

POVERTY NARRATIVES IN SCRIPTED TELEVISION AND FILM

In-depth content analysis (2015-2020)

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GATES *foundation*

This presentation is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.



OVERVIEW & METHODOLOGY

www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty

INDIVIDUALISTIC NARRATIVES

- Many Americans attribute poverty to individual-level characteristics and behaviors, such as lack of personal responsibility or work ethic (GOOD Inc., 2019)
- Narratives that frame poverty as an individual-level problem can reduce empathy for affected groups (Savani et al., 2011) and hinder policy support for systemic interventions (Applebaum, 2001)

opportunities **success**
chances
equality
blue-collar **education**
personal-choice

(GOOD Inc., 2019)

SYSTEMIC NARRATIVES

- Stories that illustrate system-level causes or solutions foster greater support for equity-based policies than those with individual-level causes or solutions (Peterson & Rosenthal, 2020)



Tessa Thompson starring in both ***Little Woods*** (2018, above) and ***Sorry to Bother You*** (2018, below).



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

EPISODE LEVEL

- To what extent do scripted TV and film episodes about poverty illustrate systemic concepts?
 - Systemic causes
 - Systemic solutions
 - Collective action
- To what extent do scripted TV and film episodes about poverty illustrate individualistic concepts?
 - Financial crime
 - Charity

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

EPISODE LEVEL

- To what extent do scripted TV and film episodes about poverty depict four types of financial challenges?
 - Job insecurity
 - Housing insecurity
 - Health insecurity
 - Food insecurity

RESEARCH QUESTIONS CHARACTER LEVEL

- Characters who face any of the four types of financial challenges:
 - What types of financial challenges do they face?
 - What are their demographics (age, race/ethnicity, gender)?
 - To what extent are they depicted as committing financial crimes?
 - What are the intersections among these variables?

SAMPLE

- Entered 18 poverty-related search terms into Norman Lear Center Script Database
- Identified 72 scripted films and TV episodes that contained substantial content about poverty (4 episodes per search term)
- Identified 208 unique characters who were experiencing financial challenges related to jobs, housing, food, or health, or were involved in financial crime



EPISODE LEVEL CODING

www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty

CODING PROCEDURE: EPISODE LEVEL

- Episode level variables were coded from explicit dialogue and character behavior
- Student coders were trained to identify presence or absence of higher-order individualistic or systemic concepts related to financial challenges
- Coders also provided short written explanations for each of their “yes” or “no” responses to ensure validity

INDIVIDUALISTIC CONCEPT VARIABLES

- Individualistic concepts are those that address a financial problem at an individual or symptom level, rather than addressing the underlying problem:
 - Financial charity
 - Financial crime



Good Sam (2018, above and below)



SYSTEMIC CONCEPT VARIABLES

- Systemic concepts are those that address the underlying cause of a financial problem:
 - Systemic cause: Contextualizes individual choices within broader systems
 - Systemic solution: Change that that addresses an underlying systemic cause
 - Collective action: Group tactics for creating systemic solutions



Pose (FX)



Gentefied (Netflix)

FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

JOB

Fired, laid off, and/or unemployed

HOUSING

Homeless or struggling to pay rent or utilities

HEALTH

Difficulties affording health care and/or seeking medical treatment

FOOD

Trouble affording nutritious food; Using food stamps and/or a food bank



CHARACTER LEVEL CODING

www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty

CODING PROCEDURE: CHARACTER LEVEL

- Student coders were trained to identify all speaking characters in each episode who faced at least one of the 4 types of financial challenge
- Coders also identified all speaking characters in each episode involved in financial crime
- Demographics of each character were coded visually, assisted by data obtained from IMDB.com about races, ethnicities, ages, and genders of performers

CHARACTER DEMOGRAPHICS

- Race and ethnicity (White, Black, Latinx, other)
- Gender (man/woman/other)
- Age (younger than 18, 18-64, 65 or older)
- Class (lower/working, middle, upper)
- Role size (lead, supporting, minor)

CHARACTER FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

- Job insecurity
- Food insecurity
- Health insecurity
- Housing insecurity



Mixed-ish (ABC)

CHARACTER INVOLVEMENT IN FINANCIAL CRIME

- Crime coding procedure for characters did not differ from crime coding procedure for episodes



Bank robberies take place in **Longmire** (Netflix, above) and **Hell or High Water** (2015, below)





EPISODE LEVEL FINDINGS

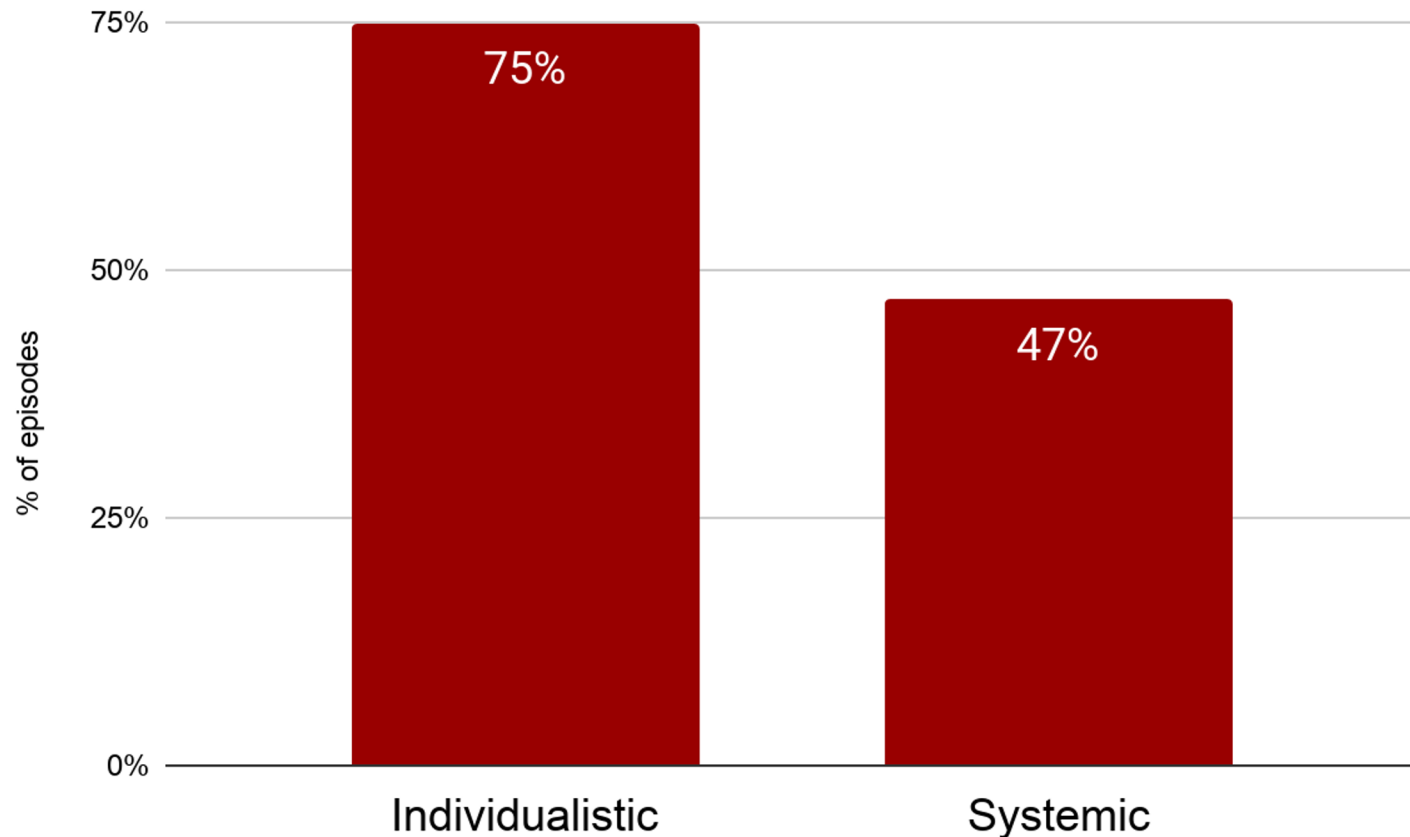
www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty

KEY FINDINGS: EPISODE LEVEL

- Individualistic concepts were more common than systemic concepts
 - The most commonly addressed concepts were crime (51% of episodes) and charity (43%)
- 82% of episodes addressed any of the 4 types of financial challenges
 - Job (57% of episodes) and housing (54%) challenges were most common

