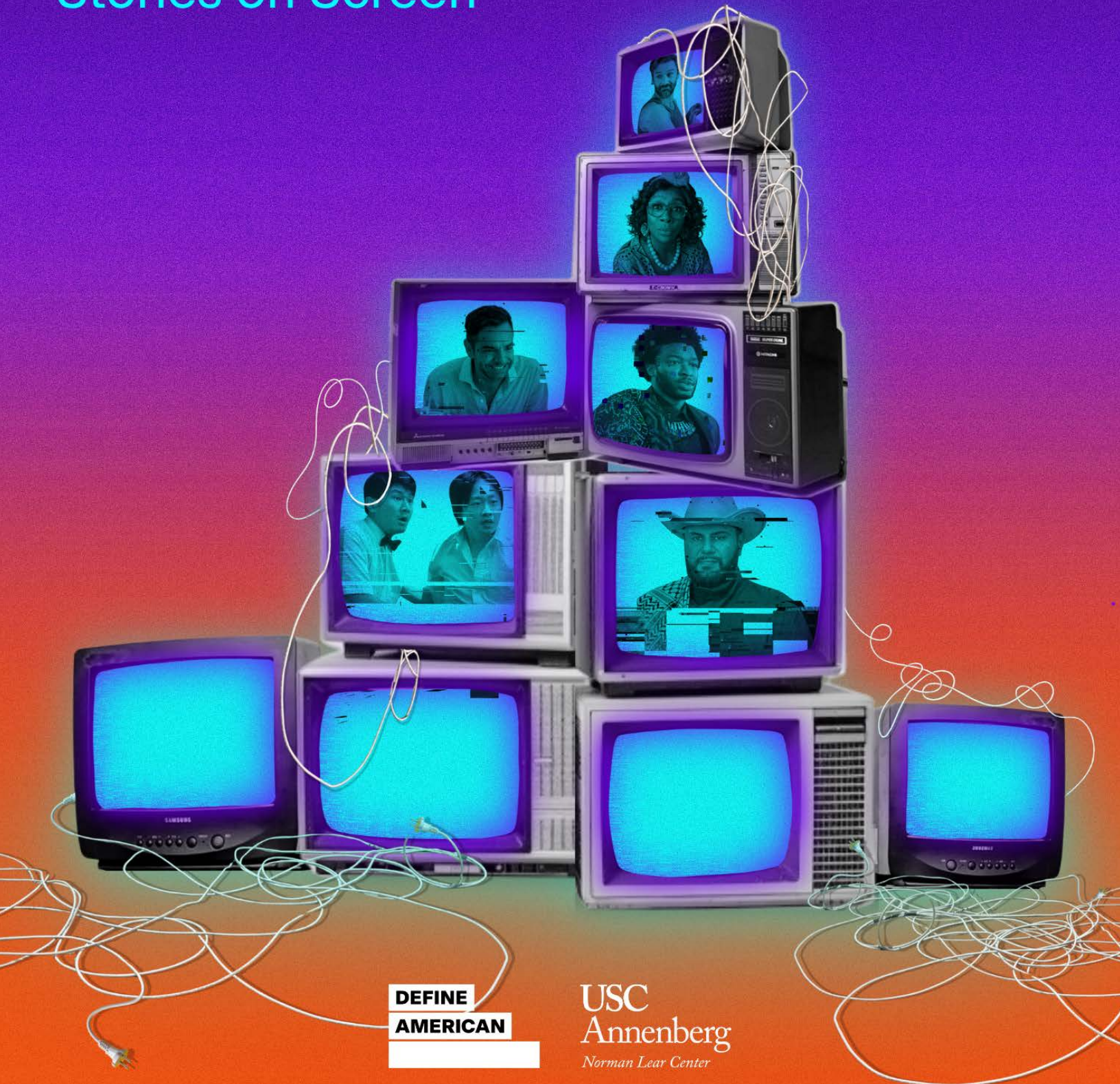


CHANGE THE NARRATIVE CHANGE THE WORLD 2026

How Hollywood
Can Fight for Immigrant
Stories on Screen



**DEFINE
AMERICAN**

USC
Annenberg
Norman Lear Center

Contents

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

Introduction

Findings

Conclusion

Recommendations

Contact



Interior Chinatown / Hulu

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Sarah E. Lowe, Ph.D., and Dulce Valencia.

