

OCTOBER 2018

# IMMIGRATION NATION

*Exploring Immigrant Portrayals on Television*



The Norman Lear  
**CENTER**

FOR THE STUDY OF ENTERTAINMENT, MEDIA & SOCIETY

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# OVERVIEW

This report presents a media content analysis conducted by the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project (MIP) in collaboration with Define American, a nonprofit media and culture organization, to investigate two research questions:

1. **How are immigrants and immigration issues depicted on entertainment television?**
2. **How do these depictions compare with the reality of the immigrant experience?**

The analysis examines the demographic, socio-economic, and social representations of immigrant characters depicted, as well as the context and use of any culturally- or politically-charged terms relating to immigration in 143 episodes of 47 television shows that aired in 2017 and 2018.

# METHODS

The objective of this study was to evaluate how entertainment television portrayed immigration and the immigrant experience, so it was important to examine content that was likely to include immigration storylines.

Episodes for analysis were selected through a search of popular media content that included an immigration storyline. Initial searches were conducted through reviews of popular television critic articles listed in *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Variety* and other popular entertainment publications. Reviews included television summaries listed on IMDB and other content summary platforms. In addition, the top Nielsen 100 broadcast shows in 2017 and 2018 were examined for shows containing at least one immigrant character. Episodes from this list were selected using a random number generator and added to the overall sample.

**In total, we analyzed 143 episodes from 47 TV shows that aired in 2017 and 2018.**

For each episode, trained content coders focused on identifying broad story elements, including the demographic, socio-economic, and social representations of immigrant characters depicted, as well as the context and use of any culturally- or politically-charged terms relating to immigration. In all, six human coders used a codebook with 46 variables and 476 sub-variables to evaluate each episode. One additional inter-rater reliability coder viewed and coded 10% of duplicate episodes to ensure a higher degree of consensus. To complete the evaluation, the data was restructured and subsequently analyzed using frequency and descriptive analyses in SAS software.

# ANALYZED TV SHOWS



# FINDINGS



Female immigrants in every racial group are **UNDERREPRESENTED** on TV.



Immigrants on TV are **OVERREPRESENTED** as criminals.



Immigrants on TV are **OVERREPRESENTED** as incarcerated.



Asian immigrants are **UNDERREPRESENTED** on TV.



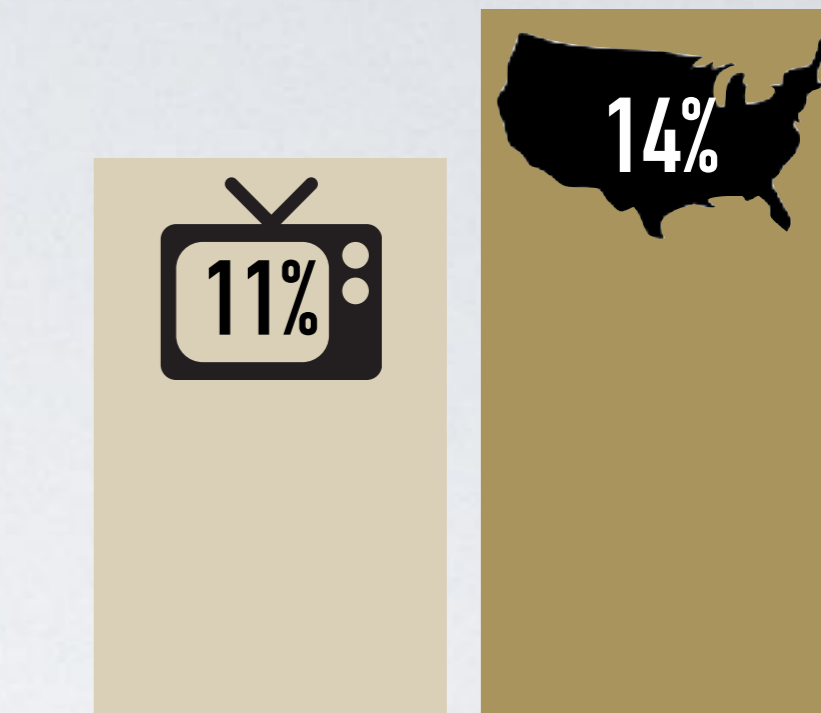
Black undocumented immigrants are **UNDERREPRESENTED** on TV.



Immigrant characters are **LESS EDUCATED** on TV than they are in reality.

# Immigrants are underrepresented on TV.

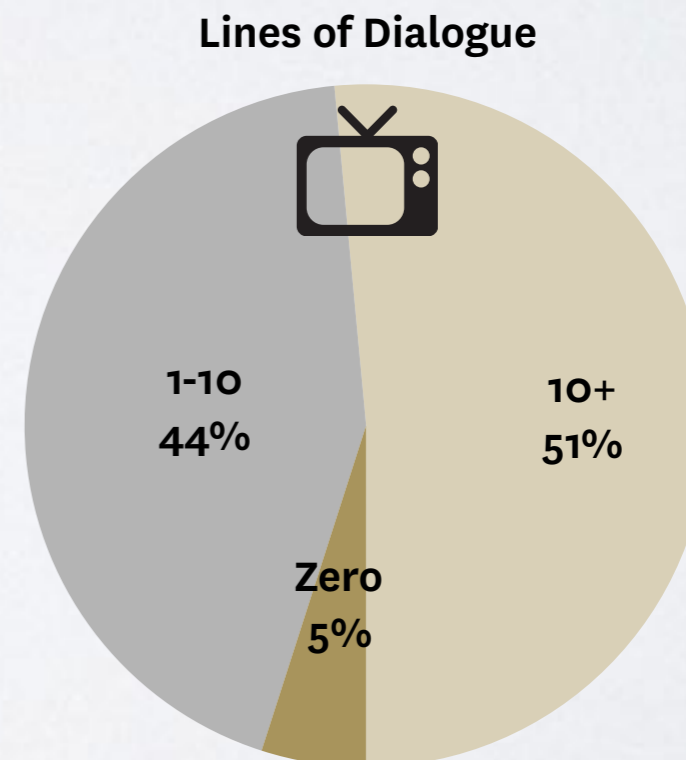
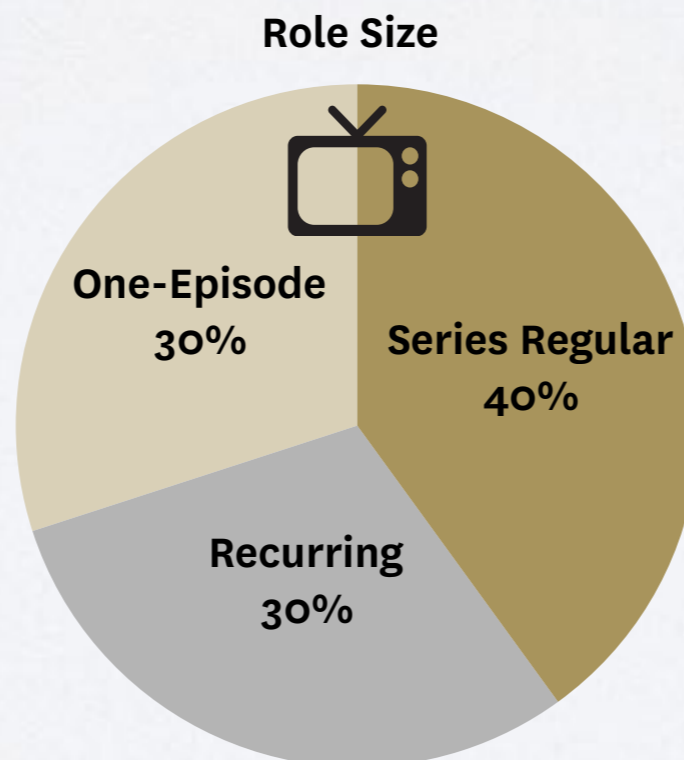
Even though the TV shows analyzed were known to contain immigration issues or immigrant characters, foreign-born characters were still underrepresented in the analyzed episodes. In reality, 14% of people in the U.S. are foreign-born,<sup>1</sup> but only 11% of the TV characters analyzed were immigrants. This suggests that the underrepresentation of immigrant depictions is far greater in the general TV landscape. In total, we identified 349 depictions of immigrants. After accounting for immigrant characters who appear in multiple episodes in the sample, we identified 211 unique individual immigrant characters.



