



POVERTY NARRATIVES in popular culture

Final Report

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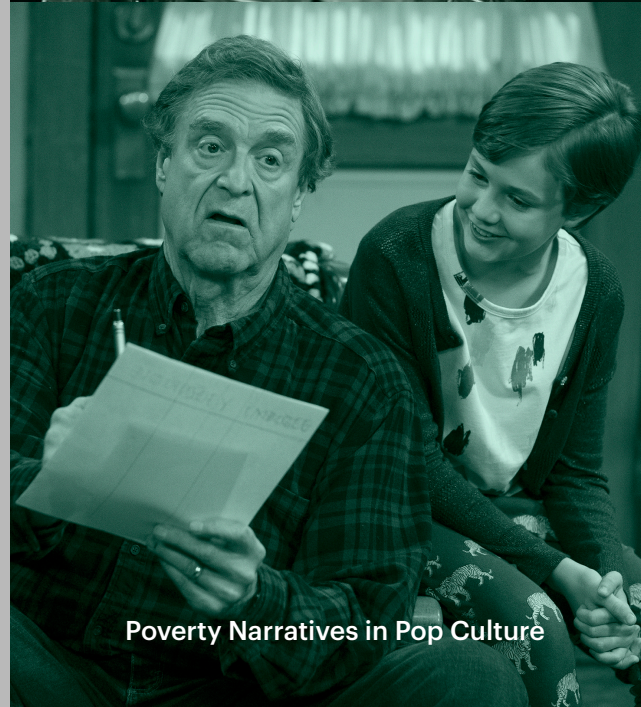
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■ INTRODUCTION

Wealth inequality in the U.S. has increased tremendously over the past fifty years (Piketty & Saez, 2013), but the proportion of Americans who self-identify as lower- or working-class has remained relatively unchanged over the same time period (GSS, 2021). Research shows that low-income Americans are often reluctant to think of themselves as poor or working class (Williams, 2009). This may, in part, be a result of social stigma painting poor people as cold and incompetent (Fiske et al., 2002), as well as lazy, entitled, and drug-addicted (GOOD, 2019). Further, Americans tend to attribute poverty to individual characteristics and behavior, such as lack of personal responsibility or work ethic (GOOD).

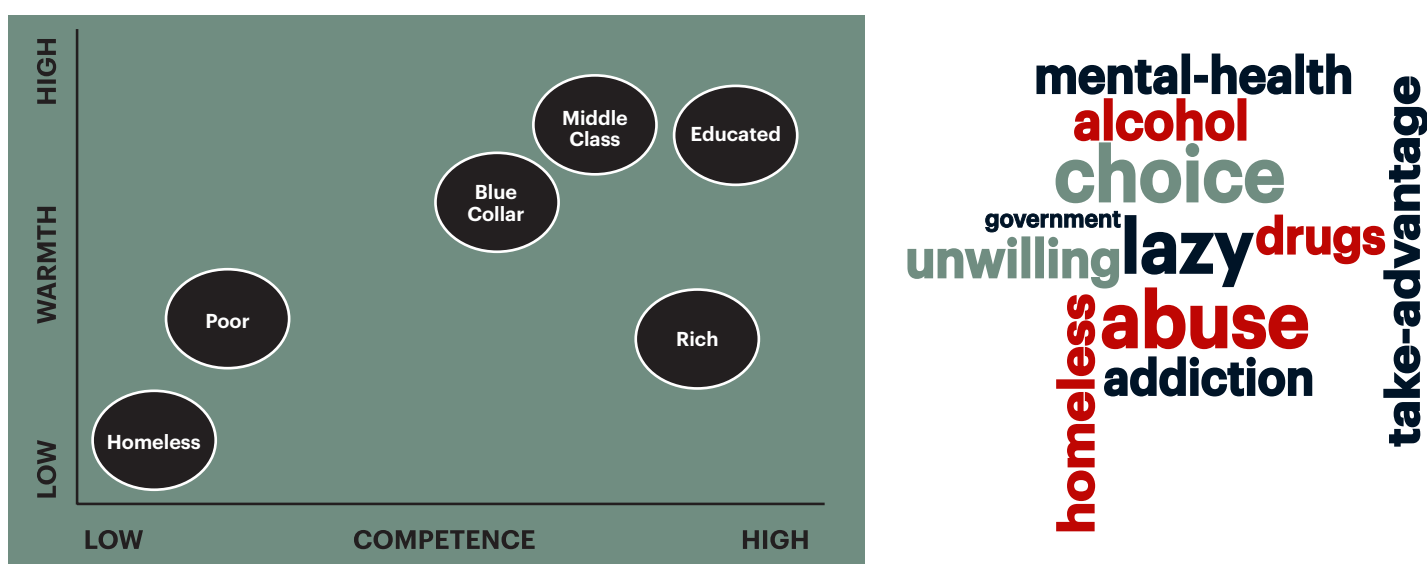


Figure 1 : (Left) Perceptions of Social Groups (Fiske et al., 2002); (Right) Words Associated with Poverty (GOOD, 2019)

These stereotypes discourage empathy for people living in poverty (Bullock, 2008; Fiske et al., 2002) and hinder support for policies that could promote economic mobility (Williams, 2009). As a result of this stigma, poor people may be less likely to participate in movements for systemic change and economic opportunity (Brewer & Silver, 2000; Klandermans, 2002; Williams, 2009).

THE POWER OF POP CULTURE

Research shows that mass media — and particularly popular entertainment — play a powerful role in shaping our attitudes, perceptions, and policy support behavior on a wide variety of issues. For example, Gillig et al. (2018) found that seeing a brief storyline involving a transgender character was associated with more supportive attitudes toward transgender people and related policies. Exposure to news coverage of transgender issues had no such effect. Entertainment stories are able to educate and inform viewers about health and social issues, and



To what extent do mass media perpetuate stigmatizing, individualistic narratives about poverty? How common are counternarratives that challenge stereotypes of those experiencing poverty?

even inspire action, because they do not trigger resistance in the same way that overtly persuasive messages do (Moyer-Guse, 2008). In particular, when viewers develop bonds with familiar characters or are transported from the real world to the story world, they are less likely to argue with the content or perceive it as an attempt to pressure them into doing or believing something. Over the last decade, numerous initiatives have adopted a culture change strategy focused on harnessing the power of entertainment to shift attitudes on issues ranging from health equity to gun safety to immigration. Emerging research (e.g., Rosenthal, Rogers et al., 2020) shows that such a strategy can be quite effective at changing attitudes, fostering support for more inclusive policies, and promoting civic action. Could an entertainment-based

culture change approach be used to humanize the experience of poverty and promote support for equity-based policies?

Before embarking on a culture change initiative, it is essential to first understand what messages are being conveyed about poverty through pop culture, and who is consuming these messages. To what extent do mass media perpetuate stigmatizing, individualistic narratives about poverty? How common are counternarratives that challenge stereotypes of those experiencing poverty?

To address these questions, the USC Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project (MIP) conducted a mixed-methods study called a "cultural audit" (Potts, 2018), with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. A cultural audit is a method of understanding key audiences by understanding the narratives they consume. For more than 20 years, the Lear Center has studied the power of media and entertainment to raise awareness about social issues, shape our perceptions of the world, and motivate people to action. The ultimate goals of this project were to:

1. Establish a baseline of existing narratives of poverty, opportunity, and economic mobility; and
2. Provide storytellers, communicators, and advocates with actionable insights to enable them to create and leverage new narratives.

HOW DO MEDIA NARRATIVES AFFECT OUR VIEWS OF POVERTY?

Sociologist Zeynep Tufekci published a piece in *Scientific American* (2019) highlighting the difference between psychological versus sociological storytelling. She claims that Hollywood writers excel at telling psychological stories, which rely on emotional investment in individual characters. Sociological stories, such as the early seasons of *Game of Thrones*, are much more challenging to write. Such stories still involve individual agency, but also address the institutions, systems and structures in which individuals are embedded. They ask us to take the perspective of a character who may not be “good,” and imagine the choices we might make under similar circumstances or constraints. Tufekci writes that “whether we tell our stories primarily from a sociological or psychological point of view has great consequences for how we deal with our world and the problems we encounter.”