The research was conducted by the USC Norman Lear Center: Erica L. Rosenthal, Ph.D., Erica Watson-Currie, Ph.D., Soraya Giaccardi Vargas, M.S., Dana Weinstein, M.A., and Veronica Jauriqui with content coding performed by Alex Chavez, Malu Petch, Vinh Nguyen, and Josefina Montoya.

Define American is led by its founder, Jose Antonio Vargas.

Define American's research is led by Sarah E. Lowe Ph.D. and supported by Charlie Sherman.

Define American's entertainment consulting is led by Dulce Valencia and supported by Britney Vongdara.

Design by Blythe Gurche.

Copyediting by Ana Murillo and Ashli Alberty Gibson.

Special thanks to Define American's Board of Directors and the entire Define American team.

Executive Summary



Mo / Netflix

Define American's fourth study with the University of Southern California's Norman Lear Center tracks how immigrant representation on television continues to evolve, and how the stories we tell on screen shape the attitudes of the audiences who watch them.

At Define American, we believe that pop culture helps us make sense of the world. Television makes that undeniable. Four rounds of research with the Norman Lear Center have shown us what that looks like in practice: television has the power to create meaningful connections between fictional characters and captive audiences, and those connections can shape how viewers think about the real people those characters represent.¹

This latest research builds on that foundation, while also pushing it forward. For the first time, we expanded our content analysis beyond immigrant characters to include their U.S.-born children. This methodological shift reflects a fundamental truth about the immigrant experience: it does not belong solely to individuals. Immigration often unfolds across entire families, many of them with mixed immigration status, navigating different relationships to citizenship, culture, and belonging across generations.

To tell the immigrant story accurately is to tell the whole family's story.

For this report, researchers at the Norman Lear Center analyzed 201 characters — 172 immigrants and 29 children of immigrants — across 80 episodes of 62 scripted series airing between July 1, 2023, and June 30, 2025.² They also conducted an impact study examining how scenes from a single episode of the Netflix series *Mo* shaped viewers' attitudes, emotions, and intentions around immigration and asylum.³

What emerged is a television landscape with meaningful gains in some areas and persistent, troubling gaps in others. More importantly, the findings illuminate how storytelling about immigration actually works: when done well, stories inform and help viewers build empathy, expand perspectives, and bring them closer to the realities of the communities reflected on screen.

1. Lowe, S.E., Jimenez, C.J., Reed, D.J., & Valencia, D., (2022). Change the narrative, change the world: The power of immigrant representation on television. USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center & Define American.

2. Data are collapsed across two seasons for all analyses, referred to in this report as the year they were released: 2026.

3. The full appendices for this report, including methodology, reliability data, and complete lists of shows and characters, are available online. <https://defineamerican.com/research/change-the-narrative-change-the-world-2026/>





What is scripted TV teaching America about immigrants?

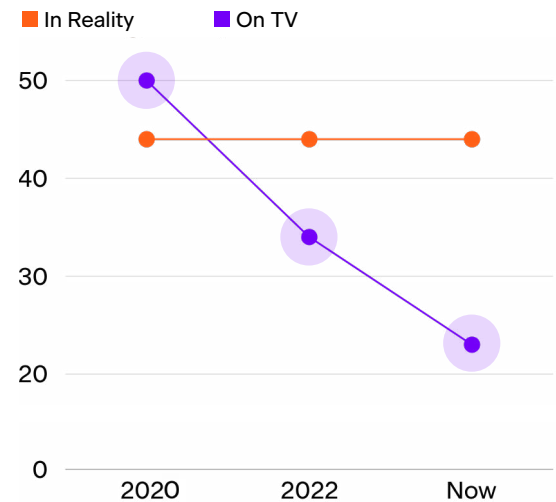
What we found in the 2023–2025 television landscape.

The Danger of Stereotypes

Latine representation is at a record low.

Latine representation continued to drop year-over-year. In 2020, Latine characters comprised 50% of all immigrant characters, in 2022 representation dropped to 34%, and now is at 23%. In reality, Latine immigrants make up 45% of all U.S. immigrants.