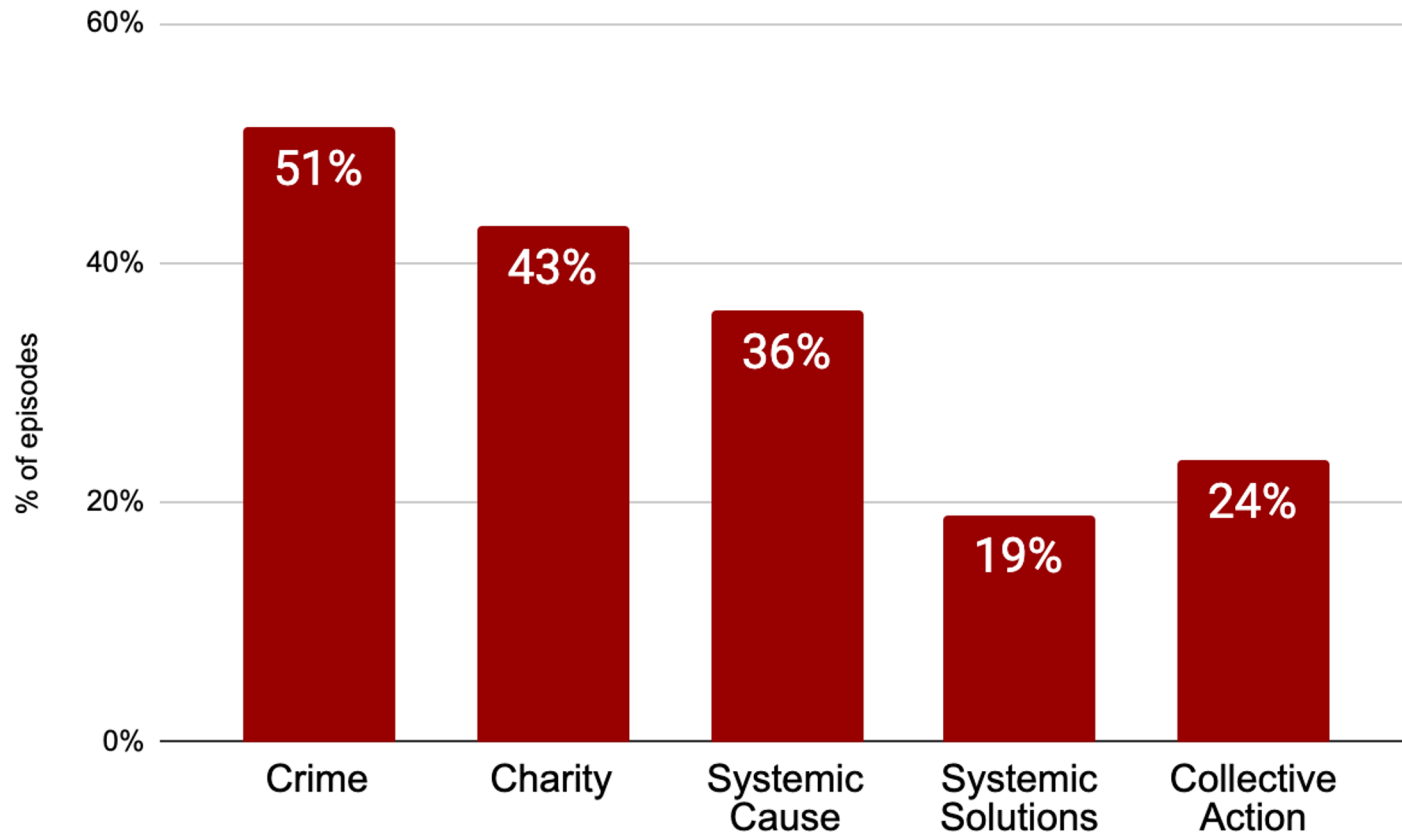
SYSTEMIC VS. INDIVIDUALISTIC CONCEPTS

75% of episodes portrayed individualistic concepts in relation to financial challenges, while 47% portrayed systemic concepts



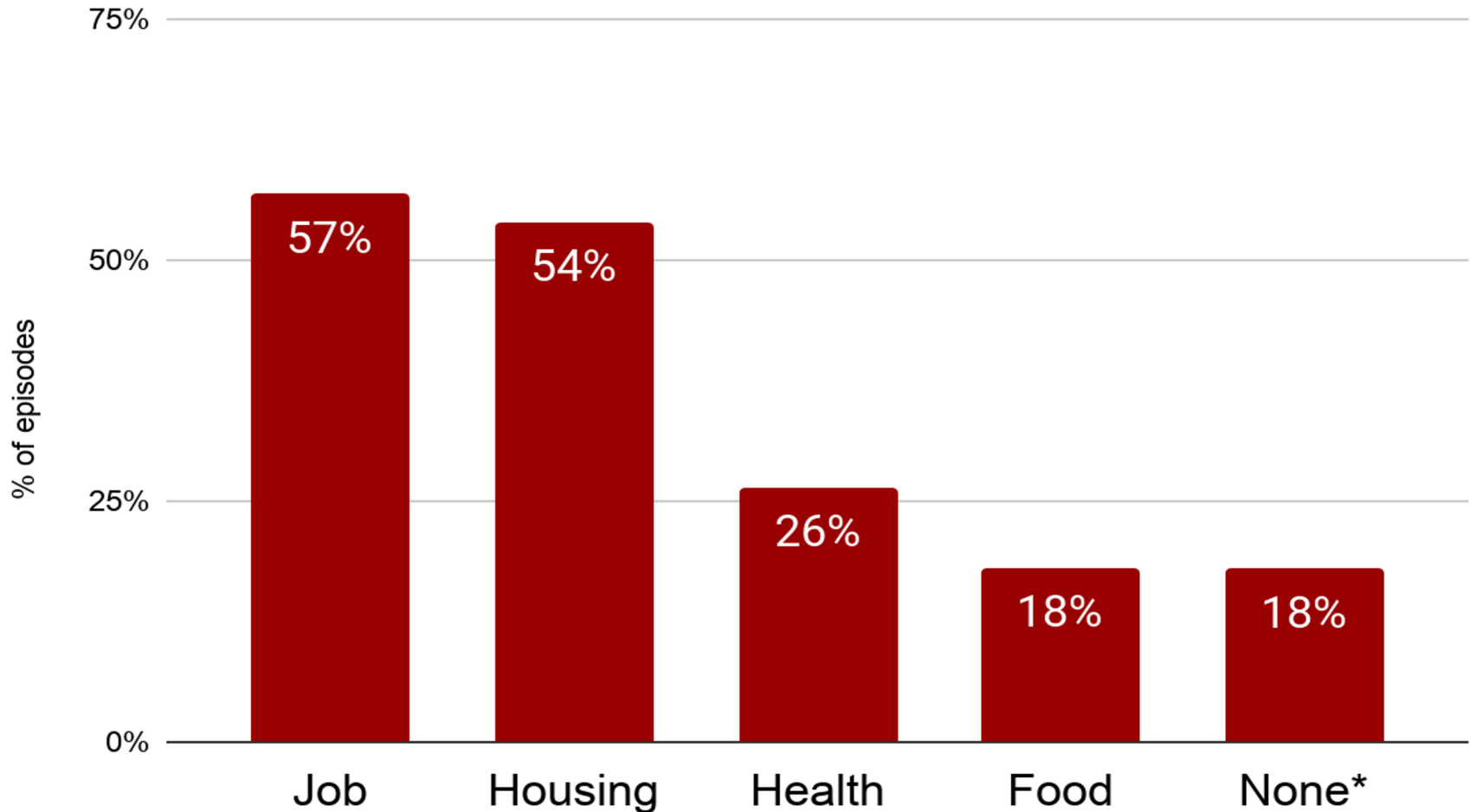
SYSTEMIC VS. INDIVIDUALISTIC CONCEPTS

The most commonly addressed concepts were individualistic (crime and charity); systemic causes were more common than systemic solutions or collective action



FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

Job and housing-related challenges were the most frequently depicted





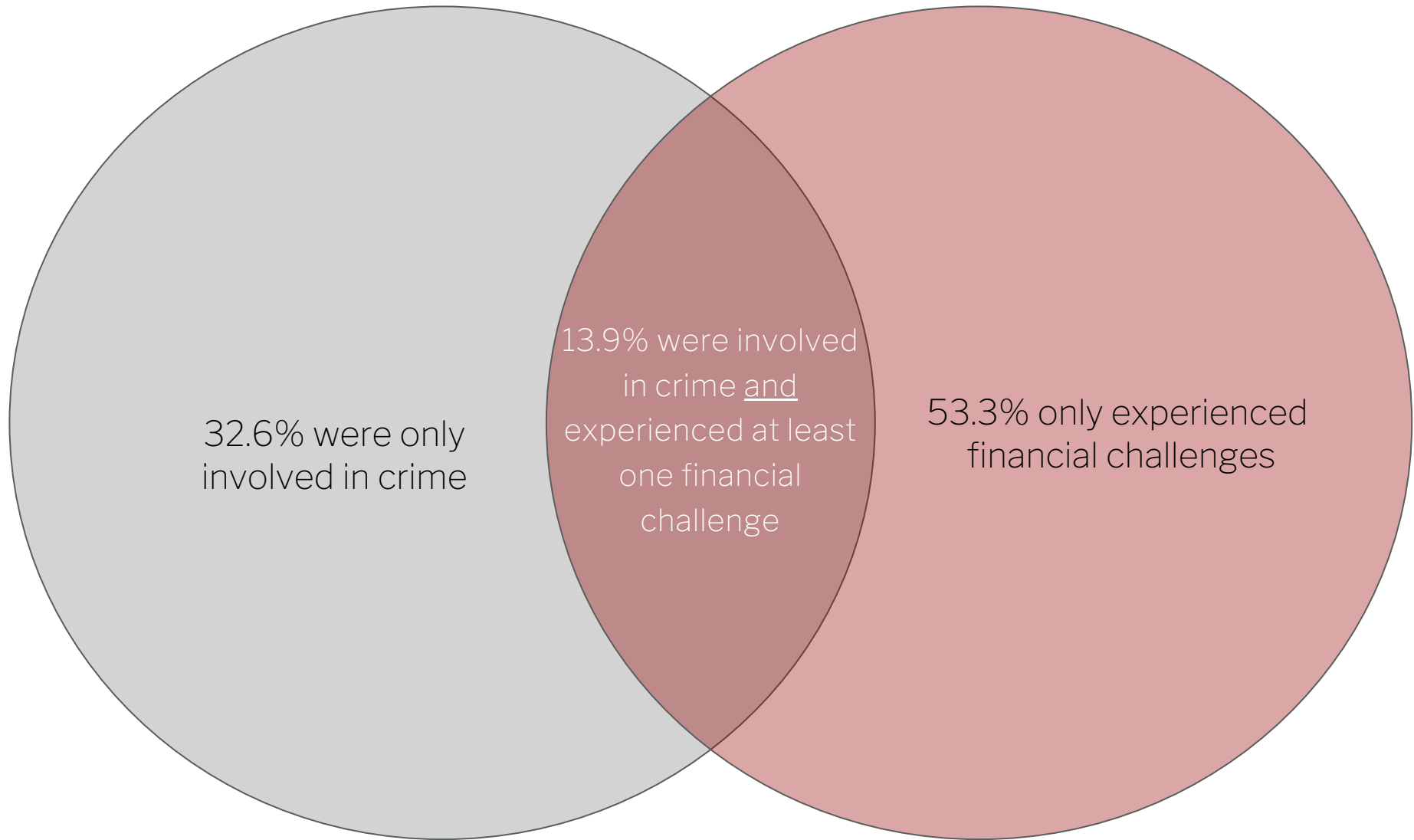
CHARACTER LEVEL FINDINGS

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KEY FINDINGS: CHARACTER LEVEL

- 140 characters faced financial challenges, largely housing and job-related
- 97 characters were involved in financial crime
- White characters were more likely to face housing or job-related challenges, while Black characters were more likely to encounter health or food-related challenges
- A substantial proportion of characters facing housing-related challenges were minor characters; many of these characters were homeless

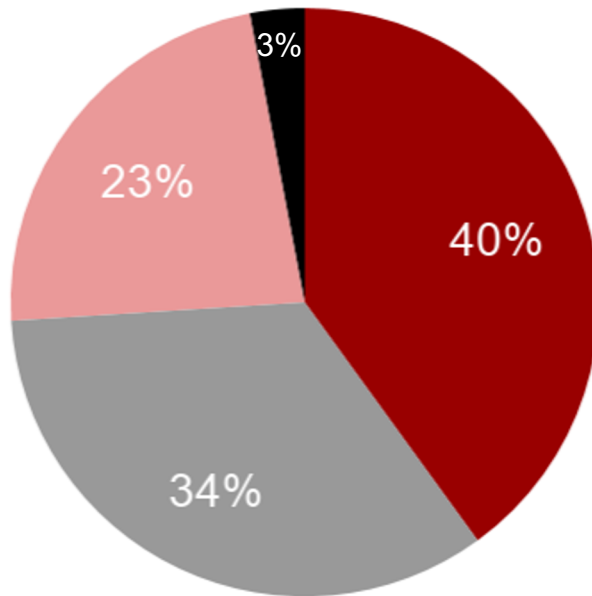
208 CHARACTERS ANALYZED



CHARACTERS WITH FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

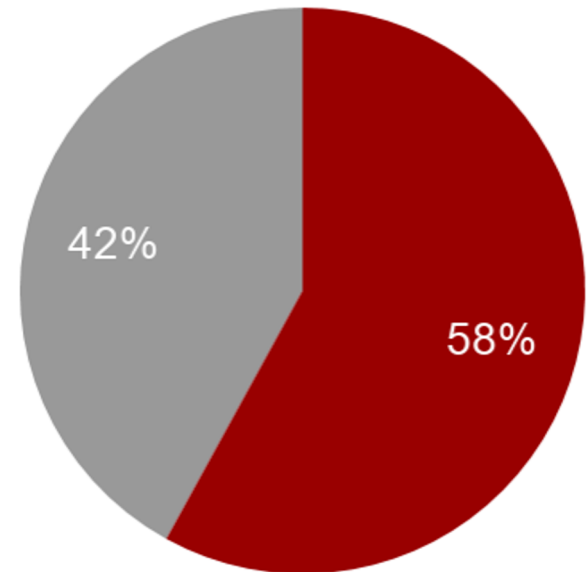
Characters facing financial challenges were majority male and highly diverse, 34% Black and 23% Latinx

Race



● WHITE ● BLACK ● LATINX ● OTHER

Gender

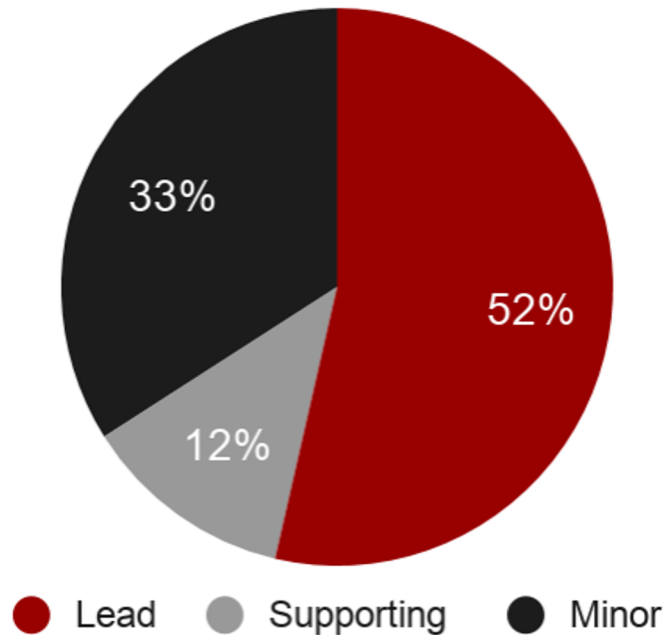


● MEN ● WOMEN

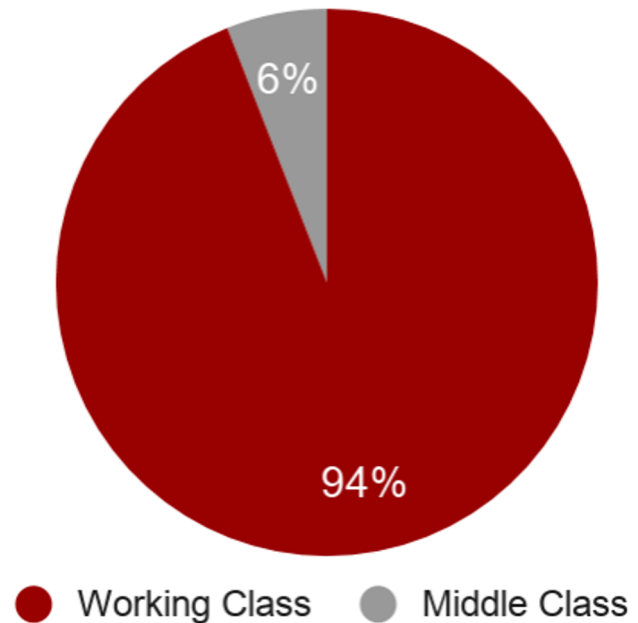
CHARACTERS WITH FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