## IMMIGRANT REPRESENTATION

### Role Size

The majority of immigrants on TV were either recurring or one-episode characters and almost half of characters had less than 10 speaking lines.



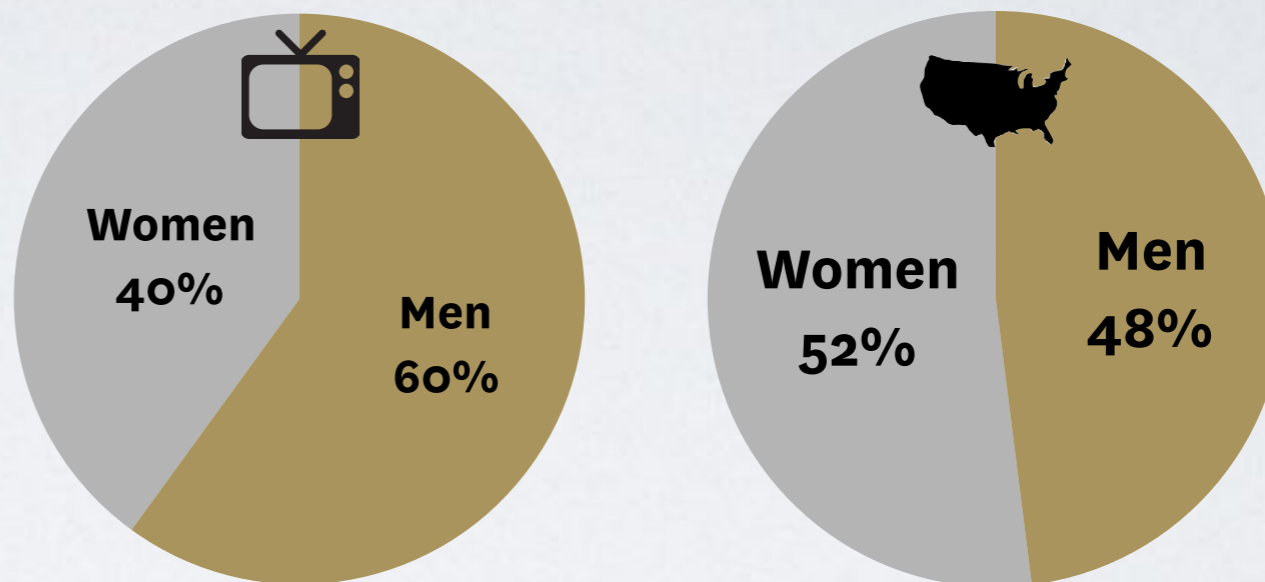
1. Zong, J., Batalova, J., & Hallock, J. (2018, February 8). Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States. Migration Policy Institute.

# Immigrant characters were predominantly men

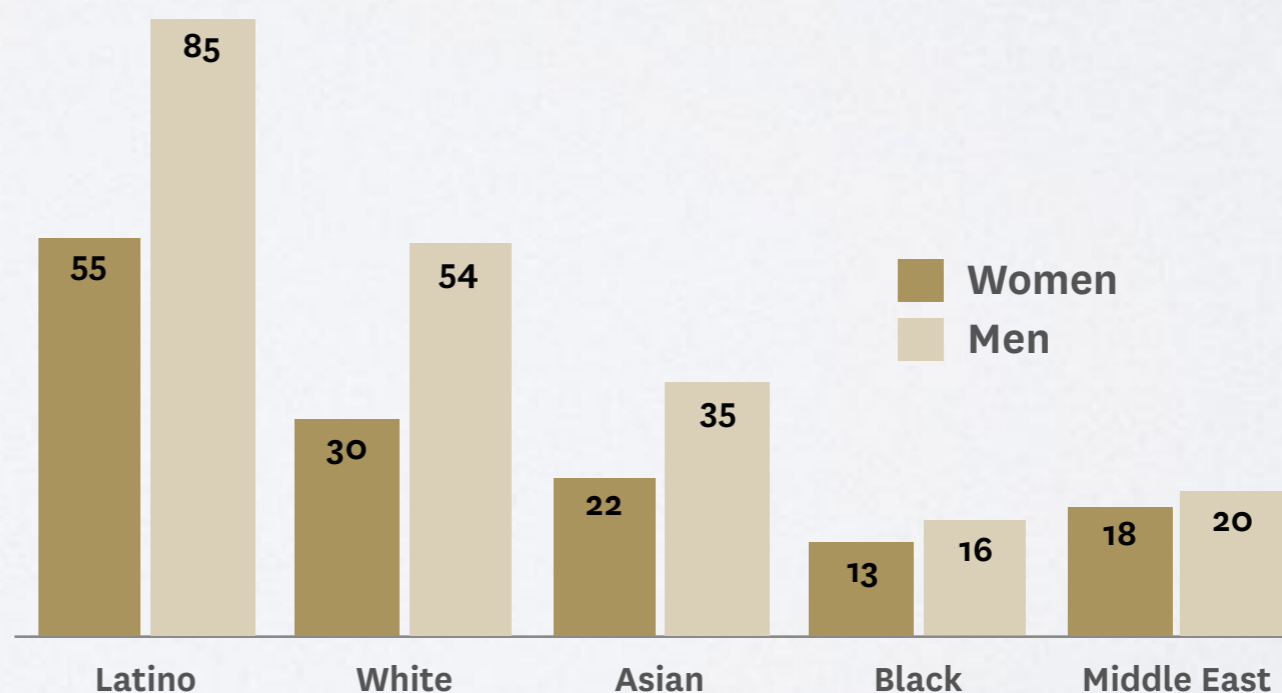
Immigrants on TV were predominantly men. Women comprise 52% of the immigrant population,<sup>2</sup> but under 40% on TV. This finding is across the board - female immigrants in every racial group were underrepresented on TV.

# GENDER

Gender of Immigrants on TV and in Reality



Immigrant Character Depictions by Gender and Race



2. Zong, J., Batalova, J., & Hallock, J. (2018, February 8). Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States. Migration Policy Institute.



