www.defineamerican.com/hollywood/change-the-narrative-change-the-world-launch>

³³ Wetts, R., & Willer, R. (2018). Privilege on the precipice: Perceived racial status threats lead White Americans to oppose welfare programs. *Social Forces*, 97(2), 793-822.

RECOMMENDATIONS

If you are creating messages about economic justice issues in your advocacy work...

Know that many of your audiences are viewing incomplete and unbalanced portrayals of people with low incomes. And there are almost no portrayals of people experiencing poverty. The narratives available to audiences reveal few solutions to economic instability or poverty. At the same time, audiences are seeing that most people's basic needs are being met with a few scattered examples of true need. It is therefore important to start communications about economic justice with some context and big-picture thinking. Without doing so, we risk our solutions seeming unnecessary or even just strange.

Fill in the gaps by providing a larger vision of what the world could look like if we had real solutions in place. Show how that world would better align with your audience's core values. They are not seeing much of this type of expansive thinking in current TV, so we can step in and provide this big picture thinking, embracing themes like abundance, community, shared responsibility, and opportunity for all.

Frame the problem systemically. It is important to link personal stories to widespread problems, point to the systemic cause, and then move to the systemic solution. Fictional portrayals of any issue are almost always going to focus on an individual character. Watching those portrayals, as well as typical media coverage, can lead audiences to a very individualistic mindset that assumes if the problem is with the individual, so is the solution. By expanding audience's understanding of the problem and linking a character's challenge to the many other people experiencing that challenge, we can move them to understand the systemic solutions better.

Center solutions. None of the shows we sampled portrayed systemic solutions, such as how safety net programs can alleviate economic instability, how unions protect workers, or how paid family and medical leave make it possible for families to provide for their children. Leveraging storylines can help to spotlight problems, but economic justice communicators will need to bring the solutions to the table. When solutions are left out, audiences are likely to fall into the trap of thinking that poverty, income disparities, and other barriers to economic justice are inevitable.

If you want to leverage popular television to highlight economic justice issues...

Use storylines and characters to make a point. While they are few and far between—so much so that many did not show up in our sample—some portrayals of economic injustice and solutions to it do exist. Later seasons of *Superstore* focused on issues such as paid family and medical leave, healthcare expenses, and labor organizing, for instance. Talking about these issues through the lens of popular TV offers an opportunity to showcase solutions in a more interesting and unexpected way than fact sheets or tweets about legislation can.

It's also true that centering popular characters' experiences can help build an emotional understanding and connection to your issue. Research has shown that we develop parasocial relationships with characters we regularly watch on television, identifying them (in our brains) as friends of sorts. So, talking to some audiences about the economic experiences of Amy from *Superstore*, for instance, could help them see those experiences in a new light and likely with more empathy. As with any individual storytelling, however, doing this needs to be balanced with other kinds of stories that broaden the focus so that audiences aren't just focused on that individual's plight, strengths, and weaknesses.

Highlight shows that showcase themes like community care, abundance, and even joy, in addition to those that provide portrayals of economic injustice. While more recent releases such as Netflix's *Maid* and *Squid Game* provide some of the low-income character representation we would like to see more of, audience appreciation for *Ted Lasso*—a show equally about rich people and being a person who cares for others—shows that audiences are primed for more representation of community care. By building upon the abundance narrative over scarcity, creators can build worlds that show how communities support their own with love, care, and joy, bringing this positive energy into their advocacy for a better life for everyone. ABC's upcoming television show *Abbott Elementary* appears to be a potential example of what the integration of community care, Black joy, and advocacy for better financial support can look like on television.

Monitor shows that offer opportunities to spark conversation about income inequality or instability. To keep up with opportunities to leverage relevant plotlines, formally select a few shows that appeal to your target audience and follow them. Watching whole episodes is not even necessary as there are many recaps available online on sites such as Vulture, EW online, and ShowSnob.

Choose your timing carefully. On the one hand, things move quickly online and issues come in and out of focus at a rapid pace. It is typically a good idea to respond within a 48-hour window for simple social media engagement and within a week for more detailed media pieces. On the other hand, social media engagement with television content spikes significantly at certain points within a show's schedule. For series that consistently engage in narratives about poverty and economic instability, look for opportunities such as premieres and finales. Significant episodes and major award shows also draw significant audiences. Use these moments to live tweet, host a Twitter chat, or host an online watch party.

If you want to influence portrayals of income instability and poverty...