Our research (Rosenthal, Jauriqui et al., 2020) and that of others has consistently shown that the dominant narrative of poverty in popular entertainment is one of individualism, and particularly meritocracy: the idea that anyone can achieve economic mobility through grit and determination. Narratives that frame poverty as an individual-level problem reduce empathy toward affected groups (Savani et al., 2011) and decrease support for systemic policy change (Applebaum, 2001). A study we recently conducted with the Behavioural Insights Team (Jones et al., 2021) found that even when narratives acknowledge systemic causes, pairing this with an individual-level solution like charity can undermine support for equity-based policies. The most powerful stories are those that combine individual choices and broader social context, along with modeling systems change solutions (Rosenthal, 2021).



A *Family Feud* contestant explained that she and her five kids lived in a homeless shelter and the community helped get them back on their feet.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

1. Detailed reports on this formative research can be found at: www.mediaimpactproject.org/poverty.html
2. A report on our qualitative research on music lyrics and videos, conducted by Erin Potts, can be found here: https://learcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/povertynarratives_music.pdf
3. A report on our audience survey can be found here: https://learcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/povertynarratives_povertymindsets_deck.pdf
4. A nationally-representative (probability-based) sample was recruited from NORC's Ameri-Speak Panel.
5. Harmony Labs' research on the audience segments can be found at: <https://obiaudiences.org>

To better understand priority audiences and the media narratives they consume about poverty, we first conducted formative research.¹ This began with a landscape analysis curating previous research on media representations of poverty and their effect on audiences. Next, we interviewed thought leaders in the entertainment industry, academia, and advocacy. Finally, we qualitatively analyzed poverty and wealth themes in scripted TV and film, music lyrics and videos, and video games from the last five years.

Informed by this formative research, we conducted a **nationally-representative audience survey** to understand the relationships between Americans' mindsets toward economic opportunity and their entertainment consumption. We also conducted several quantitative content analyses. We analyzed **700 thousand hours of television**, and did a **deep-dive into scripted content** to better understand the narratives about poverty that dominate the U.S. media landscape. We conducted a comparative analysis of **popular sitcoms** featuring low versus high socioeconomic status characters to understand whether such representations reinforce stereotypes of poverty. Finally, building upon the qualitative analysis of the most popular music lyrics and videos,² we conducted a quantitative analysis of poverty and wealth keywords and themes in **music lyrics** from the last ten years.

AUDIENCE SURVEY³

In August 2020, we surveyed over 2,600 Americans.⁴ We used a cluster analysis technique to group participants into four audience segments identified by our partners at Harmony Labs,⁵ based on beliefs about individuals living in poverty and government assistance, economic mobility and equality, systemic causes and responsibility for poverty, and racial discrimination:



PEOPLE POWER (PP) — 12%: Community-minded, politically engaged, and ready to fight for system reform to solve social issues like poverty.



IF YOU SAY SO (SS) — 23%: Independent realists who know the system is broken but are skeptical that there are real solutions to society's problems.



TOUGH COOKIES (TC) — 44%: Family-first rule followers who believe that — while the system may be broken in America — hard work can still create success.



DON'T TREAD ON ME (DT) — 20%: Conservative, achievement-oriented, and strong believers that equal opportunity already exists in the United States.

Within and across the four audience segments, we examined beliefs about poverty, civic engagement, and COVID-19. We also asked about media preferences, including news, social media, and entertainment. Participants were asked about 45 popular television shows from the 2019-2020 season (15 broadcast, 15 cable, 15 streaming), selected based on popularity, as determined by Nielsen data.

PEOPLE POWER

"We have to liberate ourselves from the status quo. It's time to live up to our ideals, especially for the marginalized and oppressed. All kinds of people coming together in community can fix the system. This goes for nearly every problem, not just poverty."



IF YOU SAY SO

"It's complicated. Politicians lie, cheat, and steal — corporations too. The system can't be trusted. We have to look out for ourselves, here and now. Why not have fun doing it? I wish I could solve poverty, but a lot of people suck, and there's no way the system is going to change anytime soon."



Figure 2:
Audience
Segment
Mottos

TOUGH COOKIES

"We play by the rules, just like our parents. We learned to treat others right, and that family comes first. With a little faith and some hard work, there's no reason this country's problems can't be solved."



DON'T TREAD ON ME

"Everyone's got the same shot at making it. Race just isn't a factor. We work hard for what we have. Our boys in blue protect that. The mainstream media wants you to believe otherwise, but, with blood, sweat, and tears, anyone can achieve the American Dream."



6. A report on our analysis of poverty on all US television can be found here: <https://learcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Poverty-Narratives-in-TV.pdf>

7. The data were drawn from TVEyes, a global TV search engine that monitors more than 900 TV stations in all 210 U.S. media markets, providing video along with closed captioning transcripts of programming and commercials. The database includes national broadcast networks, local TV markets, and basic cable TV programming. Advertising and sports programming accounted for less than 1% of mentions and are thus excluded from the report.

8. The 15 keywords for all U.S. TV were: Poverty, Homeless, Evicted, Payday, Jobless, Minimum wage, Low income, Laid off, Paycheck, Unemployed, Wages, Food bank, Child support, Foreclosure, and Food stamps. These were drawn from an initial list of 60 keywords informed by our previous research and that of our fellow grantee Harmony Labs. We examined search results for each of the 60 keywords for relevance and narrowed the list to the 15 keywords that most accurately captured poverty-related content.

9. Seven topic categories were assigned using an automated algorithm that searched for topic-related keywords within 30 words of the primary keyword. A given mention could be assigned multiple topics.

10. A report on our analysis of poverty in scripted entertainment can be found here: <https://learcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Poverty-Narratives-in-Scripted-Entertainment.pdf>

11. The 18 scripted keywords were: Living in poverty, Wages, Unemployed, Paycheck to paycheck, Layoff, Low income, Minimum wage, Payday loan, Food stamps, Foreclosure, Food bank, Evicted, Homeless, Child support, Bounce check, Overcharge, Soup kitchen, and Double shift. These were drawn from the same initial list of 60 keywords. We examined search results for each of the 60 keywords for relevance and narrowed the list to 18 keywords that most accurately captured scripted content related to poverty. The final keywords differed from those used in the analysis of all TV coverage. For example, “poverty” was a common keyword for news, while “food stamps” returned more relevant scripted content.

POVERTY ON ALL U.S. TELEVISION⁶

To understand how often poverty-related issues are depicted in U.S. news and entertainment programming, we conducted a rigorous analysis of TV coverage, including news, scripted TV, and unscripted TV during the month of December 2020.⁷ We captured a total of 166,214 mentions of 15 poverty-related keywords.⁸ For each mention, we analyzed the topic,⁹ genre, and number of views. References to poverty on U.S. television had over 3 billion views, or impressions, in December. To provide some perspective, the word “football” appeared five times as frequently as the 15 poverty keywords combined over the same time frame.

POVERTY IN SCRIPTED ENTERTAINMENT¹⁰

Because scripted narratives are especially powerful, we sought to better understand the nature and context of depictions of poverty in scripted TV and film. First, we searched the Norman Lear Center Script Database, which includes over 144,000 scripted TV episodes and films, for 60 poverty-related keywords, identifying more than 44,000 unique keyword mentions.

Next, we conducted an in-depth content analysis of 72 scripted TV episodes and films that mentioned 18 of these keywords¹¹ (four episodes for each keyword). Within each episode, we identified depictions of four types of financial challenges — those related to employment, housing, health, and food. To understand the balance between psychological and sociological storytelling, we examined portrayals of individualistic and systemic concepts in relation to poverty. Individualistic concepts are those that address the financial needs of one individual, or sometimes a few. For example, committing a crime to save one’s family from eviction or donating to charity are considered individualistic concepts. Systemic concepts are those — like collective action or policy change — that address the root causes of the financial challenge.

We identified 140 speaking characters who experienced one or more financial challenges and 96 who were involved in financial crime. For each identified character, we captured demographics, the centrality of their role, and overlap between financial challenges and crime.