# Most immigrant characters are Latino

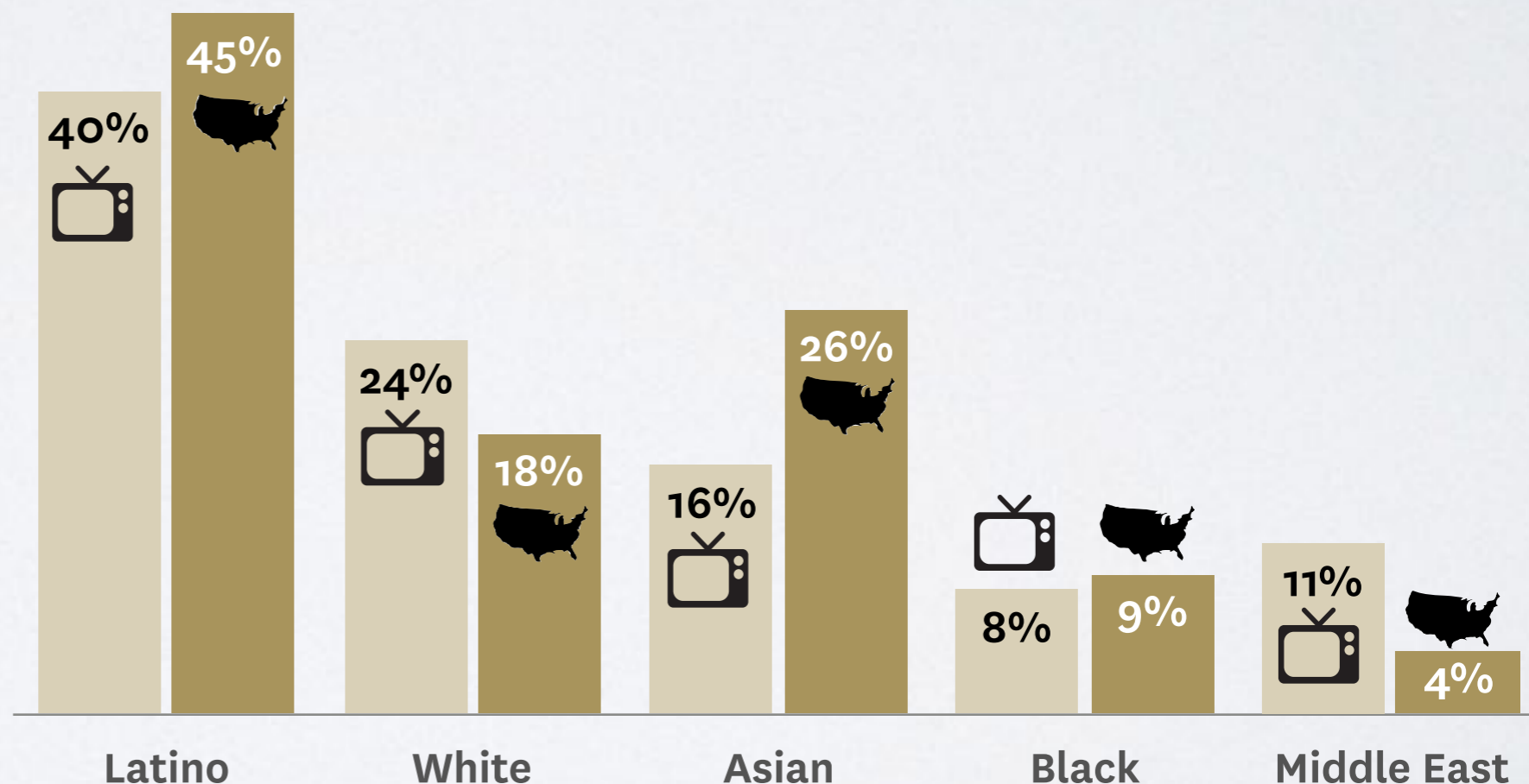
Forty percent of the immigrant characters we found are Latino and one-fifth of all immigrants on TV came from Mexico. This does match reality – Latino immigrants do still make up the largest proportion of the current immigrant population at 45%.<sup>3</sup> However, the number of Mexican immigrants have been on the decline for a decade and since 2010, Asian immigrants have outnumbered new Latino immigrants. Hollywood has not caught up with this – only 16% of immigrants on TV are Asian/Pacific Islander versus 26% in reality.

Black immigrants on TV are pretty much in line with the number of Black immigrants in reality, but undocumented Black immigrants were largely absent from entertainment television.

Thirteen percent of the immigrants in our sample came from Middle Eastern countries, which is higher than the estimated 4% of Middle Eastern immigrants in the country. White immigrants are also overrepresented on TV, accounting for almost one-quarter of immigrants on TV.

# RACE

Immigrant Character Depictions by Race



3. Radford J. and Budiman A. (2018, September 14). Facts on U.S. Immigrants, 2016. PEW Hispanic.

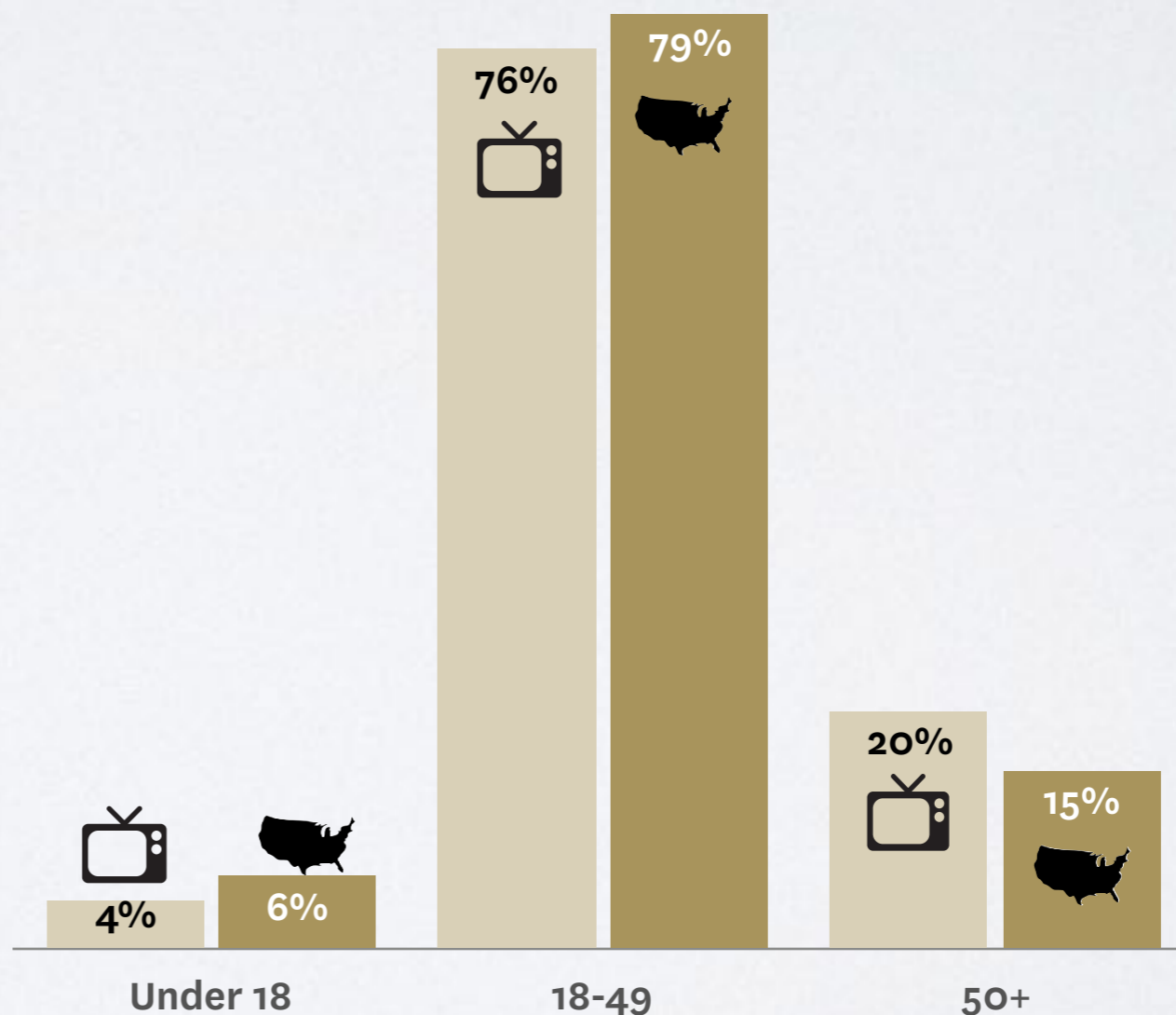
# Immigrant storylines are about adults

News headlines, particularly during the time of this study, abound about immigrant children. However, immigrants on TV, and in reality, are predominantly adults. Four percent of immigrants on TV were under the age of 18, which tracks with the 6% of immigrants under the age of 18 in reality.<sup>4</sup>

While adults over the age of 50 are often underrepresented in the general TV landscape, mature immigrants comprise one-fifth of immigrant depictions, which is higher than the 15% of 50+ immigrants in reality.