Latine Representation



FBI and FBI: Most Wanted led Latine representation:



FBI / CBS

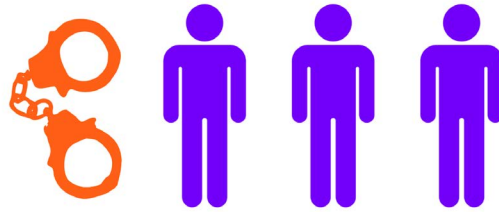
23% of all immigrant characters are Latine



FBI franchise

1 in 4 immigrant characters with a job was a criminal.

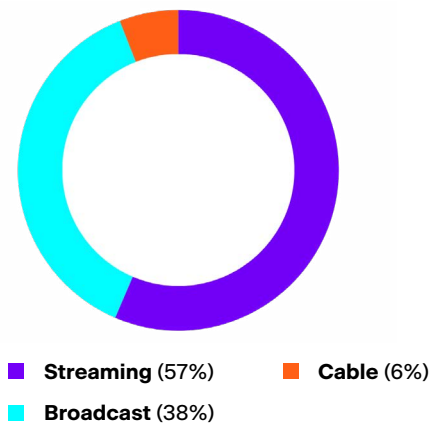
Immigrants and children of immigrants were shown as smugglers, drug dealers, and human traffickers.



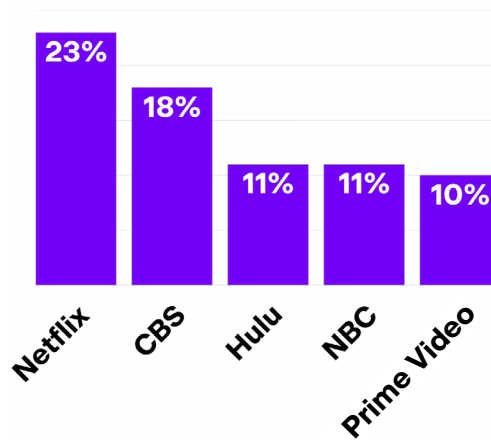
The Landscape

Streaming is leading the representation of immigrants and children of immigrants.

Character Representation



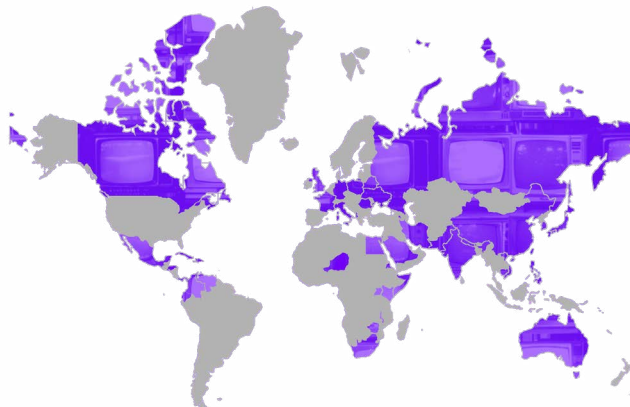
Top 5 Studios for Representation

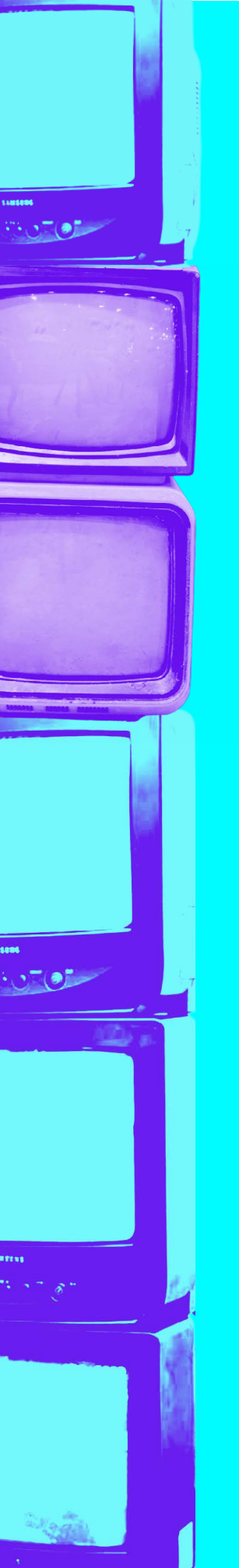


Breadth without depth: characters of 49 nationalities, most in supporting or minor roles.

Writers depicted more than 49 nationalities and 20 languages. This is a genuine expansion of the global stories television is willing to tell but most characters appeared in a single episode.