About half of characters facing financial challenges were lead characters, but one-third were minor characters; virtually all were working-class

Role Size

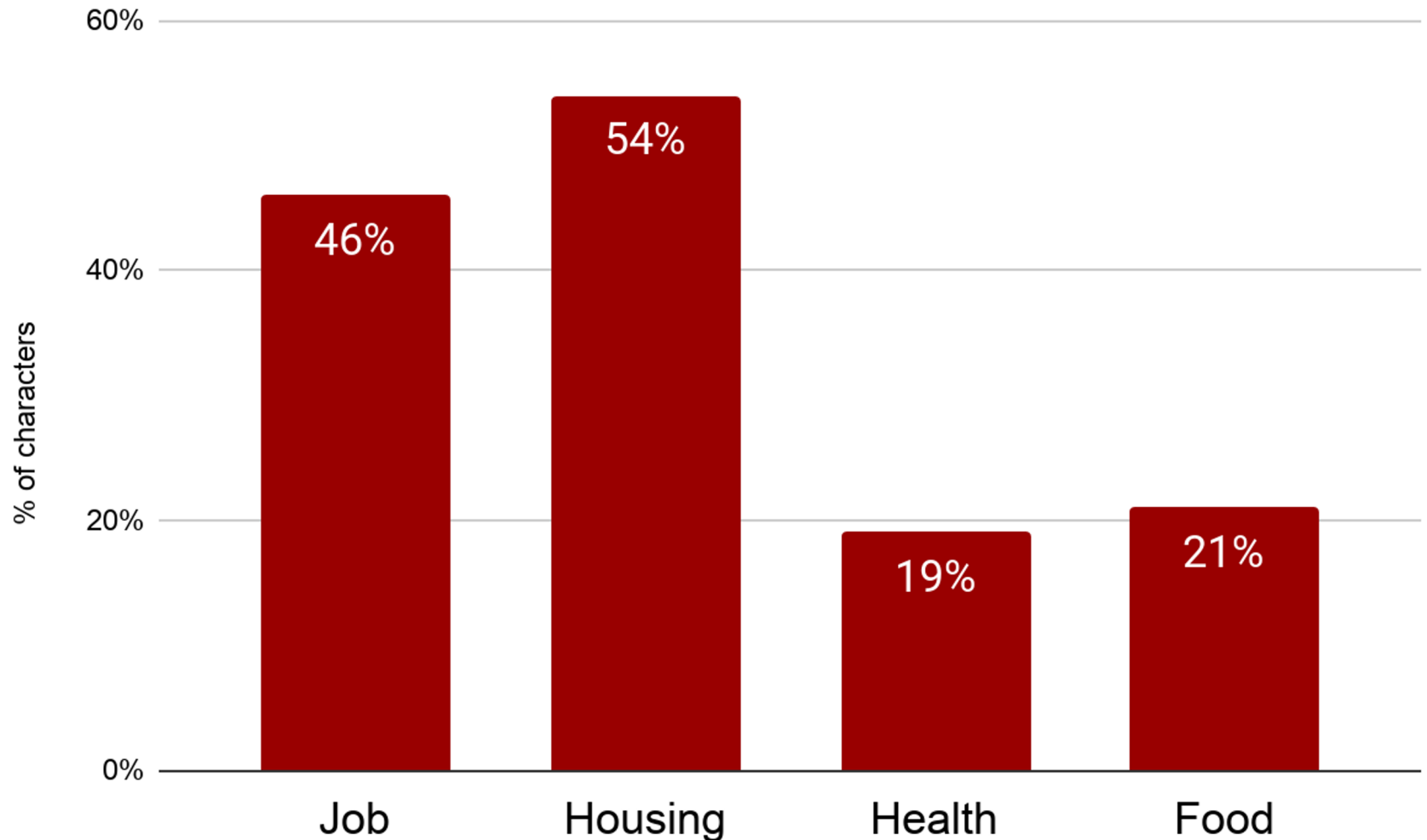


Class



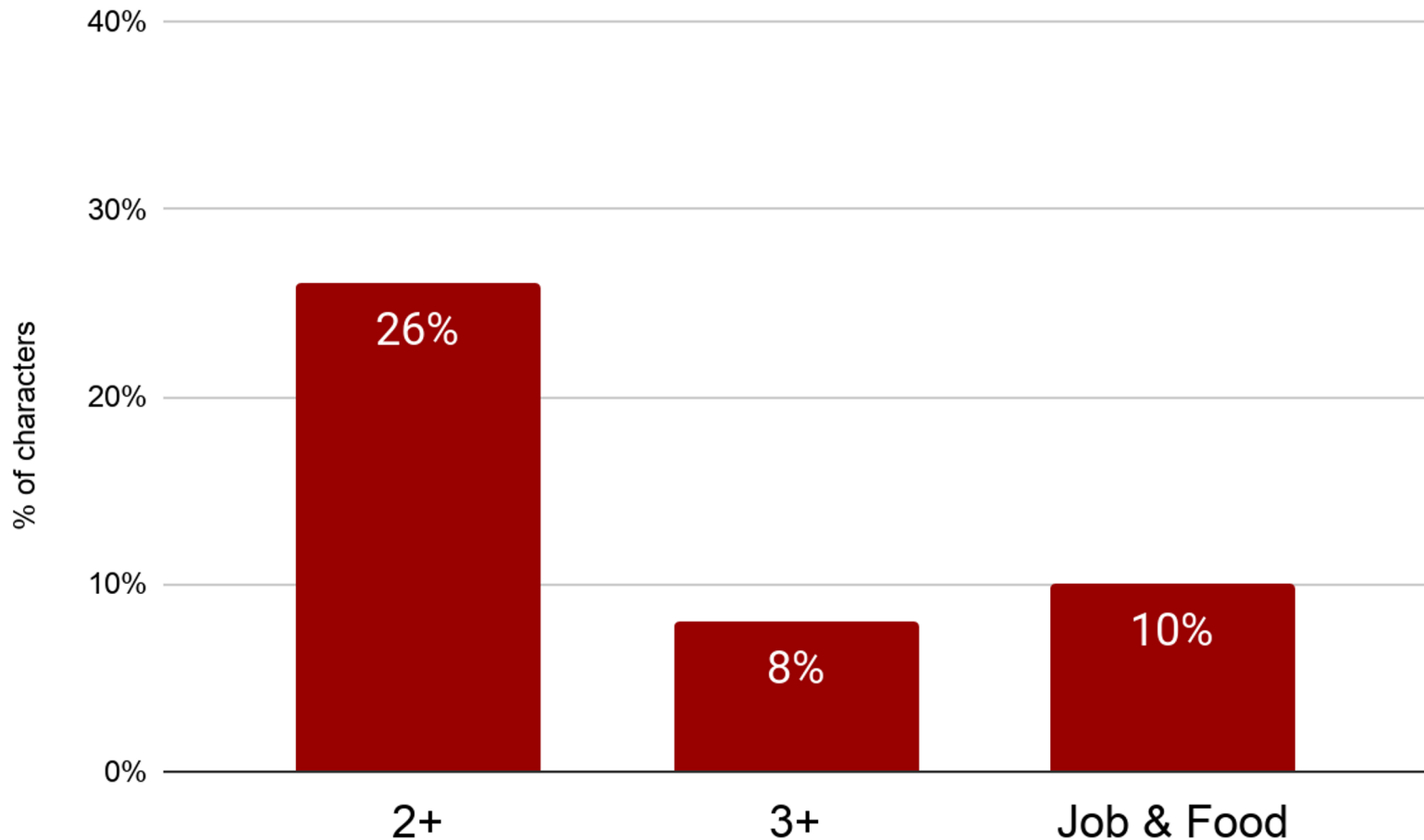
CHARACTERS WITH FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

Among characters with financial challenges, job and housing-related problems were the most common