## AGE

Immigrant Character Depictions by Age



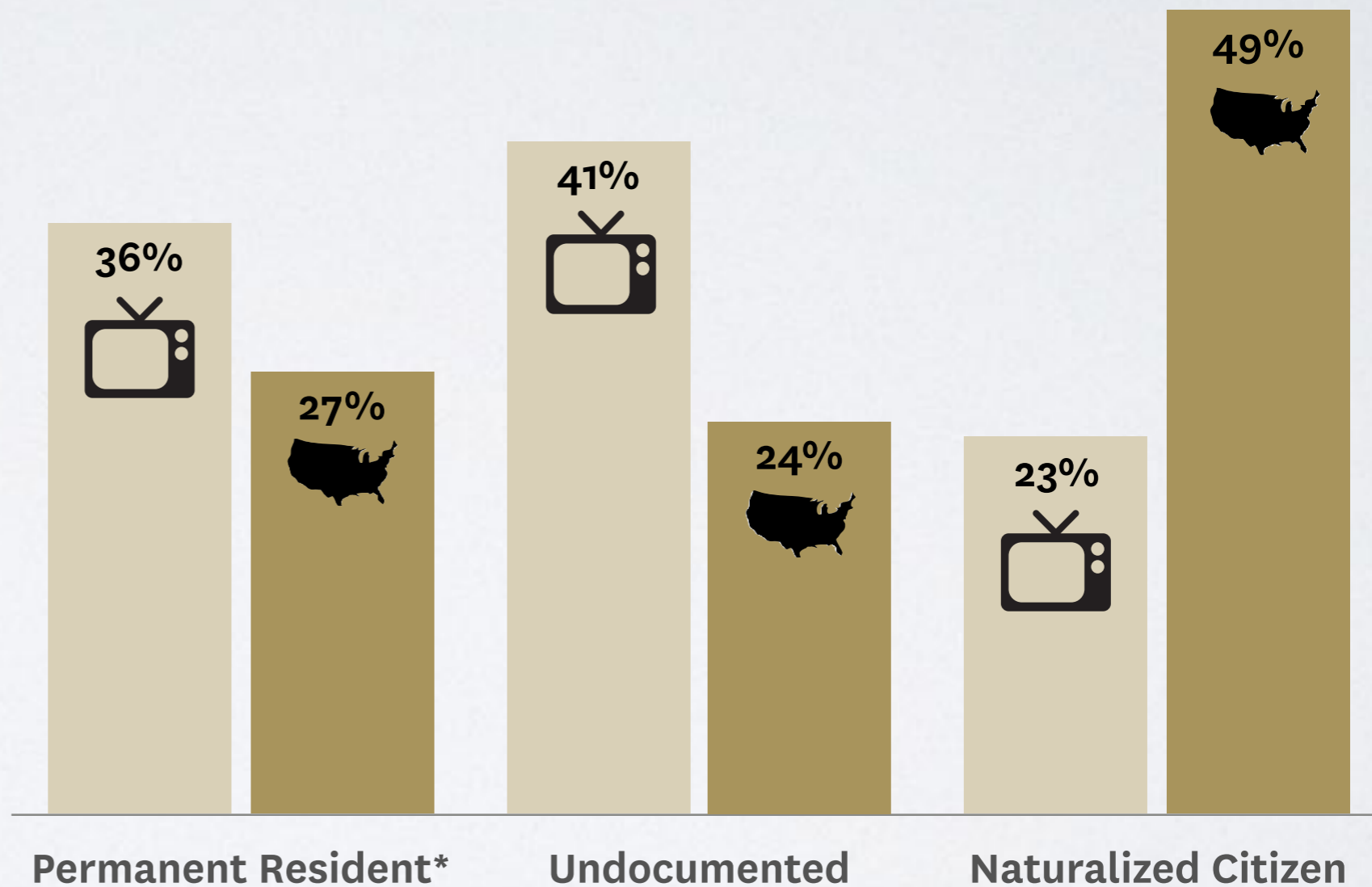
4. Zong, J., Batalova, J., & Hallock, J. (2018, February 8). Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States. Migration Policy Institute.

# Immigrants on TV are less likely to be naturalized citizens

Stories about undocumented characters were common on TV. Among characters with an explicitly mentioned immigration status, 41% of foreign-born characters were undocumented, while in reality, 24% of immigrants in the U.S. are unauthorized.<sup>5</sup> Of these undocumented immigrants, 62% were Latino. Undocumented Black immigrants were largely absent from entertainment television, despite being detained and deported at a higher rate than other races of immigrants.<sup>6</sup>

Naturalized citizens were underrepresented on TV and Asian/Pacific Islander immigrants were the most likely racial group to be identified as naturalized citizens both on TV and in reality.

Immigration Status on TV and in Reality



\* On TV, Permanent Resident includes numbers for Refugees to match government categories.

## IMMIGRATION STATUS

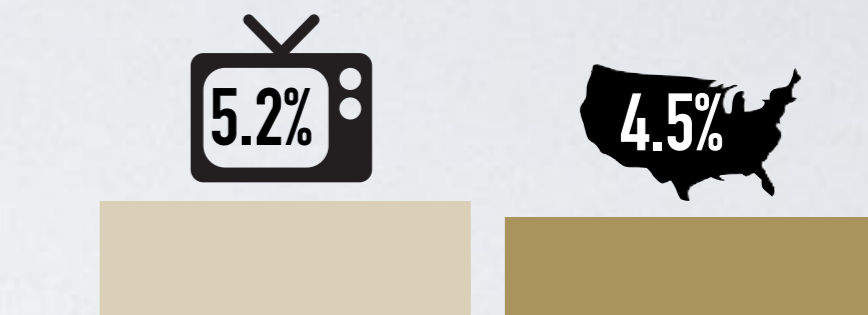
5. Department of Homeland Security (2018). Immigration Data & Statistics  
 6. NYU Law and Black Alliance for Just Immigration (2018) The State of Black Immigrants.

# Lesbian and gay immigrants are represented on TV, while transgender immigrants remain invisible on TV

# LGBTQ

LGB Immigrants on TV

The Opportunity Agenda's 2017 Power of POP report found that LGBTQ immigrants were largely absent from TV.<sup>7</sup> Our study sees some growth with 5.2% of immigrant characters identified as either lesbian, gay or bisexual, which is similar to the estimated 4.5% of American adults who identify as LGBTQ.<sup>8</sup>