12. A report on stereotypes of poverty in sitcoms can be found here: <https://learcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Poverty-Narratives-in-Sitcoms.pdf>

13. Selected series were the most watched broadcast sitcoms among adults aged 18-49, as determined by Nielsen data (reported by IndieWire.com). The 2017-2018 season was selected because it was the most recent season whose debut sitcoms could be evaluated for “staying power.” Examples of lower-SES sitcoms included *Bob’s Burgers*, *The Goldbergs*, *Roseanne*, and *Superstore*, while higher-SES sitcoms included *Black-ish*, *Fresh Off the Boat*, *Last Man Standing*, and *Modern Family*.

14. A report on our analysis of poverty and wealth in music lyrics can be found here: <https://learcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Poverty-Narratives-in-Music-Lyrics.pdf>

15. The 8 wealth keywords were: Money, Cash, Rich, Diamonds, Bank, Trap, Gucci, and Dollars. The 21 poverty keywords were: Bills, Rent, Checks, Projects, Poverty, Homeless, Paycheck, Welfare, Wages, Minimum Wage, Payday, Unemployed, Child Support, Unemployment, Food Stamps, Laid Off, Eviction, Poor People, Out of work, Working class, and Gentrification.

STEREOTYPES OF POVERTY IN SITCOMS¹²

Within scripted TV, we further examined whether popular sitcoms implicitly convey stereotypes of lower-socioeconomic status (SES) people as lazy, incompetent, or unfriendly. We began by identifying the 20 most-watched sitcom series in the 2017-2018 season that aired for three or more seasons.¹³ For each series, we identified the five most prominent characters. Series were then segmented into two categories — lower- or higher-SES — based on the five characters’ level of education, profession, estimated income, size and type of residence, type of neighborhood, and more. We randomly selected four episodes from each series for analysis, giving a total of 80 episodes (40 at each SES level).

We analyzed several variables representing three key dimensions of class-based stereotypes: warmth, competence, and laziness. Some variables were coded linguistically using transcript data from the Norman Lear Center Script Database, while others were coded visually by counting the behaviors of the five main characters. We chose to focus this analysis on sitcoms because the standardized episode length and format enables more “apples-to-apples” comparisons than can be achieved with highly variable dramatic formats. Further, sitcoms tend to be dialogue-heavy, providing substantial data for linguistic analysis.

POVERTY AND WEALTH IN MUSIC LYRICS¹⁴

Building upon our qualitative analysis of poverty and wealth themes in popular music lyrics and videos, we piloted a method of conducting quantitative analysis of music lyrics, using the Lyrics.com database. Whereas the qualitative analysis focused solely on songs that reached the Billboard Hot 100 between 2015 and 2019, for this analysis we expanded the scope to all English-language songs with lyrics in the database, over a ten year period from 2010 to 2019. We analyzed the frequencies of 8 wealth keywords and 21 poverty keywords, identifying a total of 40,467 songs with one or more keyword mentions.¹⁵ Approximately 16% of these songs were tagged with a genre label in the Lyrics.com database. Within this subset, we identified the most frequent genres associated with each keyword. In addition, we conducted a qualitative analysis of 50 songs for each keyword, focusing on themes of meritocracy as well as systemic “counternarratives.”

■ KEY FINDINGS

AUDIENCE SURVEY SEGMENTS

PEOPLE POWER



The **PEOPLE POWER (PP)** segment was the smallest group, accounting for just 12% of our survey sample. They were the most liberal and Democratic-leaning group. PP were racially diverse, and more likely to live in urban areas, relative to other groups. They were also a high socioeconomic status group: 32% had a postgraduate or professional degree, and a third of this group made more than \$100,000 per year.

PP members espoused strongly progressive values. Relative to the other groups, they were the most likely to agree that “compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial value.” They strongly believed it is both the government’s responsibility and “our duty” to help others, and saw those receiving government benefits as deserving. **They were the most likely to take civic action based on something they learned from fictional entertainment, including “high-effort” actions like donating or attending a rally.**

Members of this audience consumed news online and from television, and were more likely than other groups to also get their news from local or national newspapers, or the radio. They were highly engaged with social media, including Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.

PP were very open to entertainment featuring diverse values and ethnicities. Relative to the other groups, they were least likely to seek fun or pleasure from their entertainment and most likely to seek meaning. They watched all types of entertainment TV across broadcast, cable, and streaming platforms. Shows particularly popular with this audience segment included *Ozark*, *Saturday Night Live*, and *Better Call Saul*.

IF YOU SAY SO (SS)



The **IF YOU SAY SO (SS)** segment comprised nearly a quarter of our sample. This group skewed toward the younger end of the spectrum, with a large proportion identifying as ideologically liberal and Democrats. About one-in-five identified as Hispanic. **They were more likely to have a low income relative**

compared to the other segments, with about two-in-five saying they found it very difficult to live on their income in 2019.

Ideologically, they were similar to PP but slightly less progressive. Like PP, they believed it is both the government's responsibility and "our duty" to help others, and viewed those receiving government benefits as deserving. They took low-effort actions, such as seeking more information or speaking with a friend or family member, based on things they learned from fictional entertainment. They were the most likely of all groups to have written a social media comment in response to entertainment.

Similar to other groups, SS got their news online or from television. They were more likely than other groups to also get their news from social sources, like social media and their friends or family. They were the most engaged with social media, checking many platforms frequently, including YouTube and Instagram. They were more likely to be fans of Hip Hop and Pop music than the other groups.

Like PP, SS were open to entertainment featuring diverse values and ethnicities. They leaned toward scripted TV shows, particularly on streaming platforms. They were the least likely to watch cable or broadcast TV. Shows particularly popular with this audience segment included *American Horror Story*, *Tiger King*, and *Grey's Anatomy*.

TOUGH COOKIES (TC)



TOUGH COOKIES (TC) were the largest group, at 44% of the sample. This group was both racially and ideologically diverse. Eighteen percent identified as Hispanic and 14% as Black. They were roughly evenly split between Democrats (40%) and Republicans (37%), with the remainder identifying as Independent. Of the four groups, TC had the highest proportion of women (56%).

They skewed somewhat conservative ideologically. TC believed it is "our duty" to help the less fortunate, but not the government's responsibility. They tended to place high value on authority, agreeing, for example, that "respect for authority is something all children need to learn."

TC were the most likely to believe that it would be easy to make their community a better place to live if people worked together. They took few actions based on something they learned from entertainment, but were the most

likely of all groups to say they registered to vote for this reason (16%).

This segment got their news primarily from TV, including local and national news, as well as cable. Among TC who watched TV news, nearly half tuned into Fox News in the last week. Their social media usage was dominated by Facebook. They primarily sought fun and enjoyment from their entertainment, and leaned toward competition reality TV shows on broadcast networks. Shows popular with TC included *The Masked Singer*, *American Idol*, and *Chicago P.D.*

DON'T TREAD ON ME (DT)



DON'T TREAD ON ME (DT) accounted for 20% of our sample. Members of this group were predominantly White (79%), male (58%) Republicans (76%). They were older than the other groups, with 70% over the age of 45, and were more likely to be retired.

DT were more conservative than the other segments. They had a strong orientation toward authority, agreeing that “If I were a soldier and disagreed with my commanding officer’s orders, I would obey anyway because that is my duty.” They did not believe those receiving government benefits are deserving, by-and-large, and disagreed that it is “our duty” or the government’s responsibility to help people.

Like TC, DT were more likely to believe that it would be easy to make their community a better place to live if people worked together. Across the board, they were least likely to take civic action based on something they learned from entertainment.

Similar to TC, this segment got their news primarily from TV. Of those who watched TV news, more than half tuned into local news and two thirds watched Fox News in the last week. They were not active on social media with the exception of Facebook, and enjoyed Country, Praise, and Oldies music more than the other groups. **DT consumed less entertainment television than the other groups, but tended to enjoy niche cable shows like *Live PD*, *Gold Rush*, and *The Curse of Oak Island*.** When they did seek out entertainment, they were primarily motivated by fun and enjoyment.

MEDIA GENRES

TELEVISION NEWS

Poverty topics appeared in news programming more than anywhere else on TV, accounting for 2.5 billion impressions (80% of all impressions). They were viewed over 500 million times on national news in December 2020, including network morning shows like *Good Morning America* and *The Today Show*. However, three-quarters of news views came from local news programming. This is important because large proportions of all audience segments (50-60%) reported getting their news from TV, and particularly local stations (55-60% of TV news viewers).