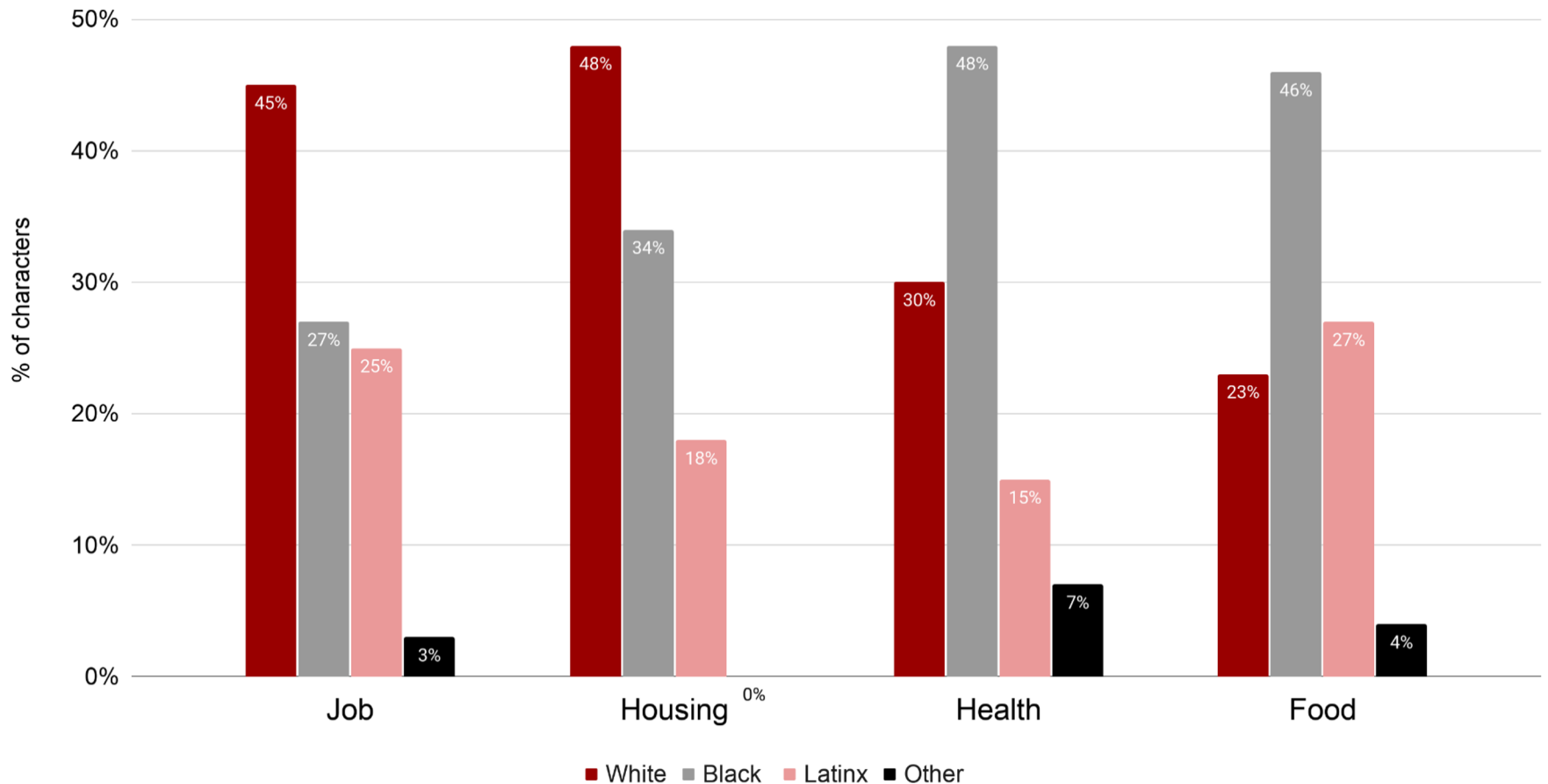
MULTIPLE FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

26% of characters who encountered a financial challenge experienced at least **two** types of challenges



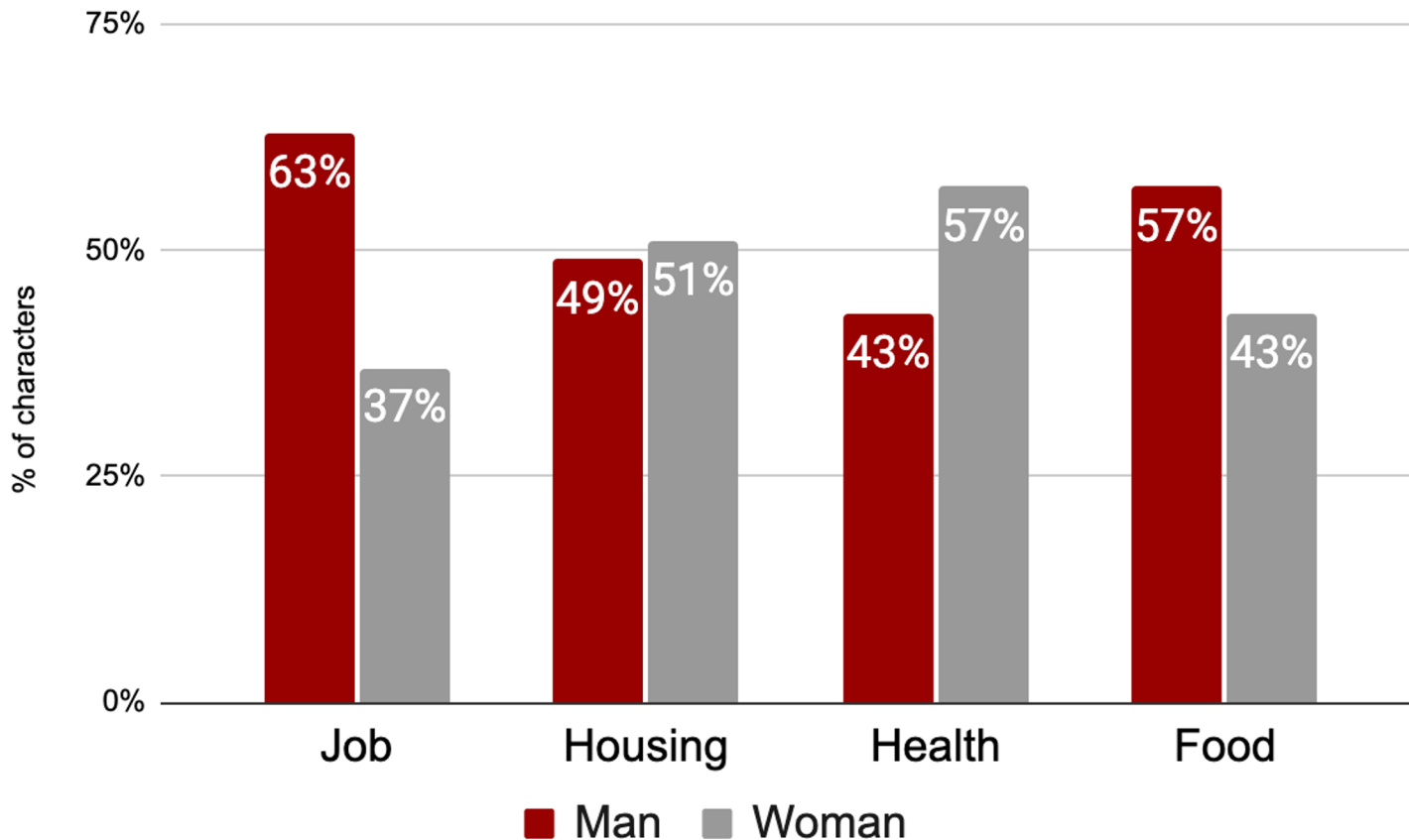
FINANCIAL CHALLENGES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

Housing and job-related challenges were most common among White characters; health and food-related struggles were most common among Black characters