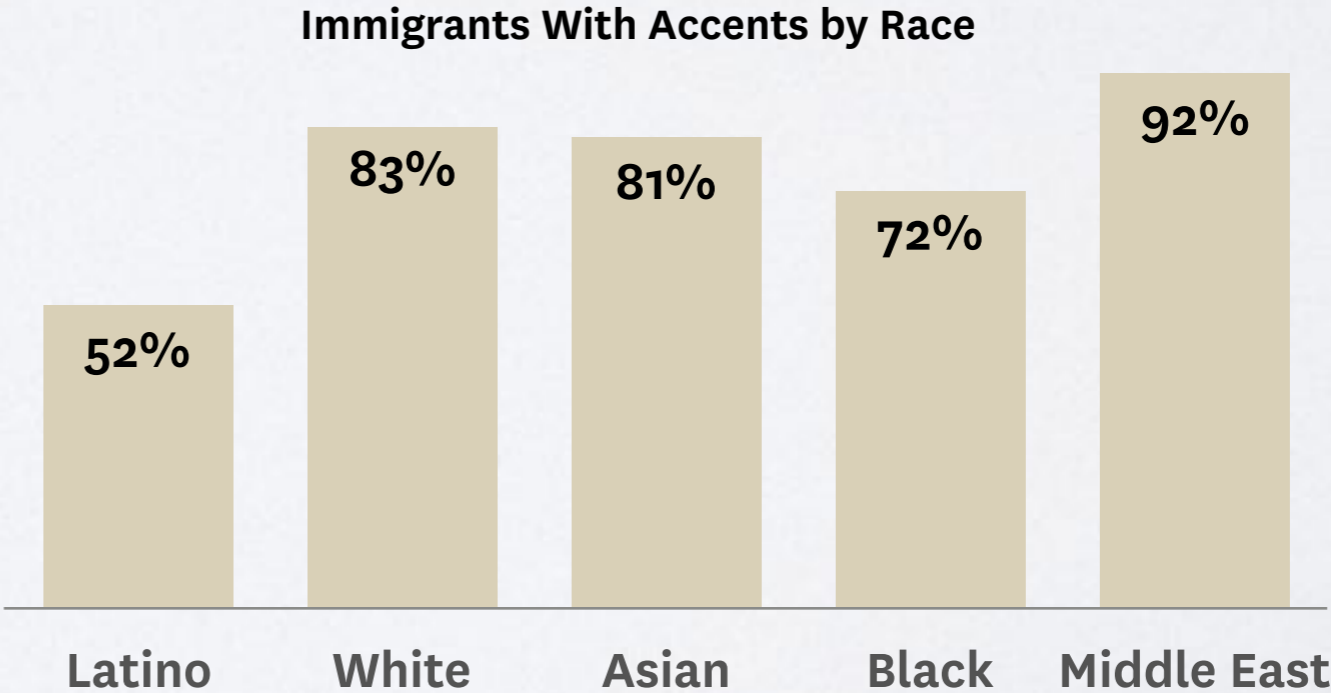
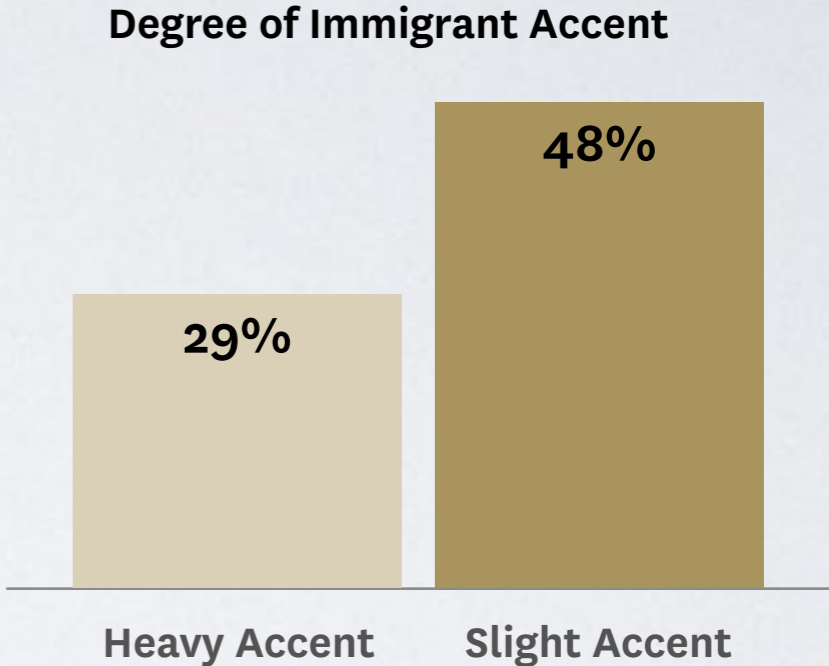
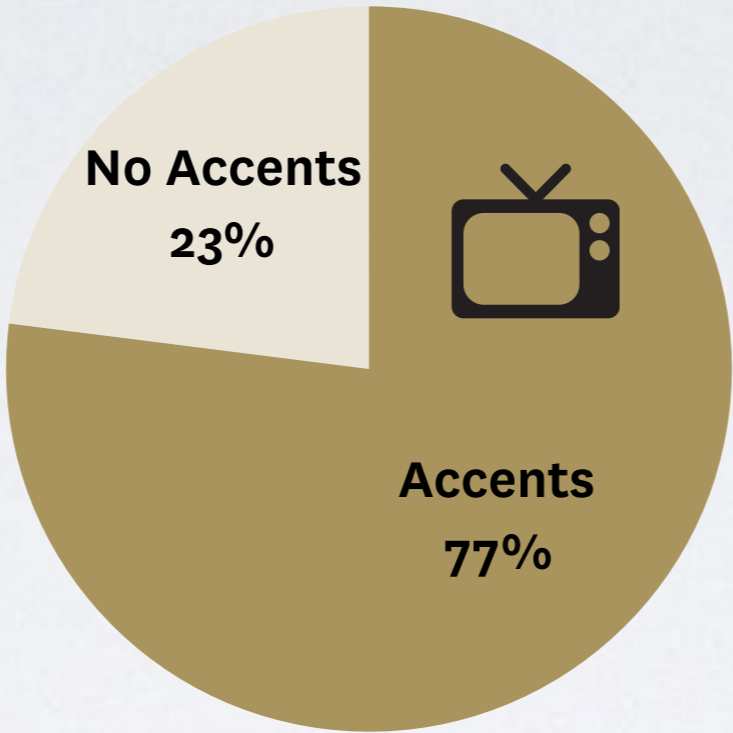


7. The Opportunity Agenda (2017). Power of POP: Media Analysis of Immigration Representation in Popular TV Shows  
 8. Newport F. (2018, May 22). In U.S., Estimate of LGBT Population Rises to 4.5%. Gallup

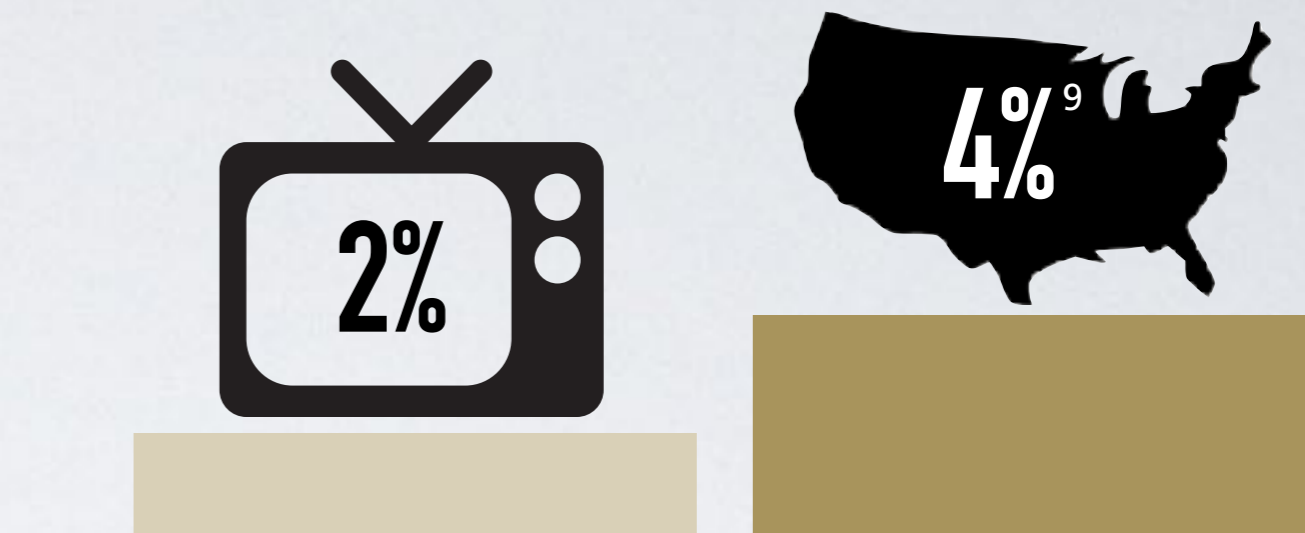
# ACCENTS

## Over three-quarters of immigrants on TV have accents

Immigrant characters were likely to speak with an accent on TV. An accent was defined as a noticeably different mode of pronunciation than the other characters on screen.