The most viewed keywords in TV news programming were “homeless” (22%), “paycheck” (14%), and “unemployed” (12%). Homeless segments and stories about the Paycheck Protection Program and unemployment were particularly common in local news.

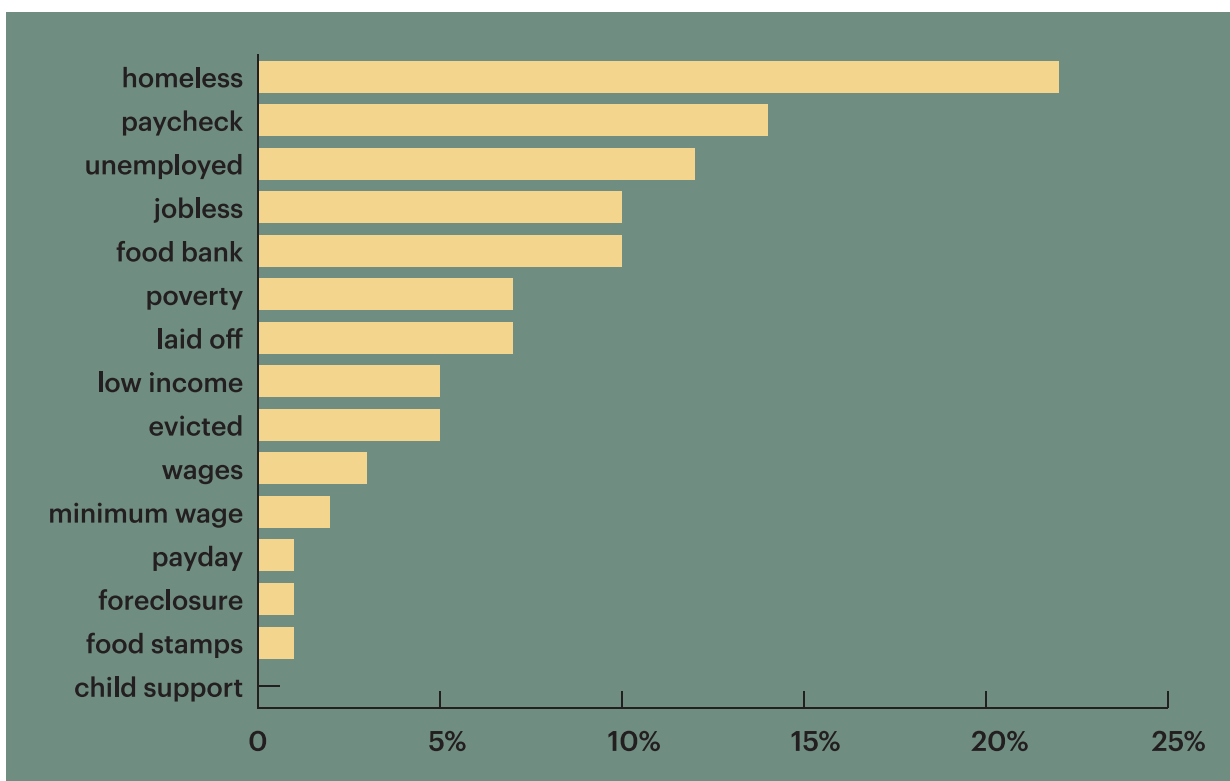


Figure 3:
Most Viewed
Poverty Key-
words in TV
News,
December
2020

UNSCRIPTED TELEVISION

Over 400 million views of poverty keywords (13%) came from unscripted entertainment. As with news programming, “homeless” was the most frequent, accounting for nearly a quarter of all unscripted views. “Payday” and “wages” each received 11% of impressions.

Over one third of unscripted views (36%) were of courtroom shows, such as *Judge Judy*,

which has been the most watched syndicated show for 11 years (Nakamura, 2020). In courtroom shows, poverty topics typically appeared as centerpieces of the legal argument. For example, on an episode of *Judge Judy*, a plaintiff sued her landlord for evicting her after losing her job due to COVID-19. *Judge Mathis* heard a man ask for back rent from his sister after letting her stay with him when she was experiencing homelessness. Poverty topics also appeared on *Divorce Court*, *Hot Bench*, *The People's Court*, and many others.

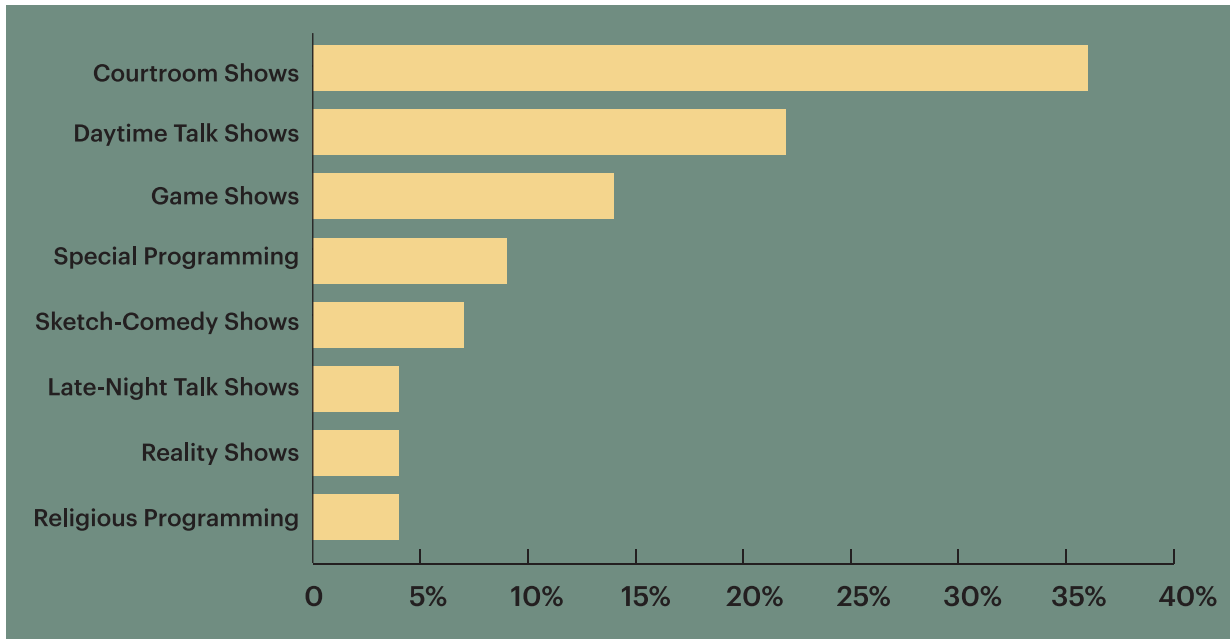


Figure 4:
Views of Poverty Keywords in Unscripted TV by Genre, December 2020

Nearly a quarter (22%) of impressions for unscripted entertainment came from daytime talk shows. These included segments featuring people experiencing poverty, as well as programs promoting charitable donations. For example, on *The View*, Viola Davis talked about her experience growing up in poverty, while *The Kelly Clarkson Show* highlighted a literacy program: “If you live in poverty, the best predictor of how well you read is the quality of your school library.”

Game shows such as *The Price Is Right*, *Card Sharks*, and *25 Words or Less* garnered 14% of poverty-related impressions. Poverty topics frequently appeared as part of a contestant’s backstory, or on occasion, references to a charitable recipient of the game show winnings. For example, a *Family Feud* contestant described living in a homeless shelter with her five kids.

While *The Voice* was popular across all four audience groups, **Tough Cookies (TC)** were particularly likely to watch popular unscripted shows, including competition reality shows and daytime talk shows.

SCRIPTED TELEVISION

Scripted TV accounted for 165 million impressions of poverty-related content (5%). In this context, poverty most frequently appeared in relation to homelessness. “Homeless” was particularly dominant in scripted TV relative to other genres, accounting for 40% of all scripted views. “Paycheck” was next, with only 14%.