Give positive reinforcement for good portrayals. This could be as simple as encouraging fans to thank show writers and networks for an authentic character or storyline via social media. Or, you could create an award to the networks or individuals using their platforms to tell compelling stories about people with low incomes or that promote a social justice narrative. Positive reinforcement is a good place to start to both encourage good storytelling and lay the foundation for relationships with creators.

Create your own hashtags or memes to draw attention to representations. For example, #StarringJohnCho memes went viral as people photoshopped John Cho into famous movie posters that starred white male actors, creatively criticizing the lack of diversity in Hollywood. The #OscarsSoWhite hashtag was started by April Reign to raise the same issue and sparked a national debate that resulted in changes in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Engage progressive fandoms. Find the online communities of popular shows where fans are already gathering to talk about them. Create toolkits or messaging guides around a particular series to spark fan engagement.

Encourage networks to engage with and hire people who have experienced economic instability. We need more stories centered on low-income characters written by people who have lived through poverty for prolonged periods. This is particularly true for houseless representation and should be a component for any creative work related to this issue, whether it is a television program or advocacy campaign. Directly affected writers can bring their lived experiences to light in a way that helps us move from a voyeuristic, socially distanced interaction to one of better relatability and nuanced understanding. After all, if the producers and writers of *Modern Family* and *Maid* can bring their personal issues into scriptwriting, why can the same not become true for character portrayals unseen in other recent television shows?

Build relationships with script writers, producers, and show runners. Introduce script writers, producers, and show runners to stories that not only are personal and compelling but also are diverse and affirmative and more fully depict the experience of people living in economic instability. Note that to be effective, this strategy may require more significant long-term investments in both time and resources.

If you want to add positive portrayals to the mix...

Rewrite shows or plots to show how they could tell a fuller story of economic insecurity and what we can all do about it. You can use social media to spread your ideas about what popular TV could look like in this regard. To do this, put yourself in the shoes of a Hollywood writer who wanted to ethically depict characters experiencing poverty and imagine what they would come up with. You can also engage in a “what if?” exercise online, inviting your audience to help fill in how a show could depict the low-income experience more realistically and compassionately. Or suggest a whole new TV show that would accurately show the causes and solutions to poverty.

Partner with artists and creatives to tell new stories about economic instability and poverty. Artists should be included in strategic conversations early because their perspectives often lead to out-of-the-box innovations. Just like graphic designers, researchers, or anyone else with a specialized skillset you wouldn’t ask to work for free, keep in mind that artists should also be paid. Consider budgeting ahead of time to be able to include their talents.

Produce your own content. Creating your own content is now more accessible than ever. Creatives with limited resources are making use of content-sharing platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and SoundCloud and crowdsourcing sites like Kickstarter to launch independent projects and tell otherwise untold stories. Videos, web series, and podcasts are within reach, although we recommend partnering with a creative that is skilled at storytelling in your chosen format to maximize the impact.

If you want to help audiences become educated consumers of entertainment and other media...

Organize watch parties and discussion groups. Assemble around helpful, harmful, and nuanced portrayals.

Provide guides. Develop study guides and curricula that help support young people to become more educated consumers of entertainment and other media.

Make your organization a resource. Offer cultural critiques of select shows on a regular basis. Pitch yourself as a resource to media who cover pop culture and are interested in how portrayals interact with real-life experiences.

APPENDIX I:

This code book is designed to assist in the process of coding and analyzing television shows for the portrayal of character income and lifestyle parallels. The media content analysis will analyze the content of 105 television episodes randomly sampled from 53 popular television series. Our content analysis will focus on the frequency of inclusion and trends in the representation of characters across perceived income. Our analysis will also focus on storylines associated with low-income characters and income disparity more broadly.

Character income should be coded in instances when explicit references are made that identify a character's income (through scripted dialogue or search engine) and also in instances when more implicit social/cultural markers are used to designate issues primarily faced by those with a low income (i.e. poor housing, food insecurity or scarcity, lack of safety net for financial straits or survival, and dependence on social programs).

VARIABLE NUMBER	VARIABLE NAME	VARIABLE TYPE/ CLASSIFICATIONS	EXPLANATION
V1	Genre	1. Reality 2. Drama 3. Comedy 4. Horror 5. Action 6. Sci-Fi 7. Mystery 8. Historical Fiction 9. Crime 0. Other	
V2	Name of Series		
V3	Episode Title		
V4	Character Name		This simply serves to state the character or entity
V5	Character Description		This provides the overall background or context of the character in relation to the episode; Mainly looking at character employment and relational responsibilities (mother of X, best friend of Y, boss of Z)