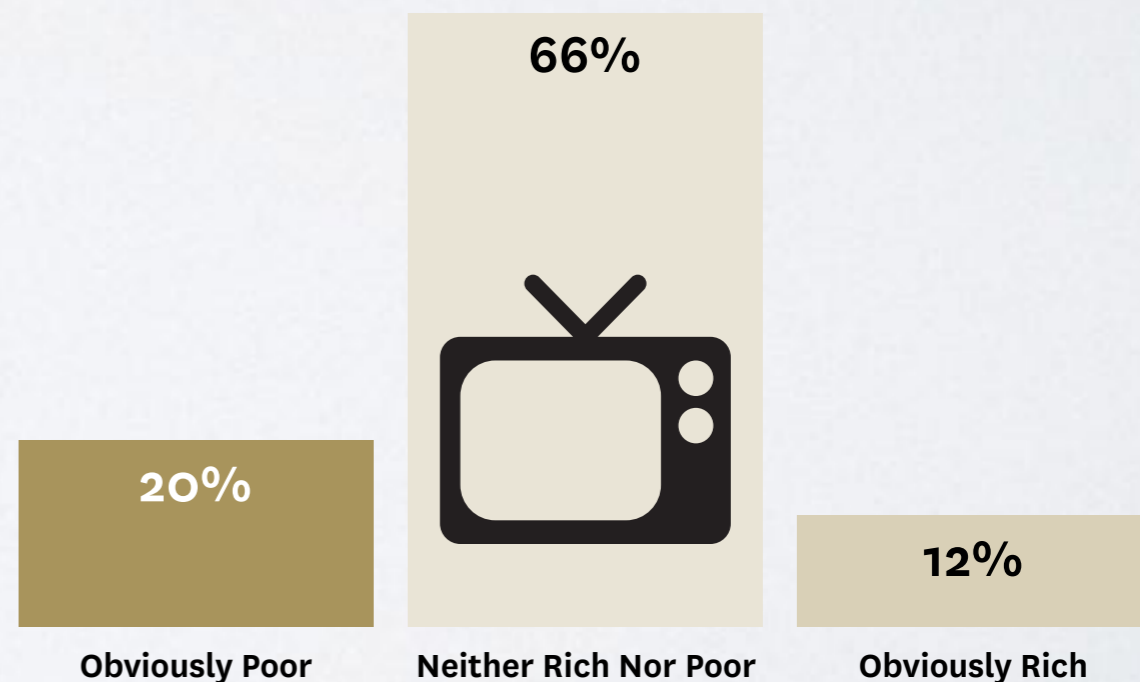


**Two percent of immigrant characters had an identified mental or physical disability**



# DISABILITY & CLASS

**One-fifth of immigrant characters were obviously poor**



9. Huang, Cheng et al. "Region of Birth and Disability Among Recent U.S. Immigrants: Evidence from the 2000 Census." Population research and policy review 30.3 (2011): 399-418. PMC. Web. 9 Oct. 2018.

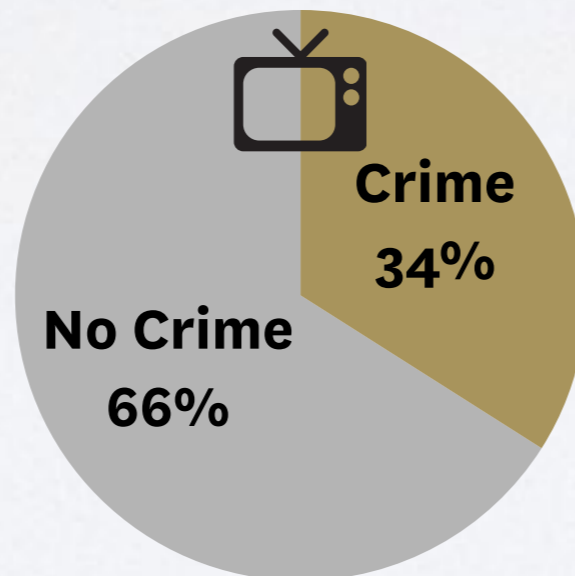
# Immigrants are disproportionately associated with crime and incarceration on TV.

On TV, one-third (34%) of immigrant characters were associated with a crime. This does not match reality. 2018 studies by the CATO Institute and the Marshall Project both reiterate what several other studies have found: both undocumented populations and immigrants as a whole commit less crime than native-born Americans.<sup>10</sup>

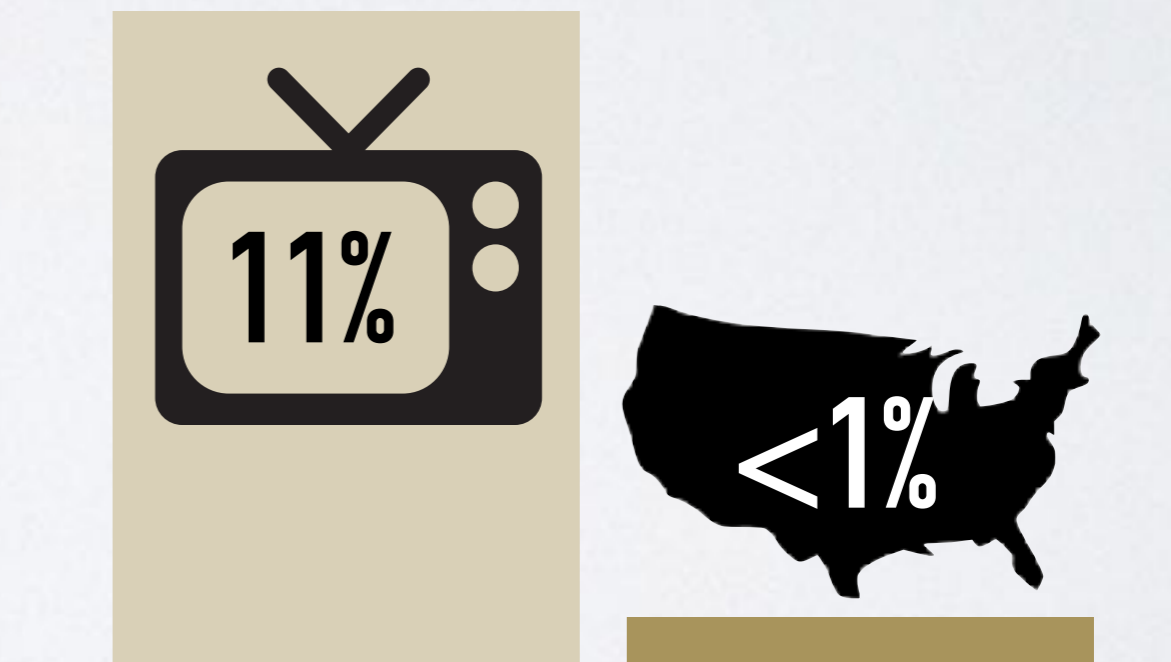
Eleven percent of TV immigrants are associated with incarceration. This means there was either a reference to a previous incarceration, they are currently incarcerated or there is a reference to a future incarceration. This is substantially higher than the less than 1% of foreign-born people incarcerated at the state and federal level in the U.S., excluding immigration offenses, according to the CATO Institute.<sup>11</sup>

## CRIME & INCARCERATION

TV Immigrants Associated With Crime



TV Immigrants Associated With Incarceration



10. Ingraham, C. (2018, June 19). Two charts demolish the notion that immigrants here illegally commit more crime, *Washington Post*.