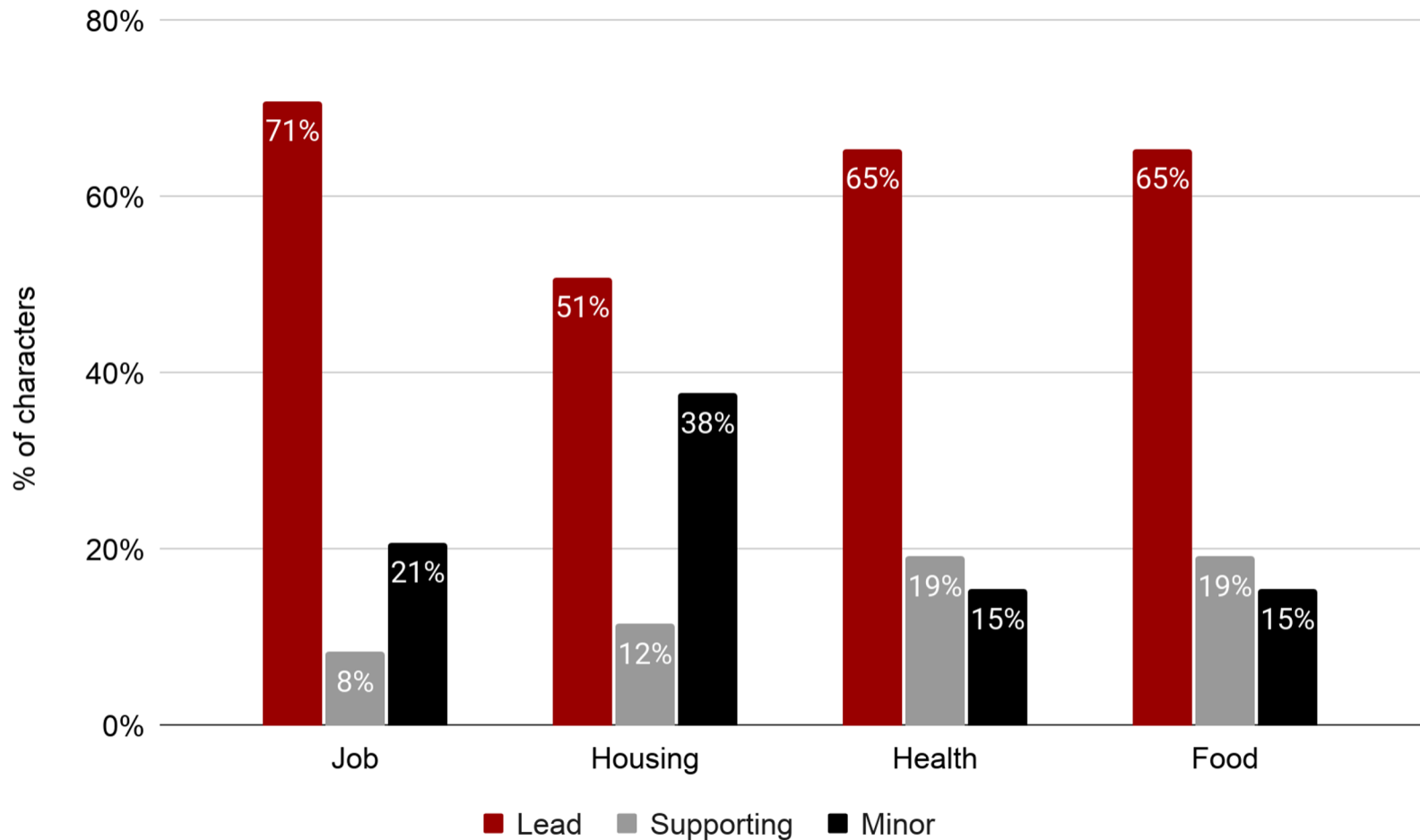
FINANCIAL CHALLENGES BY GENDER

Job-related challenges were most common among male characters; health-related challenges were most common among female characters



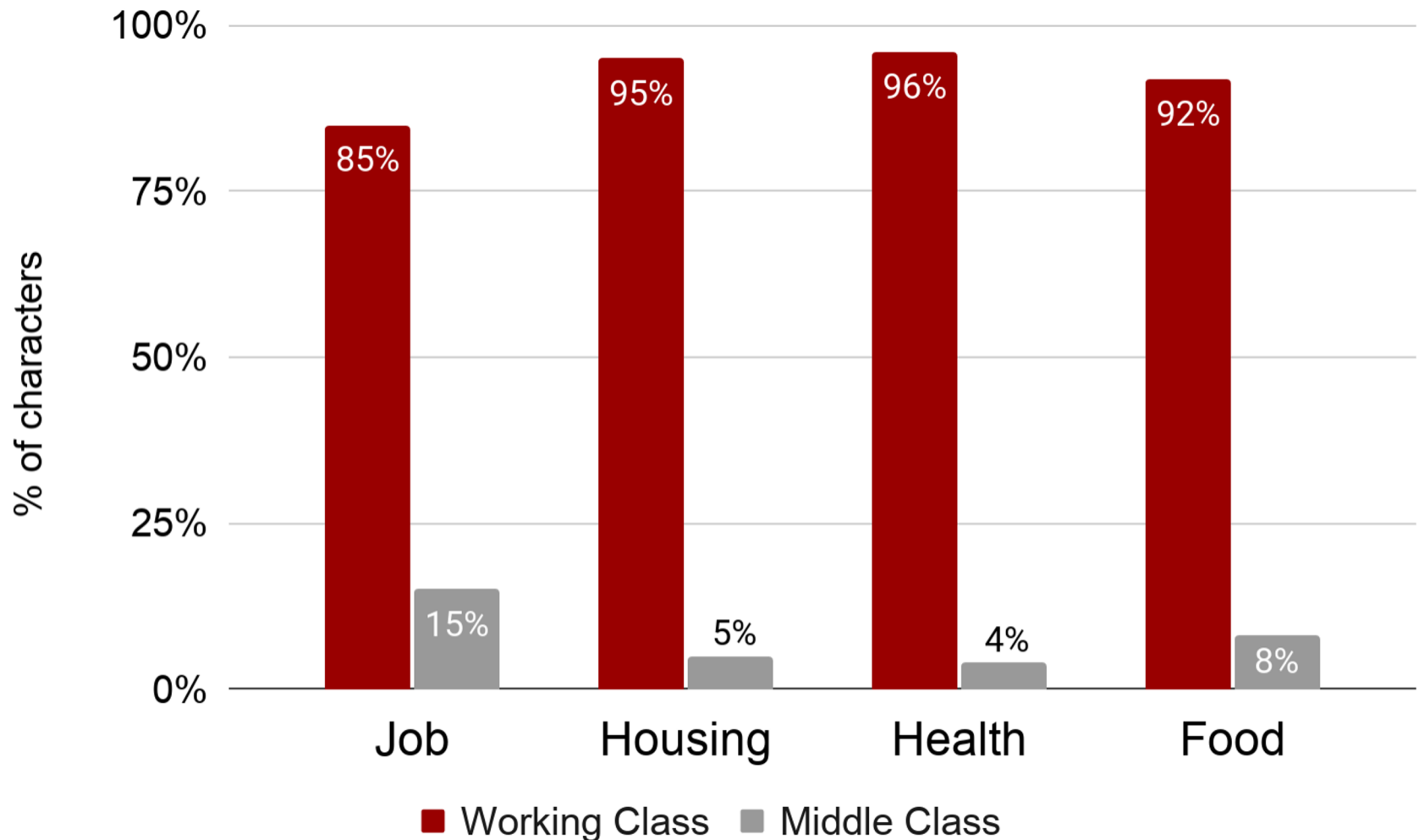
FINANCIAL CHALLENGES BY ROLE SIZE

Financial challenges were most common among lead characters, but a number of minor characters experienced housing problems