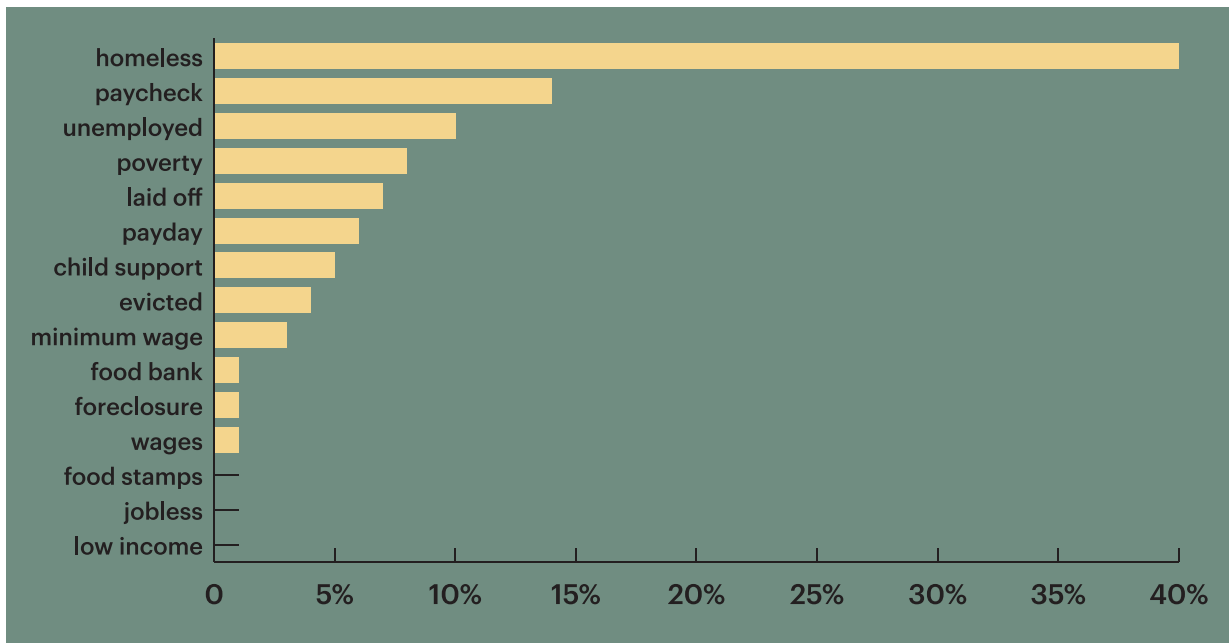


Figure 5:
Most Viewed
Poverty
Keywords in
Scripted TV,
December
2020

Half of all scripted views (84 million) came from drama programming. Mentions of homelessness, paychecks, unemployment, and layoffs were common, particularly in police procedurals and medical dramas. For example, *Magnum P.I.* featured a criminal investigation in the middle of a homeless encampment, while *Chicago P.D.* investigated a low-income robbery suspect who owed child support. A *Chicago Med* episode offered a more in-depth storyline, discussing the relationship between poverty and discrimination and higher death rates for Black COVID-19 patients.

About a third of scripted views (61 million) came from comedies. Many poverty mentions appeared as fleeting references or jokes. For example, in an episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, Sheldon Cooper was mistaken for a person experiencing homelessness. Similarly *The Neighborhood* had a brief mention of providing free haircuts to the homeless. However, some poverty storylines in scripted comedies were more substantive. On *The Conners*, after being evicted, Dan Conner was forced to lay off his construction team. An episode of *Family Guy* featured Native American leaders explaining the relationship between institutional racism and severe poverty on reservations. *Last Man Standing* had characters debating whether waiters should be paid less than minimum wage with no sick time.



...those who saw more scripted shows with poverty storylines expressed greater support for relevant policies, such as increasing the federal minimum wage. Even members of **Don't Tread on Me** who saw poverty-related storylines were more likely to support increasing taxes on the wealthiest Americans.

The most popular scripted shows, such as *The Walking Dead*, appealed to all audience segments. However, scripted series were especially well-liked by members of **If You Say So (SS)** and **People Power (PP)**. These groups were also more likely to take civic actions based on something they learned from fictional entertainment. Across all audience segments, with the exception of PP, those who saw more scripted shows with poverty storylines expressed greater support for relevant policies, such as increasing the federal minimum wage. Even members of **Don't Tread on Me (DT)** who saw poverty-related storylines were more likely to support increasing taxes on the wealthiest Americans.

MUSIC LYRICS

¹⁶ Because the lyrics.com database does not enable querying of all songs during the time period, it is not possible to determine whether Hip Hop was overrepresented among songs with wealth or poverty keywords. Because of the limited data, all genre findings should be treated as exploratory.

We identified a total of 40,467 songs featuring wealth or poverty keywords between 2010 and 2019. For comparison, there were 72,813 mentions of the word “love” in the same ten-year time period. Wealth songs outnumbered poverty songs seven-to-one, despite the fact that there were nearly three times as many poverty keywords as wealth keywords in our sample. “Money” was the most common keyword, mentioned in 15,722 songs, followed by “cash” (4,532) and “rich” (4,266). The least frequently mentioned wealth keyword, “dollars” (1,585), was still more common than the most frequently mentioned poverty keywords, “bills” (1,239) and “rent” (1,104). The remaining poverty keywords appeared in fewer than 1,000 songs, and half appeared in fewer than 100.

Of 6,301 songs tagged with one or more genres, Hip Hop was the most common genre to feature either wealth or poverty keywords.¹⁶ Forty percent of wealth or poverty songs with an identified genre were tagged as Hip Hop. Hip Hop was particularly dominant among wealth keywords, with 2.7 times as many songs as the next most frequent genre (Rock). Poverty keywords appeared in 1.5 times as many Hip Hop songs as Rock songs.

A qualitative analysis of a subset of this sample found that bragging about affluence or expensive purchases was a common theme among songs with wealth keywords. Displays of wealth were frequently connected with themes of sexual conquest and prowess, particularly among male artists, who asserted the role of wealth in attracting sexual partners. This “wealth flaunting” was often paired with a meritocracy narrative, attributing one’s wealth and success to hard work. However, some songs offered critiques of extreme wealth, characterizing money as

unimportant, meaningless, or corrupt. Another key narrative centered the accomplishments of Black artists attaining wealth, despite the historical and structural barriers they encounter.

In songs with poverty keywords, personal stories of struggle featured prominently. Some artists emphasized perseverance in escaping or overcoming poverty. Such content reinforces meritocracy narratives — the idea that anyone can go from “rags-to-riches” if they work hard enough. Poverty keywords such as “laid off,” “unemployed,” and “eviction” were sometimes used as insults to demean an artist’s rivals or “haters.” However, poverty keywords also

EXAMPLES OF POVERTY & WEALTH KEYWORDS IN MUSIC LYRICS



Logic uses the system narrative to tell his personal story of poverty, recognizing the systemic forces and structural barriers that create and maintain economic inequality.

Keyword: “Welfare”

Song: “Mos Definitely” (2017)

Artist: Logic

Theme: Systemic barriers to the American Dream

Lyrics Excerpt: “Livin in America, this s**t is a facade

*But you gotta push through and persevere, word to God
Tryna find a home, but I can’t afford a home
‘Cause I’m 25 and owe a hunnid grand in student loans
Tryna get healthcare, but I’m on welfare
Man I swear to god, I wish I was living in Bel Air
F**k Medicaid, I just wanna get paid [. . .]
Come now folk, get woke, stay woke
‘Cause the white man want the black man stay broke”*



Keyword: “Poverty”

Song: “Dear God 2.0” (2010)

Artists: The Roots Ft. Monsters of Folk

Theme: Poverty and systemic issues

Lyrics Excerpt: “Cops yellin’, “stop, freeze,” shoot him before he try to leave

The Roots touch on a number of systemic issues related to poverty including police brutality, environmental injustice, war, corporate special interests and economic structures, and drug abuse.

*Air quality so foul, I gotta try to breathe
Endangered species and we runnin’ out of trees
If I could hold the world in the palm of these
Hands, I would probably do away with these anomalies
Everybody checkin’ for the new award nominee
Wars and atrocities; look at all the poverty
Ignoring the prophecies, more beef than broccoli
Corporate monopoly, weak world economy
Stock market topplin’
Mad marijuana, Oxycontin, and Klonopin
Everybody out of it?”*



Juicy J flaunts his wealth, bragging that he only pays cash in full, while attributing his financial success to nonstop hard work.