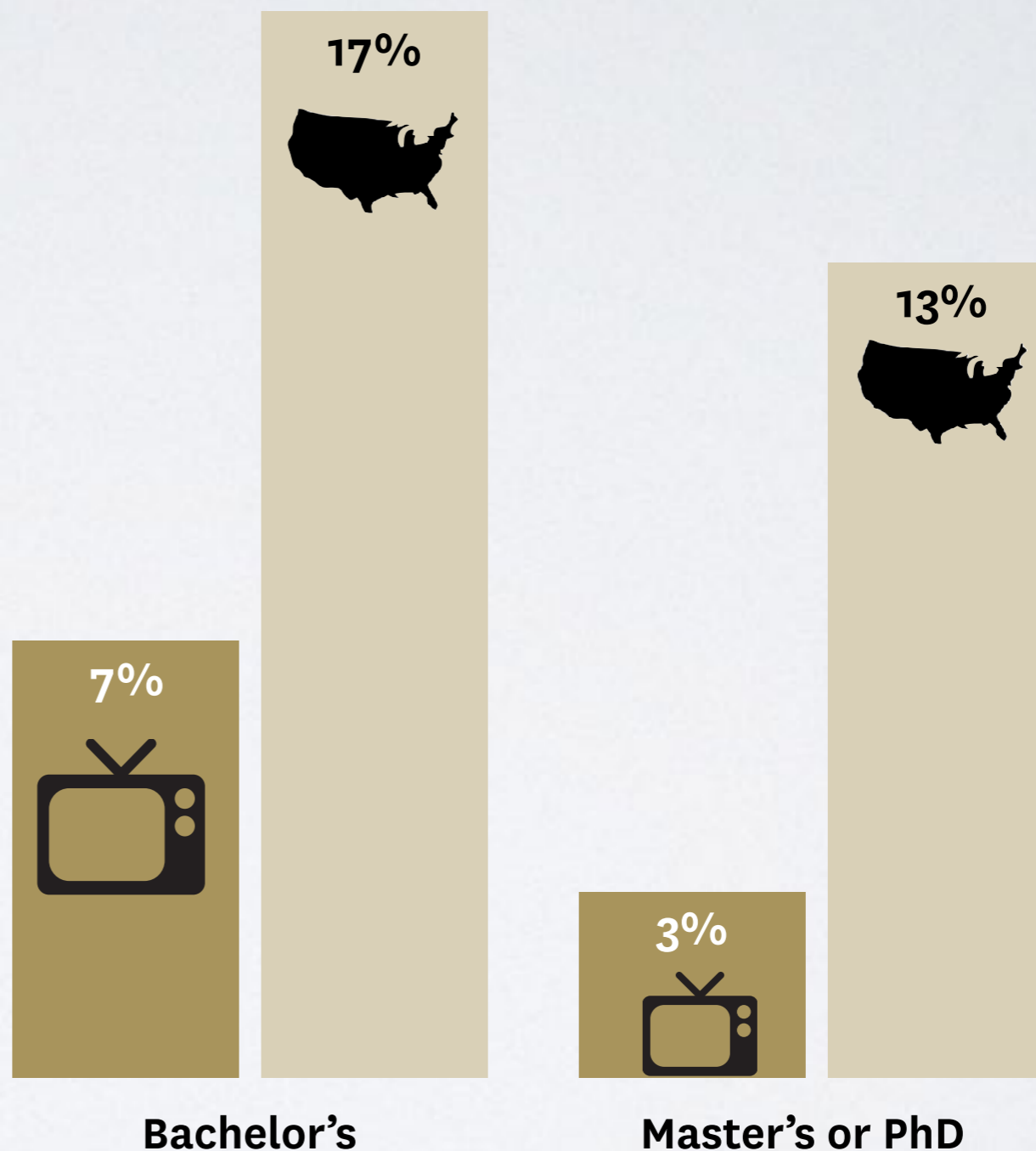
11. Landgrave, Michelangelo and Nowrasteh, Alex, *Criminal Immigrants: Their Numbers, Demographics, and Countries of Origin* (March 15, 2017). Immigration Research and Policy Brief No. 1.

# Immigrants are less educated on TV

Characters with identifiable education information were less educated than immigrants in reality.

In reality, 17% of U.S. immigrants attained a Bachelor's degree and 13% of U.S. immigrants attained a postgraduate degree, but immigrants on TV only received a Bachelor's degree 7% of the time and postgraduate degrees 3% of the time.<sup>12</sup>