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

VARIABLE NUMBER	VARIABLE NAME	VARIABLE TYPE/ CLASSIFICATIONS	EXPLANATION
V6	Male	0. No 1. Yes	
V7	Black	0. No 1. Yes	
V8	Hispanic	0. No 1. Yes	
V9	Native	0. No 1. Yes	
V10	Other	0. No 1. Yes	Ethnically ambiguous - not explicitly acknowledged or presumed to be of any ethnicity
V11	Asian	0. No 1. Yes	
V12	White	0. No 1. Yes	
V13	Sexuality	0. Heterosexual 1. LGBTQ NA	Is there a reference to sexuality and what is it? (Not coding for specific references, just type of sexual orientation)

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DATA

VARIABLE NUMBER	VARIABLE NAME	VARIABLE TYPE/ CLASSIFICATIONS	EXPLANATION
V14	Low Income	0. No 1. Yes	Find Character's income by comparing their vocation to average Glassdoor incomes; Low income is defined as below \$27k
V15	Middle Income	0. No 1. Yes	Find Character's income by comparing their vocation to average Glassdoor incomes; Middle income is defined as between \$27k to \$86k
V16	High Income	0. No 1. Yes	Find Character's income by comparing their vocation to average Glassdoor incomes; High income is defined as above \$86k
V17	Poor Housing	0. No 1. Yes	
V18	Food insecurity/scarcity	0. No 1. Yes	NA indicates lack of information within episode to make a determination
V19	Lack of safety net for financial straits/survival	0. No 1. Yes	Including live events like medical treatment, losing a house, death, etc; NA indicates lack of information within episode to make a determination
V20	Dependent on social programs	0. No 1. Yes	NA indicates lack of information within episode to make a determination

PORTRAYAL DATA

VARIABLE NUMBER	VARIABLE NAME	VARIABLE TYPE/ CLASSIFICATIONS	EXPLANATION
V21	Aggressive	0. Passive 1. Somewhat Aggressive 2. Aggressive	Are the poor shown as unjustifiably violent or hostile? Looking at treatment of others and self treatment
V22	Integrity	0. Deceitful 1. Somewhat honest 2. Honest	Are they portrayed as honest or deceitful?
V23	Friendly	0. Rude; unfriendly 1. Somewhat friendly 2. Kind; friendly	Were characters considered docile or amenable people, or intractable and callous people? Looking at how they are treating others within the show.
V24	Competent	0. Incompetent 1. Somewhat Competent 2. Competent	While some may not have educational levels, competency doesn't come only in the form of a degree. It can come in all shapes or forms. Is the character being trusted by others/ given responsibilities? Are they shown as executing these responsibilities satisfactorily? Does the character complete tasks they set out to do?
V25	Depiction	0. Negative 1. Ambiguous/ambivalent 2. Positive	Is the overall depiction of the character positive, negative, or a mix of both? Mix of how the character is portrayed but also how they are treated by others.
V26	Good Treatment	0. Negative 1. Positive	Overall, the treatment of a character as positive or negative depends on if it is justified or not and if they are being treated fairly. If, for instance, the person is a criminal and is treated "poorly," one could still argue that he or she is being treated fairly based on his/her criminal status. Is the character viewed as worthy of good treatment and are they receiving it? Expressed through things like being given opportunity, having responsive conversations with others, being allowed to rely on others.
V27	Key or recurring role	0. No 1. Yes	Indicates if the character is important or recurring to the given episode; for key role it is based on their embeddedness within the given episode. Recurring is checked through an IMDB search of the actor's show appearances.

POST VIEWING RESEARCH

VARIABLE NUMBER	VARIABLE NAME	VARIABLE TYPE/ CLASSIFICATIONS	EXPLANATION
V28	Perceived income based on employment	0. Passive 1. Somewhat Aggressive 2. Aggressive	Classifies subjectively what work title and pay the character receives based on portrayal, fan search engines, and Glassdoor
V29	Perceived or requisite education	0. Less than high school 1. High School graduate 2. Some College/Associate 3. Bachelor's Degree 4. Any Post Bachelor education NA	Measure against internet job description requirements
V30	Income characteristics	0. Rude; unfriendly 1. Somewhat friendly 2. Kind; friendly	Classifies subjectively what work title the character has based on portrayal and fan search engines

NOTES: Coding for clear abject poverty. Explicit and prolonged housing issues/instability, expressed or displayed worries about meeting basic needs, employment struggles.

APPENDIX II:

The following character profiles were developed to showcase the depth of portrayal necessary to frame the hardships of living on a low wage. As stated in the report, none of these characters fully portray the level of hardship faced by most people living in the United States under similar incomes. We have chosen these characters for their accessible yet under-developed storylines, which serve as entry to better, fuller portrayals in the future. The blank template is for consumer use in embarking on a similar analysis of the characters they watch on TV.