Keyword: “Cash”

Song: “Stop It” (2013)

Artists: Juicy J

Theme: Wealth flaunting and meritocracy

Lyrics Excerpt: “Make money, no vacation
Pay cash, don’t make payments

*Getting high like I’m eighteen
But I’ve been rich since the late eighty’s”*

17. These real-life comparisons are somewhat imprecise, as poverty is not equivalent to experiencing financial challenges, and arrests for all types of crime are not equivalent to committing financial crimes.

highlighted counternarratives relating to the role of failed systems (e.g., welfare, health care, criminal justice, capitalism) and racism in creating and maintaining economic inequality.

DEEP DIVE INTO SCRIPTED ENTERTAINMENT

In our analysis of poverty themes in scripted entertainment from 2015 through 2020, the vast majority of sampled episodes (82%) addressed one or more financial challenges, the most common being employment (57%) and housing (54%). Health-related financial challenges were portrayed in 26% of episodes and food insecurity in 18%. Three in four episodes portrayed individualistic causes or responses in relation to financial challenges, while less than half portrayed systemic concepts. Individualistic concepts included acts of financial crime (51%) and charity (43%) that do not address the underlying cause of the financial challenge. Content was more likely to address systemic causes (36%) than systemic solutions (19%) or collective action (24%).

The 140 characters facing financial challenges were racially diverse: 40% White, 34% Black, and 23% Latinx. Fifty-eight percent were male. Compared to real-life poverty statistics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), Black people and men were over-represented (56% of those in poverty are women). Of the 97 characters involved in financial crimes, the majority were White (54%) and two-thirds were male. In reality, 69% of those arrested for crimes are White, and nearly three-quarters are male (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019).¹⁷

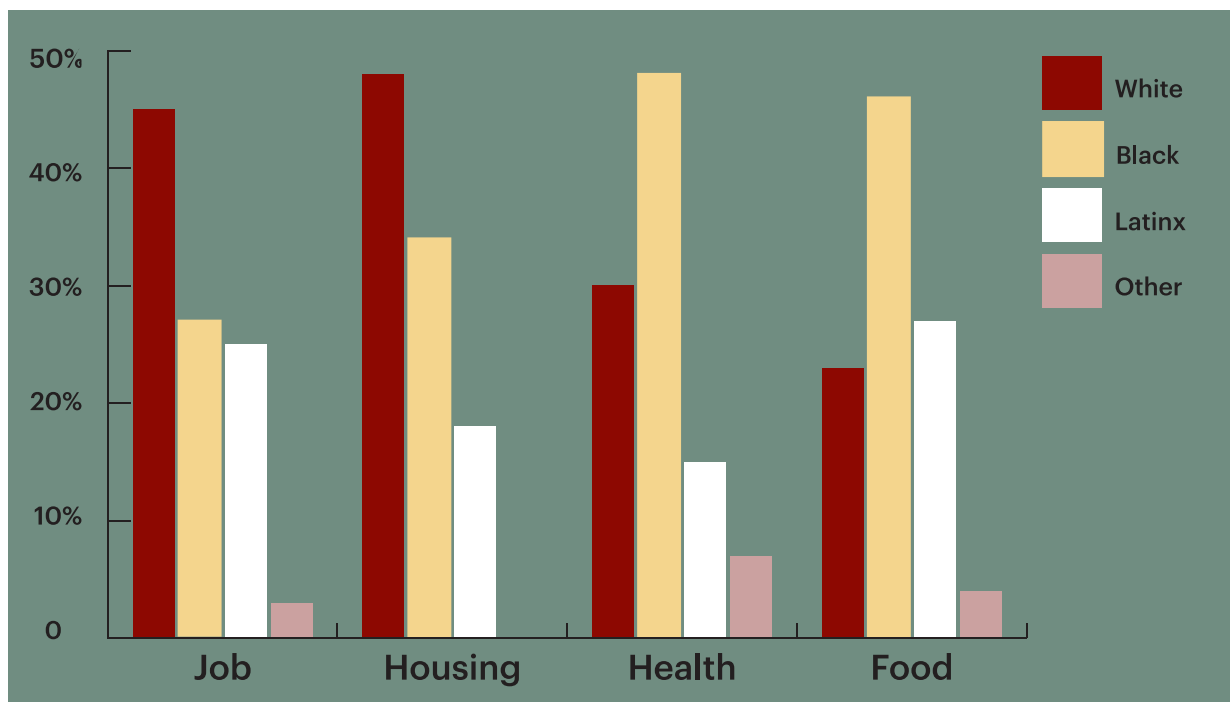


Figure 6:
Financial Challenges Depicted, by Character Race/Ethnicity



While health- and food-related challenges were less frequent, nearly half of characters facing these types of challenges were Black. Job- and housing-related challenges, on the other hand, were more likely to be experienced by White characters.

Housing was the most common challenge characters faced (54%) followed by job-related challenges (46%). Twenty-five percent of characters experienced two or more financial challenges, and 8% had three or more. While health- and food-related challenges were less frequent, nearly half of characters facing these types of challenges were Black. Job- and housing-related challenges, on the other hand, were more likely to be experienced by White characters.

Based on our earlier qualitative research, it appears that health- and food-related challenges may be more likely to be framed in an individualistic context, whereas food- and housing-insecurity are more likely to be framed as systemic

(e.g., tied to a floundering economy or booming housing market). Indeed, we found evidence that financial crime was particularly common among those facing health-related challenges (27%). However, characters who experienced food insecurity were marginally more likely to appear in episodes that discussed systemic factors.

Two-thirds of characters facing job-related challenges were male, whereas characters with health-related financial challenges were more likely to be female (57%). All types of financial challenges were most common among lead characters, but a substantial number (38%) of those experiencing housing-related challenges were minor characters. This was due in part to the prevalence of minor characters who were homeless.

SITCOMS

Lower-SES sitcom characters were portrayed as less friendly and less competent than their higher-SES counterparts. Specifically, characters in higher-SES sitcoms engaged in more laughing and hugging, though characters in lower-SES sitcoms were more likely to be seen sharing meals. Characters in higher-SES sitcoms were also portrayed as more competent, based on linguistic analysis of vocabulary and use of correct grammar. We did not find any differences between the two categories of sitcoms in terms of laziness.

While these linguistic choices may not have been entirely conscious on the part of the writers of these shows, these findings show implicit class biases can often be embedded in the dialects and behaviors attributed to fictional characters.

KEY TOPICS

Across TV genres, “homeless” was the most common keyword, accounting for 22% of all mentions and 23% of all views associated with poverty mentions in December 2020. Other frequently viewed keywords included “paycheck” (13%), “unemployed” (11% of views), and “poverty” (9% of views). The contextual topics with most views were job insecurity (47%) and housing insecurity (37%). Jobs and housing were also the most common financial challenges depicted in our in-depth analysis of scripted entertainment. Only 1% of poverty impressions on TV were related to race or racism.