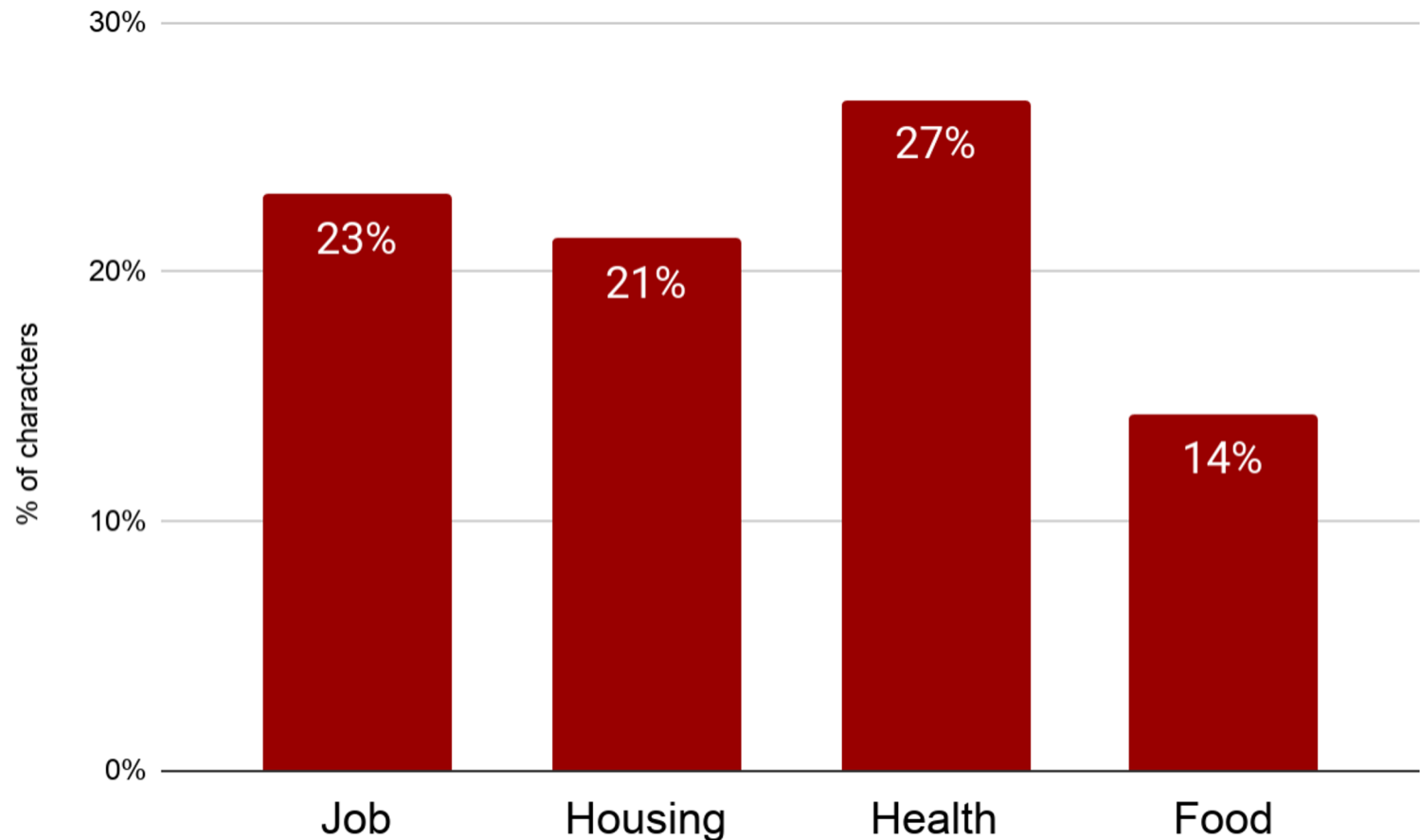
FINANCIAL CHALLENGES BY CLASS

Among characters who faced financial challenges, the overwhelming majority were coded as working class



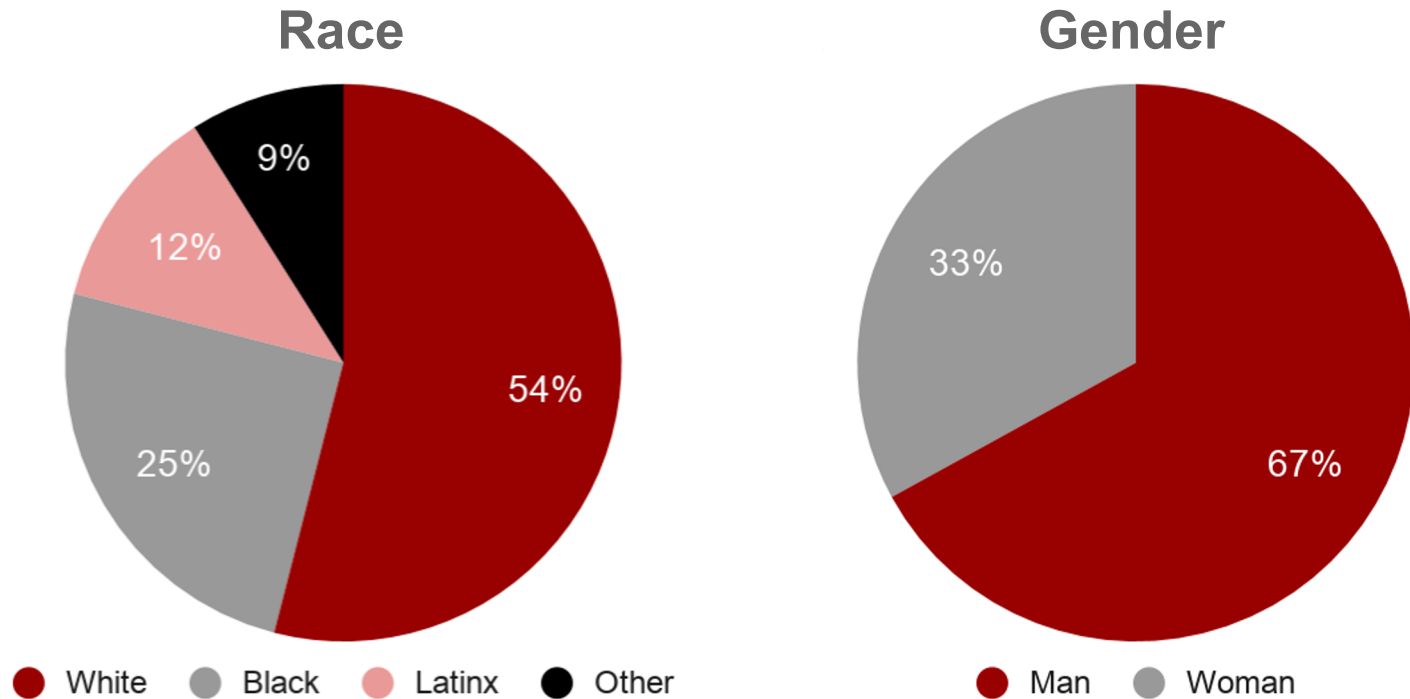
CHARACTERS WITH FINANCIAL CHALLENGES INVOLVED IN CRIME

Among characters who faced financial challenges, 21% were involved in financial crime; crime was most common among those facing health-related challenges



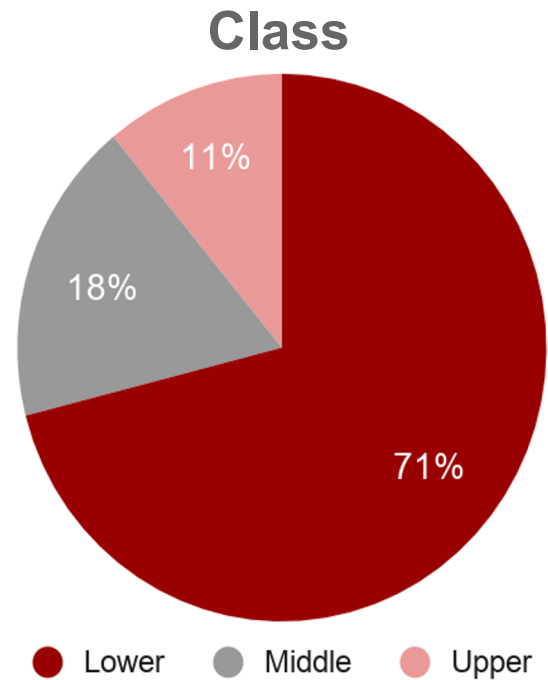
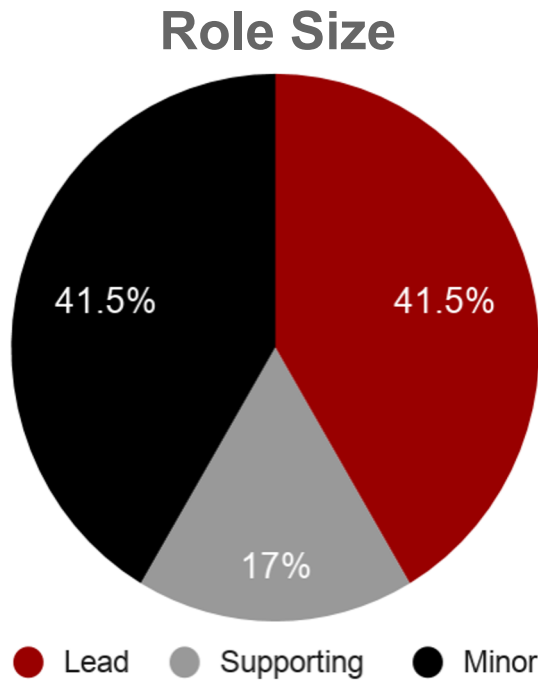
DEMOGRAPHICS OF CHARACTERS INVOLVED IN CRIME

Among characters involved in crime, two thirds were male and slightly more than half were White



DEMOGRAPHICS OF CHARACTERS INVOLVED IN CRIME

Among characters involved in crime, almost 3 in 4 were lower/working class; both lead and minor characters were frequently involved in crime



APPENDIX A: KEYWORD MENTIONS IN SCRIPTS

- The following tables show the number of TV and Movie mentions and scripts (individual episodes or films) for each keyword
- For example, “bus” was mentioned 7,846 times in 4,247 TV scripts

KEYWORD MENTIONS IN SCRIPTS 2015-2020 (1-10)

Keyword	TV Mentions	TV Scripts	Movie Mentions	Movie Scripts	Total Mentions	Total Scripts
Bus	7,846	4,247	3,400	1,481	11,246	5,728
Starving	3,055	2,533	1,488	1,106	4,543	3,639
Loan	2,978	1,827	1,413	739	4,391	2,566
Homeless	2,284	1,467	713	464	2,997	1,931
Bum	2,120	1,646	849	574	2,969	2,220
Wages	1,309	1,051	576	378	1,885	1,429
Unemployed	751	613	399	301	1,150	914
Poor people	718	308	376	139	1,094	447
Poverty	592	490	381	253	973	743
welfare	624	468	363	224	987	692