Immigrant Character Nationalities





Mo / Netflix

The Risk of the Single Show

Mo set the standard for immigrant representation – in just two seasons.

The Netflix series *Mo* featured more immigrant characters than any other show in our sample — 13 immigrants and 2 children of immigrants — and anchored Middle Eastern and North African representation on screen. The final episode aired in 2025.

Mo led Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) representation: 16% of all immigrant characters are MENA



Mo / Netflix



Mo

Impact of *Mo* on audiences:

62% increased their understanding of the challenges immigrants and asylees face in the U.S.

54% were more likely to support refugees or asylees in their community.

NOTE: Among those who watched the immigration storyline from *Mo*.

***Bob Hearts Abishola* anchored Black immigrant representation for five seasons.**

The CBS series *Bob Hearts Abishola* made headlines in our 2022 report for creating a surge in Black immigrant character representation. Representation held steady at 17% since that report. The final episode aired in 2024.



Bob Hearts Abishola / CBS

Impact of *Bob Hearts Abishola* on audiences:

34% increased their understanding of immigrant experiences.

29% increased their comfort around meeting a recent immigrant to the U.S.

44% increased their understanding of the sacrifices people must make to emigrate.

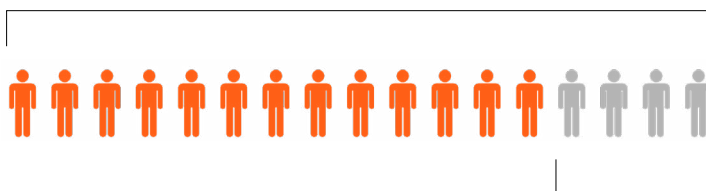
NOTE: As self reported from our 2022 impact study.

***Bob Hearts Abishola* led Black representation:**



Bob Hearts Abishola / CBS

17% of all immigrant characters are Black



Bob Hearts Abishola

***Deli Boys* led Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Representation:**



Deli Boys / Hulu

22% of all immigrant characters are AAPI



Deli Boys

Hollywood has proven it can tell compelling, nuanced immigrant stories, and audiences are watching. Now is the time to fight for them.





Introduction

Nine years ago, Define American launched this longitudinal research with the USC Norman Lear Center to document what no one else was systemically tracking: what does immigrant representation on TV in the U.S. actually look like? What we found made the next question inevitable: do those portrayals shape how audiences think about immigrants in real life? Across four editions of this research, the answer has consistently been yes. But the question before us now is more urgent and more complicated.


This is a report about progress and what happens when that progress does not hold.

For our [2022 report](#), we asked whether Hollywood's post-racial-reckoning commitments to diverse storytelling would translate into lasting change. We saw real gains. Black immigrant character representation had doubled. AAPI representation had more than doubled. *Bob Hearts Abishola* — a sitcom centered on a Nigerian immigrant woman — was one of the most-watched shows on CBS. *Mo*, a Palestinian-American asylum seeker's story on Netflix, was breaking ground in ways we couldn't have anticipated.

It felt like the industry was turning a corner. But the progress didn't last.

Both *Bob Hearts Abishola* and *Mo* ended in the 2024-2025 season, and with them, a significant share of that representation. This is the pattern that continues to define immigrant storytelling on American television: communities are visible one season, and gone the next. But it also points to the opportunity to move from moments of representation to sustained presence. When representation is concentrated in a handful of shows, each one carries the weight of an entire community, and every cancellation becomes a loss far beyond a single series.





At the same time, the world beyond the screen has shifted. Since our last report, ICE raids have escalated dramatically, and fear in immigrant communities has intensified in ways we have not seen across the life of this research. Define American responded by publishing [A Writer's Guide to Understanding ICE Raids](#) — a resource for TV writers trying to get the story right at a moment when getting it wrong has real consequences. Whether and how television will respond to this political moment remains an open question.

And yet, this research reveals something worth holding onto.

Streaming platforms now account for the majority of immigrant representation on American television, and they are delivering a breadth of stories beyond what has historically existed. Characters speak 20 languages. Nationalities span Nigerian, Nepali, Eritrean, and beyond. The immigrant story on screen is becoming more global, more specific, more expansive, and audiences are ready for it. This breadth matters. It is a form of recognition.

Breadth and depth are needed to change how audiences think and feel.