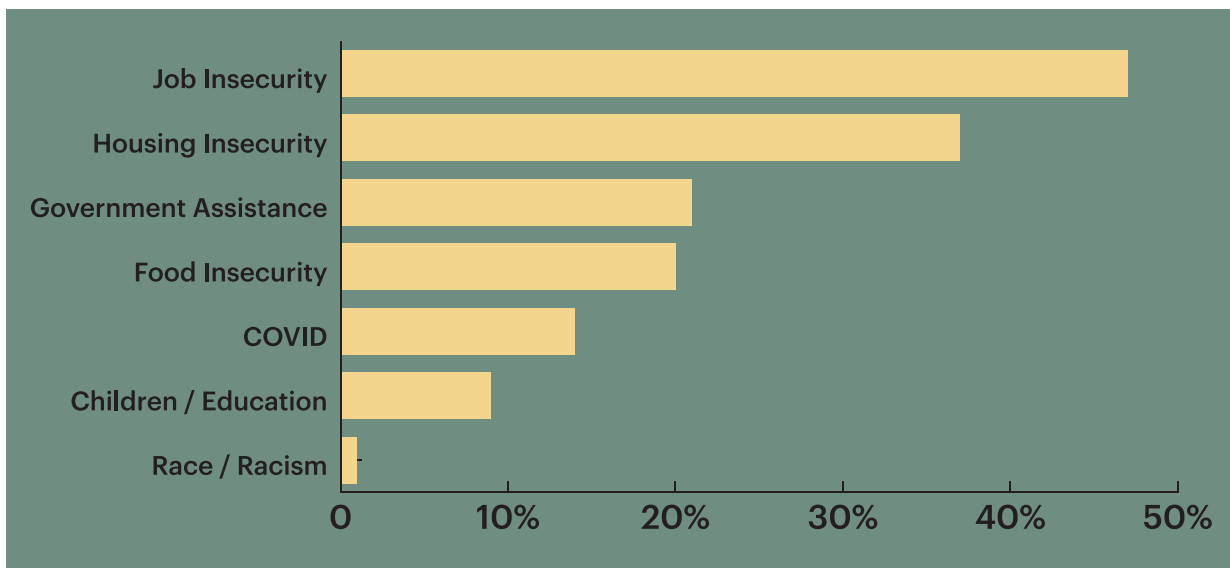


Figure 7:
Poverty Topics
Associated
with Most
Views, Decem-
ber 2020

HOMELESSNESS

Representations of poverty were dominated by homelessness, particularly in scripted TV. Across genres, “homeless” was by far the most common poverty keyword, in terms of both frequency of mentions and impressions. In scripted TV in December 2020, mentions of “homeless” accounted for 40% of all views.

“
Representations of poverty
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scripted TV.

This could, in part, be an artifact of the selected timeframe for analysis. Kendall (2011) notes that TV storylines around the holidays often focus on lead characters engaging in charity, such as serving a Christmas meal to the homeless: “These media representations suggest that Americans are benevolent people who do not forget the less fortunate” (p.

13). Indeed, real world data indicates the majority of charitable giving in the U.S. takes place between GivingTuesday (the Tuesday following Thanksgiving) and the end of the calendar year (Gomez, 2020). A recent Lear Center study of charitable giving in the media found that



Nearly four in ten characters facing housing challenges were minor characters, like in this scene from *Bob's Burgers* (FOX).

TV coverage of charitable giving was viewed 25% more frequently during the giving season compared to a baseline 40-day period (Rosenthal et al., 2021).

That said, in our deep dive into scripted TV over the last 10 years, housing-related challenges were the most common type of financial challenge characters experienced. Interestingly, nearly four in ten characters facing housing challenges were minor characters, a pattern we did not see with any other types of financial challenges. Only speaking characters were counted, but the finding nonetheless suggests a large proportion of poverty stories in scripted TV involve depictions of the homeless with little or no character development.

Our research suggests homelessness is far overrepresented in media representations of poverty relative to reality. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2019), 567,715 people experience homelessness on any given night, while 34 million people live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). That makes for less than 2% of poor people who experience homelessness (though the first number is likely an underestimate of the true number who experience homelessness).

POVERTY EMOTIONS AND POLICY SOLUTIONS

A majority of all groups reported feeling sad about poverty in the U.S., but **People Power (PP)**, and to a lesser extent **If You Say So (SS)**, also felt angry. **Don't Tread on Me (DT)**, on the other hand, were more likely to pick positive or neutral words to describe their feelings, like hopeful or curious. PP and SS believed that a variety of policy proposals would reduce poverty in America, including increasing the federal minimum wage, increasing taxes on the


wealthiest Americans, and expanding Medicare to all ages. DT were the least likely to say any of these proposals would be effective.

COVID-19

We conducted our survey in August 2020, at the peak of the “second wave” of the pandemic. Given the ways in which COVID-19 and associated shutdowns have laid bare or worsened existing inequities, we wanted to see how support for equity-based policies and other attitudes would play out in this context.

PP were the most likely, and DT least likely, to believe that COVID-19 posed a threat to health at all levels, including the health of the U.S. population as a whole, the health of their family members, and their personal health. The financially precarious SS were the most likely to say the pandemic presented a threat to their personal financial situation, while DT were the least likely. However, DT were most likely to believe the pandemic posed a threat to their freedom.

While all groups agreed that COVID-19 represented a serious threat to the U.S. economy, **Tough Cookies (TC)**, and especially DT, were far less supportive of equity-based policy solutions to address this economic impact. This difference was largest for providing unemployment or income support and providing assistance to undocumented immigrants. PP and SS were broadly supportive of equity-based policy solutions to address the economic impact of COVID-19, but only PP supported providing assistance to undocumented immigrants.



While all groups agreed that COVID-19 represented a serious threat to the U.S. economy, Tough Cookies, and especially Don't Tread on Me, were far less supportive of equity-based policy solutions to address this economic impact.

A great deal of media coverage during the summer of 2020 focused on the fact that Black people are more likely to be infected with COVID-19 and have higher rates of hospitalization. When we asked about this disparity, with the sole exception of PP, substantial proportions of all groups considered health and lifestyle choices to be a major reason. PP were the most likely of all groups to attribute these racial disparities in COVID-19 to external factors such as lack of

access to healthcare. TC were less likely, and DT far less likely, to believe external factors were a major reason for racial disparities.

Finally, we asked survey participants about their entertainment motivations and preferences during the pandemic. All groups reported engaging in “comfort” entertainment — including rewatching old favorite TV shows, movies, and music — more than before. PP were most likely