KEYWORD MENTIONS IN SCRIPTS 2015-2020 (11-20)

Keyword	TV Mentions	TV Scripts	Movie Mentions	Movie Scripts	Total Mentions	Total Scripts
paycheck	701	580	271	221	972	801
evicted	594	403	214	138	808	541
single mom	517	297	133	68	650	365
Working class	422	191	191	78	613	269
Coupon	507	337	135	92	642	429
needy	478	424	112	100	590	524
Beggar	289	243	298	208	587	451
Payday	429	357	98	85	527	442
social security	426	296	110	84	536	380
work overtime	250	136	121	59	371	195

KEYWORD MENTIONS IN SCRIPTS 2015-2020 (21-30)

Keyword	TV Mentions	TV Scripts	Movie Mentions	Movie Scripts	Total Mentions	Total Scripts
Laundromat	287	161	76	37	363	198
child support	241	169	121	73	362	242
pawn shop	266	154	52	32	318	186
trailer park	247	140	32	27	279	167
minimum wage	199	172	85	53	284	225
homeless shelter	181	120	64	37	245	157
double shift	162	132	56	43	218	175
soup kitchen	180	119	29	20	209	139
Jobless	44	41	148	96	192	137
low income	138	100	43	28	181	128

KEYWORD MENTIONS IN SCRIPTS 2015-2020 (31-40)

Keyword	TV Mentions	TV Scripts	Movie Mentions	Movie Scripts	Total Mentions	Total Scripts
Second Job	123	76	44	19	167	95
Working conditions	156	63	43	16	199	79
Bucks an hour	118	85	43	33	161	118
Vagrant	126	107	39	35	165	142
sweatshop	127	84	28	20	155	104
foreclosure	95	77	57	41	152	118
food bank	109	52	36	16	145	68
gentrified	110	81	18	16	128	97
transient	86	75	49	39	135	114
thrift store	95	73	36	29	131	102

KEYWORD MENTIONS IN SCRIPTS 2015-2020 (41-50)

Keyword	TV Mentions	TV Scripts	Movie Mentions	Movie Scripts	Total Mentions	Total Scripts
overcharge	98	84	23	21	121	105
financial aid	97	65	46	29	143	94
food stamps	87	52	37	24	124	76
gentrification	101	72	16	14	117	86
layoff	97	69	31	21	128	90
free lunch	96	64	17	17	113	81
Walkout	89	45	11	5	100	50
street life	49	18	32	13	81	31
Bootstrap	56	49	16	14	72	63
Section 8	38	20	15	11	53	31

KEYWORD MENTIONS IN SCRIPTS 2015-2020 (51-60)

Keyword	TV Mentions	TV Scripts	Movie Mentions	Movie Scripts	Total Mentions	Total Scripts
payday loan	53	31	4	3	57	34
living in poverty	30	19	21	11	51	30
slumlord	48	42	3	3	51	45
paycheck to paycheck	29	27	13	9	42	36
bounce check	22	12	7	3	29	15
Gig Economy	23	21	0	0	23	21
food pantry	30	13	3	2	33	15
relief fund	30	17	5	4	35	21
Norma Rae	24	23	1	1	25	24
Food Insecurity	2	2	6	1	8	3

APPENDIX B: LIST OF SHOWS/FILMS & EPISODES

- The following tables list the names and episode titles of all shows and films included in our sample

LIST OF SHOWS/FILMS & EPISODES

Name	Year	Season	Episode	Episode Title
2 Broke Girls	2015	5	5	"And the Escape Room"
Abby's	2019	1	5	"Mail Bin"
Animal Kingdom	2019	4	6	"Into the Black"
Animal Kingdom	2018	3	5	"Prey"
Black Jesus	2015	2	5	"Tasty Tudi's"
Black-ish	2016	2	24	"Good-ish Times"
Black-ish	2017	4	8	"Charity Case"
Bob's Burgers	2016	6	8	"Sexy Dance Healing"
Bones	2016	11	12	"The Murder of the Meninist"
Car Dogs	2016	Film	N/A	N/A

LIST OF SHOWS/FILMS & EPISODES

Name	Year	Season	Episode	Episode Title
Castle	2015	8	4	"What Lies Beneath..."
Coop and Cami Ask the World	2018	1	8	"Would You Wrather Get a Moose Angry?"
Corporate	2018	1	8	"Society Tomorrow"
Crazy Ex-Girlfriend	2015	1	8	"My Mom, Greg's Mom and Josh's Sweet Dance Moves!"
Criminal Minds	2018	13	20	"All You Can Eat"
CSI Cyber	2015	2	10	"Shades of Grey"
Deidra & Laney Rob a Train	2017	Film	N/A	N/A
Evil Nanny	2016	Film	N/A	N/A
Flesh and Bone	2015	1	7	"Full Dress"

LIST OF SHOWS/FILMS & EPISODES

Name	Year	Season	Episode	Episode Title
For Life	2020	1	1	"Pilot"
For the People	2019	2	6	"You Belong Here"
Gentefied	2020	1	4	"Unemployed AF"
God Friended Me	2018	1	5	"Unfriended"
Good Sam	2019	Film	N/A	N/A
The Greasy Strangler	2016	Film	N/A	N/A
Haters Back Off!	2016	1	2	"Uploading my Fist Video"
High Maintenance	2018	2	3	"Trixie"
House of Cards	2015	3	1	"Chapter 29"
In Contempt	2018	1	6	"Banned"

LIST OF SHOWS/FILMS & EPISODES

Name	Year	Season	Episode	Episode Title
In Contempt	2018	1	10	"BLM, Part Two"
Jane the Virgin	2015	2	7	"Chapter Twenty-Nine"
K.C. Undercover	2016	2	8	"Down in the Dumps"
Little Woods	2018	Film	N/A	N/A
Longmire	2017	6	8	"Cowboy Bill"
Looking	2015	2	4	"Looking Down the Road"
Major Crimes	2016	5	4	"Skin Deep"
Mixed-ish	2020	1	22	"Every Little Step"
NCIS	2019	17	8	"Musical Chairs"
NCIS: LA	2016	8	8	"Parallel Resistors"

LIST OF SHOWS/FILMS & EPISODES

Name	Year	Season	Episode	Episode Title
Outsiders	2017	2	6	"Kill or Be Killed"
Ozark	2020	3	8	"BFF"
Rebel	2017	1	3	"Chasing Ghosts"
Riverdale	2019	3	15	"Chapter Fifty: American Dreams"
S.W.A.T	2017	1	15	"Crews"
Secret Millionaire	2018	Film	N/A	N/A
Shadow Fighter	2018	Film	N/A	N/A
Shameless	2019	10	4	"A Little Gallagher Goes a Long Way"
Shameless	2016	6	6	"NSFW"
Shameless	2016	7	1	"Hiraeth"

LIST OF SHOWS/FILMS & EPISODES

Name	Year	Season	Episode	Episode Title
Show Me a Hero	2015	1	2	"Parts 1 & 2"
Show Me a Hero	2015	1	3	"Parts 3 & 4"
Smilf	2018	2	6	"Should Mothers Incur Loss Financially?"
Smilf	2017	2	9	"Single Mom Is Losing Faith"
Speechless	2018	2	18	"N-o-Nominee"
Stuck in the Middle	2016	1	1	"Stuck in the Middle"
Suits	2018	7	12	"Bad Man"
Superior Donuts	2017	1	11	"Wage Against the Machine"
Superstore	2019	4	15	"Salary"
The Bold Type	2017	1	8	"The End of the Beginning"

LIST OF SHOWS/FILMS & EPISODES

Name	Year	Season	Episode	Episode Title
The Bold Type	2018	2	3	"The Scarlet Letter"
The Chi	2019	2	7	"A Blind Eye"
The Chi	2018	1	8	"Wallets"
The Chi	2019	2	8	"Lean Into It"
The Good Fight	2017	1	2	"First Week"
The Good Fight	2019	3	1	"The One About the Recent Troubles"
The Major Deal	2016	Film	N/A	N/A
The Mayor	2017	1	5	"The Strike"
The Paynes	2018	2	1	"A Painful Bounce"

LIST OF SHOWS/FILMS & EPISODES

Name	Year	Season	Episode	Episode Title
The Public	2019	Film	N/A	N/A
The Resident	2019	3	3	"Woman Down"
We Are Your Friends	2015	Film	N/A	N/A
Deadly Pickup	2016	Film	N/A	N/A

POVERTY NARRATIVES IN SCRIPTED TELEVISION AND FILM

In-depth content analysis (2015-2020)

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