PERSONAL AIDE

*projected annual income: \$34,111

“I love the kid, but the pay’s not that great, so I do this [part-time job at grocery store] to make ends meet.”

KENNETH CLEMENTS SPEECHLESS

PERSONALITY

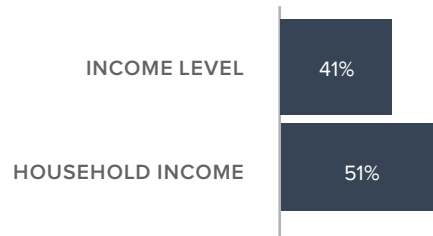
Upbeat	Considerate
Helpful	Kind

OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND

Formerly school groundskeeper
First-time Speech Aide for JJ DiMeo
Part-time Grocery Store manager

INCOME CHARACTERISTICS (COMPARED TO U.S. AVERAGE**)

Kenneth’s earnings place him within the top 41% of Americans reporting individual income in 2014 and among 48% of people who make middle income wages in the Sacramento area.



KEY EPISODES

- SHOWCASING PAY & LIFESTYLE

SEASON 1: Episodes 1 - 2, 5, 9, 11, 15, 18, 20

SEASON 2: Episodes 4, 10

STORYLINES SHOWCASING FINANCIAL HARDSHIP:

- DEBT - Alimony payments to former spouse along with capability to maintain apartment needs
- INABILITY TO MEET BASIC NEEDS - Has to work two jobs to make ends meet

*Based on Glassdoor results for city/region: https://www.glassdoor.com/Salaries/sacramento-personal-aide-salary-SRCH_IL.0,10_IC1147229_KO11,24.htm

**Supported by quintile calculations from: <https://graphics.wsj.com/what-percent/> and <https://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/are-you-in-the-middle-class/>

MATEO LIWANAG SUPERSTORE

PERSONALITY

Shrewd Selective
Competitive Personable

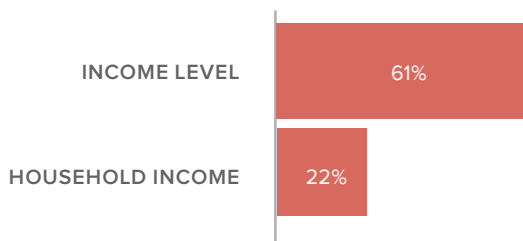
OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND

Formerly sales associate
Recently executive assistant
Unemployed when store closed by end of series

INCOME CHARACTERISTICS

(COMPARED TO U.S. AVERAGE**)

Mateo's earnings place him below 61% of Americans reporting their income in 2014 and among 22% of people who also make low-income wages in the St. Louis, MO area.



KEY EPISODES

- SHOWCASING PAY & LIFESTYLE

SEASON 1: Episodes 5 & 10
SEASON 2: Episodes 1, 8, 10 - 11, 18
SEASON 3: Episodes 5, 6, 8, 14, 16, 18, 19
SEASON 4: Episodes 4, 8, 9, 10, 15, 19, 20, 22
SEASON 5: Episodes 1 - 5, 8
SEASON 6: Episodes 10, 14 - 15

STORYLINES SHOWCASING FINANCIAL HARDSHIP:

- **DEBT** - Is houseless due to financial precarity stemming from his undocumented status
- **INABILITY TO MEET BASIC NEEDS** - Has to obtain pro bono immigration lawyer to counter deportation and seek ill-advised remedies to earache due to lack of healthcare coverage