# EDUCATION



12. Department of Homeland Security (2018). Immigration Data & Statistics

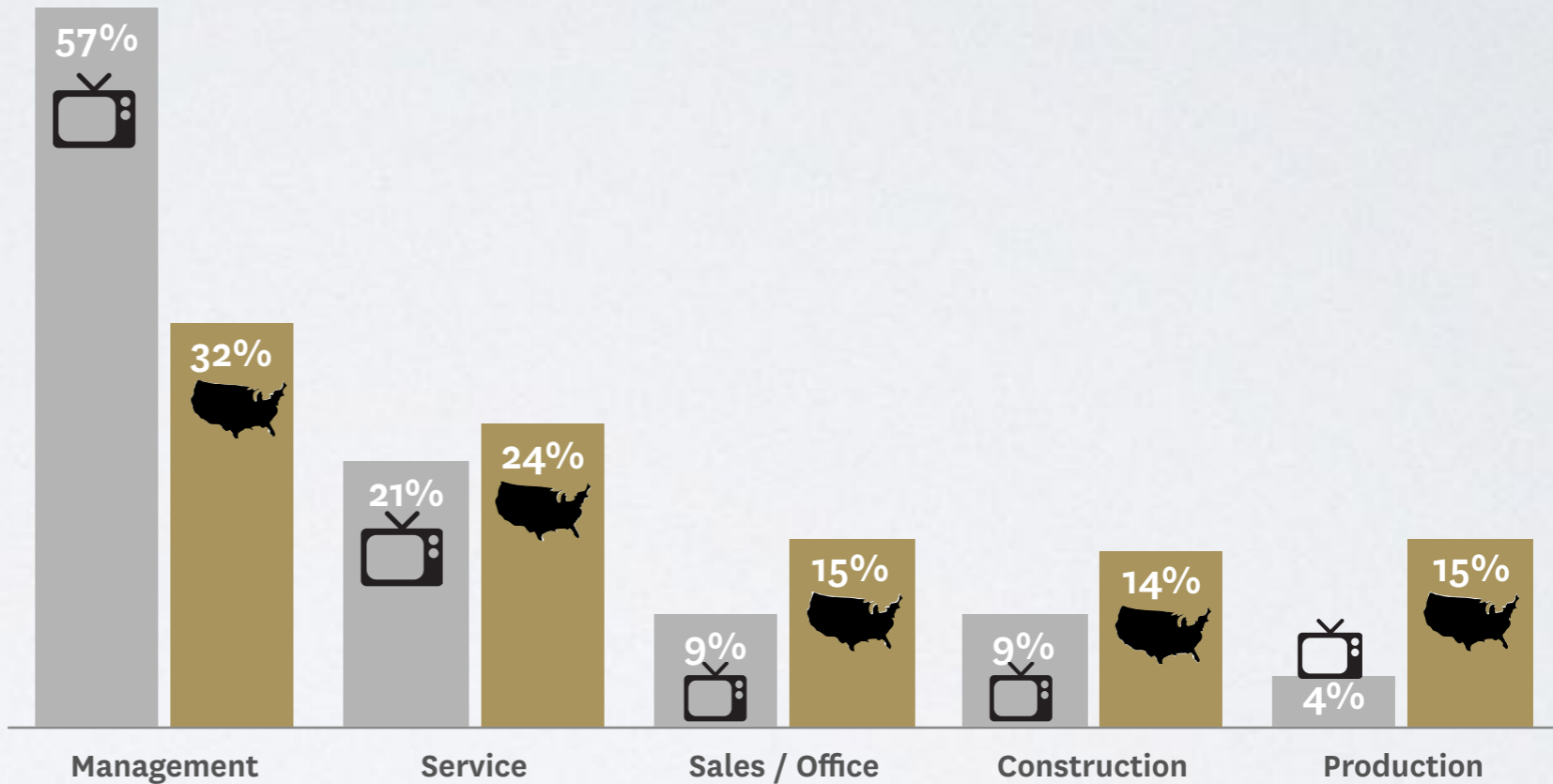


# IMMIGRANT JOBS

## Immigrants on TV are overrepresented in management positions

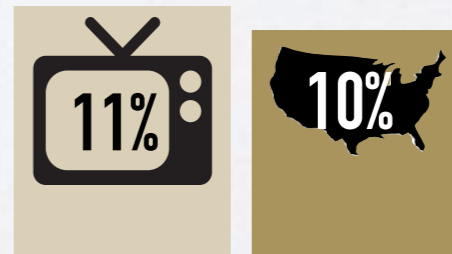
We compared the types of jobs immigrants on TV have with the categories of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Over half of immigrant characters with identifiable jobs worked in management or professional jobs, which is substantially higher than the 32% of the foreign-born workforce that works in these jobs in reality.

TV accurately depicts the percentage of immigrant characters working in the service industry, but foreign-born employees are markedly underrepresented in the TV depictions of sales and office jobs, construction and maintenance jobs and production and transportation jobs.<sup>13</sup>



### Immigrant Business Owners and Entrepreneurs on TV and in Reality

Roughly one out of ten immigrants own their own business in the US, which is reflected on TV as well – 11% of immigrants on TV are either business owners, entrepreneurs or self-employed.



13. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018). Labor Force Characteristics of Foreign-Born Workers

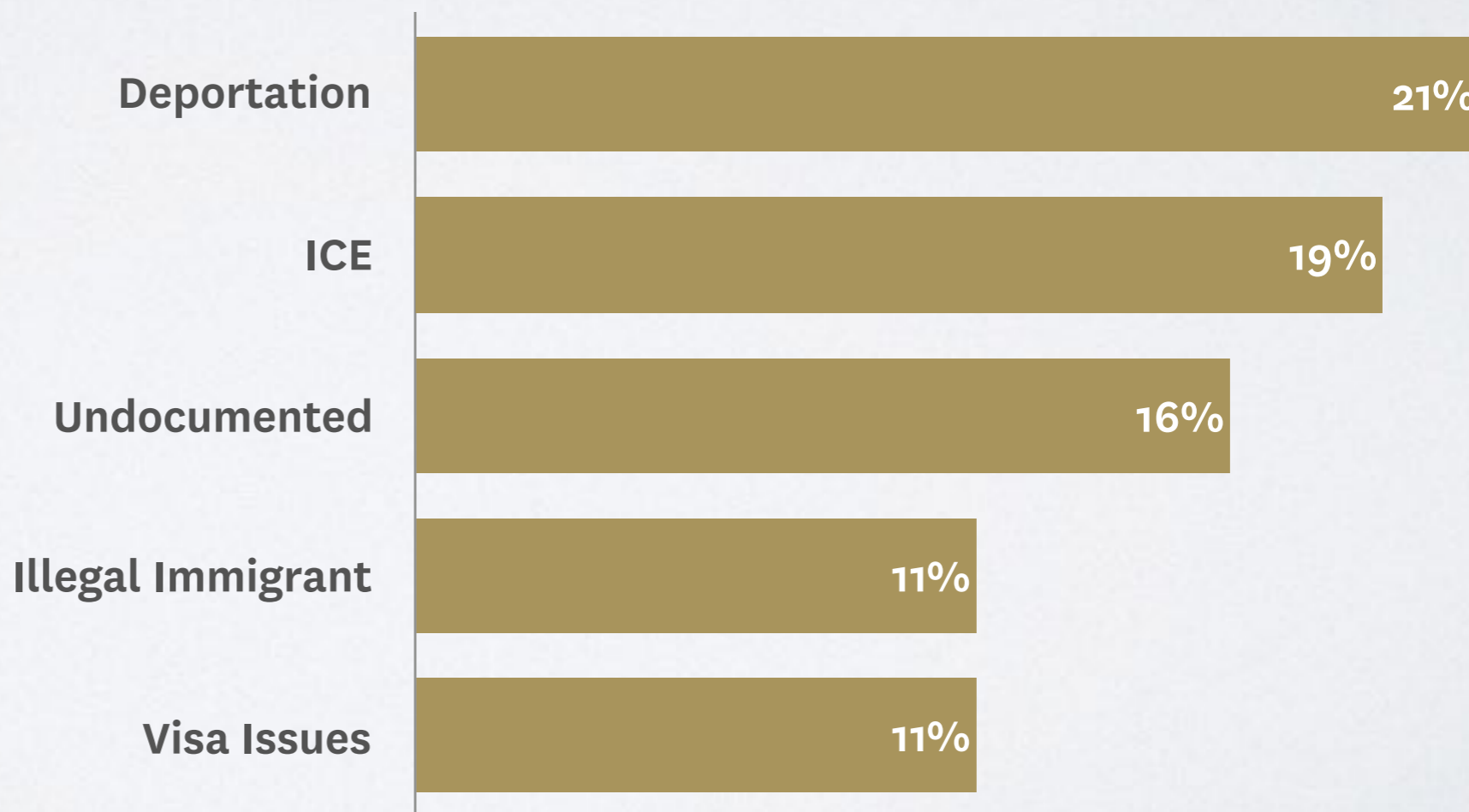
# “Deportation” and “ICE” were the two most common immigration terms tracked

Twenty-one immigration terms were tracked in each episode. The words “deportation” and “ICE” appeared in about one-fifth of all episodes and the use of “undocumented” appeared more frequently than the use of “illegal / illegals / illegal immigrant.”

A deeper analysis was conducted on the top two terms. Latino characters were the subject of 37% of the deportation mentions while White characters (44%) and female characters (63%) were the most likely characters to challenge the mentions of “deportation” as unacceptable. Latino characters were also the most common recipients of mentions of ICE and the term was challenged as unacceptable just over half of the time (52%), and the challenges also mainly came from women (71%).

# IMMIGRATION TERMS

Top 5 Tracked Immigration Terms



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# ABOUT

The Norman Lear  
**CENTER**  
FOR THE STUDY OF ENTERTAINMENT, MEDIA & SOCIETY

## USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center

The Norman Lear Center is a nonpartisan research and public policy center that studies the social, political, economic and cultural impact of entertainment on the world. The Lear Center translates its findings into action through testimony, journalism, strategic research and innovative public outreach campaigns. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field. Its Founding Director is Marty Kaplan. For more information, please visit: [www.learcenter.org](http://www.learcenter.org).



## Define American

Define American is a nonprofit media and culture organization that uses the power of story to transcend politics and shift the conversation about immigrants, identity, and citizenship in a changing America. Through event curation, media consulting and creation, and grassroots organizing, Define American jumpstarts widespread and culture change around citizenship, race and identity in a changing America. It was founded in 2011 by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and Emmy-nominated filmmaker Jose Antonio Vargas. For more information, visit [defineamerican.com](http://defineamerican.com).



## Media Impact Project

At the Lear Center's Media Impact Project ([www.mediaimpactproject.org](http://www.mediaimpactproject.org)), we study the impact of news and entertainment on viewers. Our goal is to prove that media matters, and to improve the quality of media to serve the public good. We partner with media makers and funders to create and conduct program evaluation, develop and test research hypotheses, and publish and promote thought leadership on the role of media in social change.