What our audience studies over the years have shown — this year featuring the Netflix show *Mo* — is that audiences are not moved by information. They're changed by connection. By spending time with a character. By watching them struggle, love, fail, and persist. By coming to know them the way you know a neighbor. That is the power of parasocial relationships — the feeling of genuine investment in a fictional person — and that level of connection cannot be built in a guest role or a single episode.

When representation is scarce, every role becomes symbolic, whether anyone intends it or not. The conversation doesn't start with outrage. It starts with scarcity. And scarcity makes every choice feel, to the communities watching, like either a gift or a verdict.⁴

- Gloria Calderón Kellett, Writer/Producer known for *One Day at a Time*, *Jane the Virgin*, and *Drunk History*.

4. Calderón Kellett, G. (2026). The Latino waiting game: when one role means everything. Deadline.



Findings

Content Analysis

80 episodes

4,200 minutes of content

14 networks

201 characters

62 scripted series airing between July 1, 2023 & June 30, 2025

172 immigrant characters

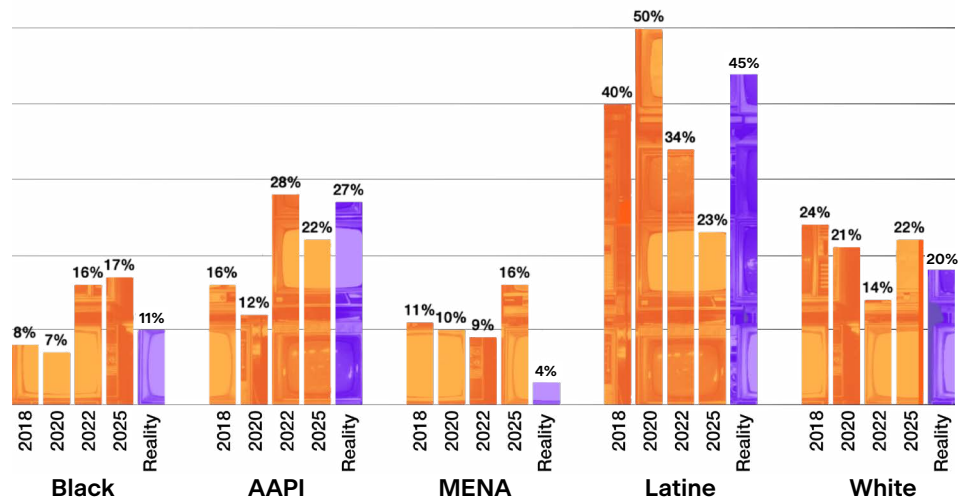
29 U.S.-born children of immigrants

Immigrant Representation on Television

For this round of research, we expanded our analysis in a meaningful way. In addition to immigrant characters, we coded U.S.-born children of immigrant characters for the first time, using the same codebook to capture how the immigrant experience is represented across the whole family. The full list of shows and characters are available in the appendices.

Immigrant Representation on TV

■ % of all immigrant characters
■ % of U.S. immigrants in reality



NOTE: The U.S. has a complicated history of defining race and ethnicity in ways that flatten identity and obscure lived experience. We use census categories here as a point of comparison, not as an endorsement, to better understand how on-screen representation aligns with real-world demographics. Additionally, one immigrant character was coded as 2+ races in 2025.



Role Prominence for Immigrants



- Leading/ Co-leading roles (10%)
- Supporting (77%)
- Minor (13%)

Role Prominence for Children of Immigrants



- Leading/ Co-leading roles (38%)
- Supporting (41%)
- Minor (21%)

NOTE: Lead characters are protagonists. “Ensembles” are noted as co-leading. Supporting characters appear in multiple scenes and are essential to the story. All other speaking characters are noted as minor.

Being Seen vs. Being Centered.

77% of immigrant characters are concentrated in supporting roles.