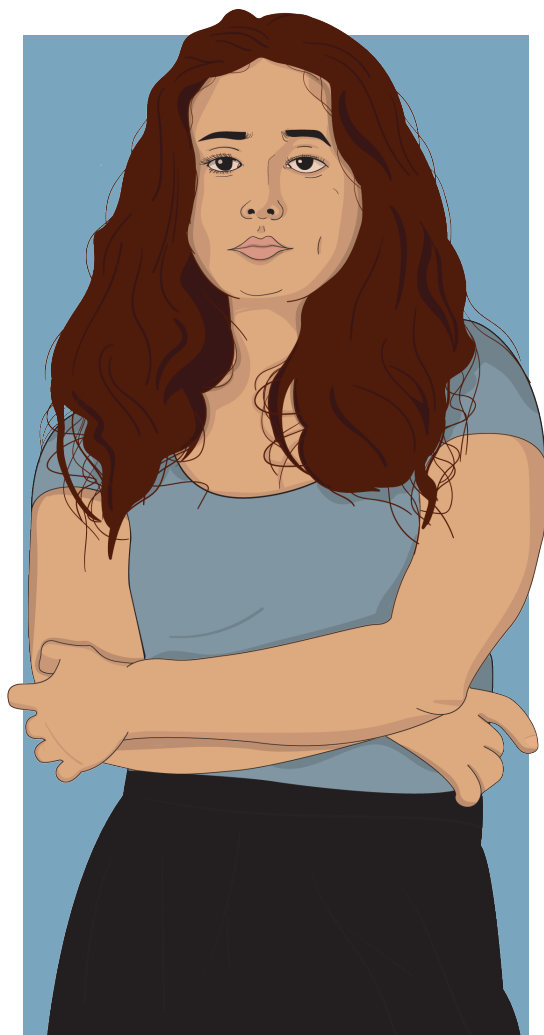
SALES ASSOCIATE

*projected annual income: \$19,558

[When required to show documentation for store transfer]
“So...that’s it.
Corporate is going to find out that my documents are fake. I’m gonna get deported.”

*Based on Glassdoor results for city/region: https://www.glassdoor.com/Salaries/st-louis-part-time-sales-associate-salary-SRCH_IL.0,8_IM823_KO9,34.htm

**Supported by quintile calculations from: <https://graphics.wsj.com/what-percent/> and <https://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/are-you-in-the-middle-class/>



UNEMPLOYED

*projected annual income: \$32,112

[When faced with
toe necrosis]
“What happens if
I can’t afford the
surgery? I just die?”

DEBBIE GALLAGHER SHAMELESS

PERSONALITY

Candid Creative-thinker
Daring Realist

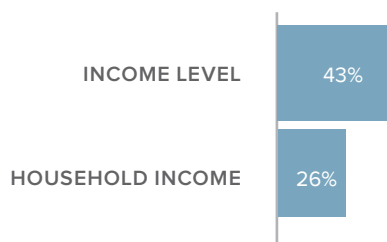
OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND

Welder in-training
Unemployed
Mother to toddler

INCOME CHARACTERISTICS

(COMPARED TO U.S. AVERAGE**)

Debbie’s earnings place her within the top 43% of Americans reporting their income in 2014 and among 26% of people who also make low-income wages in the Chicago area.



KEY EPISODES

- SHOWCASING PAY & LIFESTYLE

SEASON 2: Episodes 1 - 2, 4
SEASON 3: Episodes 7 & 8
SEASON 5: Episode 12
SEASON 6: Episode 1, 6, 7, 11, 12
SEASON 7: Episode 1 - 8, 10, 12
SEASON 8: Episode 6, 8, 9 - 12
SEASON 9: Episode 1, 2, 8 - 10, 14
SEASON 10: Episode 1, 3 - 5, 7 - 8, 10
SEASON 11: Episode 1 - 3, 9

STORYLINES SHOWCASING FINANCIAL HARDSHIP:

- DEBT - Regularly scrounges up funds to pay for utilities and mortgage with siblings
- INABILITY TO MEET BASIC NEEDS - Has to visit local food bank and seek dangerous health care alternatives; turns to shoplifting for necessities

*Based on annual unemployment benefit for an individual with child dependent in Chicago area:
<http://illinoislegalaid.org/legal-information/getting-unemployment-benefits>

**Supported by quintile calculations from: <https://graphics.wsj.com/what-percent/> and <https://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/are-you-in-the-middle-class/>



CURRENT JOB TITLE

*projected annual income: \$XXXXXX

Character quote
about life/money
issues to go here

CHARACTER NAME

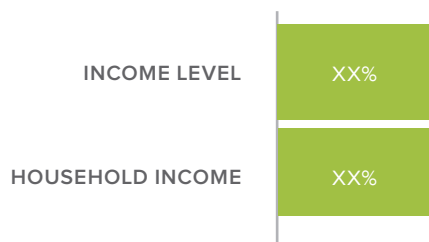
SHOW TITLE

PERSONALITY

OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND

INCOME CHARACTERISTICS (COMPARED TO U.S. AVERAGE**)

[CHARACTER NAME]'s earnings place them...



KEY EPISODES

- SHOWCASING PAY & LIFESTYLE

SEASON X: Episodes

SEASON X: Episodes

STORYLINES SHOWCASING FINANCIAL HARDSHIP:

- DEBT -
- INABILITY TO MEET BASIC NEEDS -

*Based on Glassdoor results for city/region:

**Supported by quintile calculations from: <https://graphics.wsj.com/what-percent/> and <https://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/are-you-in-the-middle-class/>