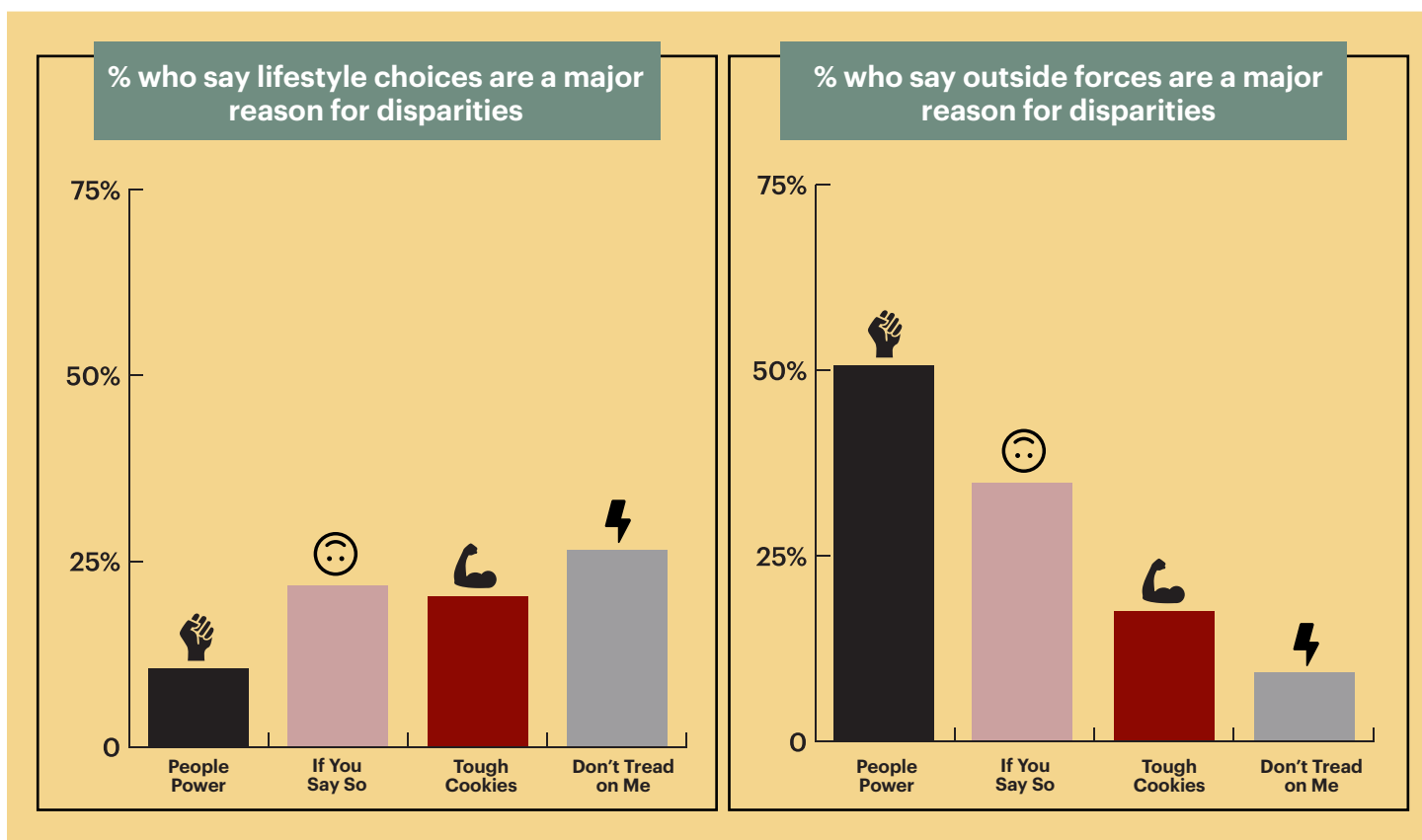


Figure 8: Perceptions of Racial Disparities in COVID-19 Outcomes

to be reading or watching more news during the pandemic, while SS watched more entertainment TV and films, and engaged in social media more.

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

More than half of DT believed there is no discrimination against Black people in America today. Only small proportions of the other groups agreed, including less than 1% of SS and PP. Among those who said there is a little or a lot of discrimination, three-quarters of DT and more than half of of TC attributed this discrimination primarily to the prejudice of individual people. The majority of PP and SS, on the other hand, blamed racial discrimination on a combination of individual prejudice and systemic laws and policies.

■ CONCLUSION

Through this research, we sought to understand what narratives about poverty are dominant in pop culture entertainment and news media, and particularly what narratives are consumed by key audiences. We established a baseline to enable tracking of how the stories of poverty conveyed through pop culture — as well as public attitudes — change over time. The following insights and recommendations, drawn from this research, are intended to provide culture change storytellers with the tools to create and leverage new narratives about poverty, opportunity, and economic mobility.

INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STORYTELLERS

1

Balance psychological with sociological storytelling.

This research has consistently demonstrated that the dominant storytelling approach in scripted entertainment is psychological, focusing on individualistic causes and solutions. Even narratives that addressed the systemic causes underlying financial challenges were far more likely to portray individualistic solutions, such as crime or charity, than those focused on systems change. Storytellers might consider how to integrate a sociological approach that gives characters agency while addressing the institutional and systemic barriers to mobility. The challenge is — how to make stories about systems emotionally compelling.

2

Target conservative-leaning TOUGH COOKIES through unscripted TV.

Unscripted TV was particularly popular with **Tough Cookies**. This group could be targeted through explicit messages highlighting barriers of meritocracy. Storytellers might appeal to TC's sense of authority by illustrating how it is possible to follow all of the "rules" and remain in poverty. TC also have a strong sense of duty and optimism about community-building through collective action. Such messages could employ calls-to-action by respected media personalities who hold caché with this group, such as daytime talk show hosts or celebrity judges.

3

Reach all groups — particularly PEOPLE POWER and IF YOU SAY SO — through local TV and scripted storylines.

All audiences turned to local news in large numbers, and the vast majority of views associated reporting on poverty came from local news programming. Likewise, all groups were equally likely to tune into the most popular scripted shows, like *The Walking Dead*. **People Power** and **If You Say So** were most likely to take action based on something they learned from fictional entertainment, but even members of **Don't**

Tread on Me can potentially be persuaded through storylines in the most popular scripted shows or those in their cable niche. Together, these findings suggest scripted entertainment is an ideal medium for not only raising awareness, but also promoting engagement on poverty-related issues.

4

Be aware of how unconscious biases can inform creative choices.

Lower-class sitcom characters were portrayed as less friendly and less competent, consistent with existing stereotypes of the poor. These differences were largely implicit in dialect choices that may not reflect conscious decisions on the part of writers. At the same time, it is important for storytellers to be mindful of the intersections between race and class. Only 1% of poverty impressions addressed it in a context of race or racism. Likewise, Black characters were more likely to face health- or food-related challenges, whereas employment and housing challenges were more likely to be faced by White characters. This racial disparity is particularly concerning given evidence that health-related challenges may be more likely to be framed in individualistic terms. Such a disparity — unintentional though it may be — could lead to perceptions of Black characters facing health-related challenges as less deserving of support or more likely to seek a solution through crime.

5

Expand stories beyond homelessness, and humanize the homeless when depicted.

The most visible aspect of poverty in all types of TV was homelessness, and there appears to be a vast overrepresentation of the homeless among those experiencing poverty, relative to reality. Similar to the use of dialect to convey class in sitcoms, content creators may focus on homelessness as a way of evoking a strong emotional response in their audience. The result, however, is dehumanization by not making them full characters with their own stories. Kendall (2011) notes that the homeless are frequently treated as “faceless” statistics in news reports on poverty. Further, narratives of poverty that over rely on inaccurate tropes of homelessness may contribute to “othering” the poor. As Kendall writes, **conventional media framing of homelessness “suggests that we should distance ourselves from ‘those people’ [and] encourages us to view the poor and homeless as the Other, the outsider... As a result, we find it easy to buy into the dominant ideological construct that poverty is a problem of individuals, not of society as a whole.”** (p. 174). Homelessness and housing insecurity are important issues worthy of media attention, but this overrepresentation raises the question of what stories are rendered invisible when the dominant narrative of poverty is laser-focused on one particular aspect. In order to avoid further dehumanization of the homeless, storytellers should center the stories of those who experience homelessness and allow them to speak for themselves.

FUTURE RESEARCH

We recommend the following future research activities:

1

Measure the impact of nuanced poverty narratives on different audiences.

As new narratives of poverty emerge in scripted or unscripted TV, impact research would enable advocates to understand the influence of such stories on the knowledge, attitudes, policy support, and civic actions of different audience segments. This could include experimental research comparing a narrative storyline with a non-narrative appeal, or emphasizing individualistic versus systemic concepts. Integrate tools such as social media analysis and eye-tracking along with traditional survey-based research. Insights on how audiences are influenced by different types of poverty narratives can be used to inform strategic outreach to the entertainment industry, as well as advocacy and communication strategies more generally.

2

Further examine the prevalence of implicit race and class bias in scripted TV and other genres.

Conduct additional content analysis, leveraging linguistic analysis and machine learning tools, to examine differences in portrayals of lower- versus higher-SES characters beyond sitcoms. Are similar biases evident in scripted dramas, unscripted TV, and news programming? How do these portrayals intersect with race, gender, and sexual orientation? Further, explore whether stories about Black and Latinx people experiencing poverty are more likely to be told through an individualistic lens.

3

Track shifts in content and audience attitudes over time.

The effectiveness of new and ongoing campaigns can be assessed by monitoring shifts in content from the baseline established by this research. Conducting longitudinal content analysis of TV programming and scripted entertainment would enable year-over-year comparisons in the content of poverty narratives. Similarly, longitudinal surveys could be employed to measure corresponding shifts in attitudes and policy support over time.

4

Engage in targeted outreach to entertainment content creators.

Armed with data on depictions of poverty in different media genres and audiences, outreach efforts can be more effectively targeted to different types of content. For 20 years, the Lear Center's Hollywood, Health & Society has served as a free resource to the entertainment industry, connecting content creators with subject matter experts on a variety of health and public interest issues.



This research suggests that integrating new narratives of poverty and economic mobility into entertainment could be a highly effective strategy for promoting culture change in support of more equity-based policies.

The stories that we as a nation tell and consume serve to illuminate the shared assumptions we hold. It is by changing these stories that we can begin to shift these assumptions, perceived truths, and ultimately policy. In short, policy change requires narrative change. This research makes visible the broader trends and implicit norms embedded in the stories American pop culture tells about poverty. Media, and particularly scripted entertainment, have an unparalleled reach and power to humanize the experience of poverty and move audiences to engage in civic action. Ultimately, this research suggests that integrating new narratives of poverty and economic mobility into entertainment could be a highly effective strategy for promoting culture change in support of more equity-based policies.

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