Top shows featuring children of immigrant characters:

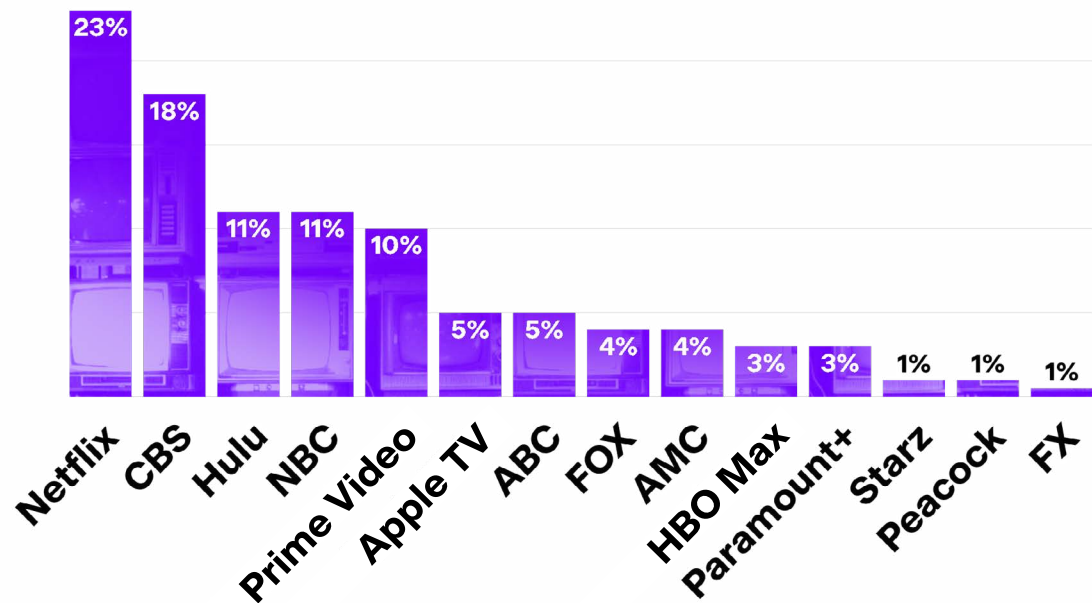
- ◆ *Station 19*
- ◆ *Deli Boys*
- ◆ *Nobody Wants This*
- ◆ *Mo*
- ◆ *Interior Chinatown*
- ◆ *#1 Happy Family USA*

Top shows featuring immigrant characters:

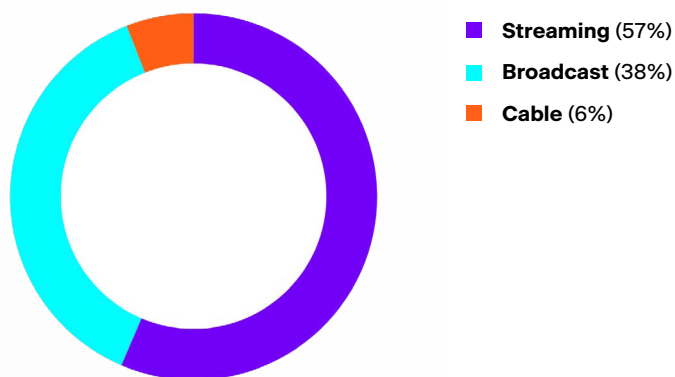
- ◆ *Mo*
- ◆ *Bob Hearts Abishola*
- ◆ *The Night Agent*
- ◆ *The Irrational*

The Studios, the Numbers, and Who's Showing Up

Studio Representation: Immigrants and Children of Immigrants



Character Representation



Latine Representation: Losing Ground

Latine representation has substantially declined. This gap is among the most concerning trends across our four rounds of research. Where Latine immigrant characters once outpaced the real-world population they represent, they are now underrepresented, even as Latine immigrants in the U.S. remain the largest immigrant population. In our 2020 report, television told a different story, one of Latine intersectionality, complexity, humor, and humanity. Then, one by one, those shows were canceled.

Latine Immigrant Shows Canceled Between 2022 - 2025

~~*Diary of a Future President* (Disney+)~~

~~*Gentefied* (Netflix)~~

~~*Gordita Chronicles* (HBO Max)~~

~~*Mr. Iglesias* (Netflix)~~

~~*On My Block* (Netflix)~~

~~*One Day at a Time* (Pop, Netflix)~~

~~*Party of Five* (Freeform)~~

~~*Promised Land* (ABC)~~

~~*Roswell, New Mexico* (The CW)~~

~~*The Baker and the Beauty* (ABC)~~

~~*The Garcias* (Netflix)~~

~~*Vida* (Starz)~~

~~*National Treasure:*~~

~~*Edge of History* (Disney+)~~

~~*This Fool* (Hulu)~~

~~*Now & Then* (Apple TV)~~

~~*Los Espookys* (HBO Max)~~

~~*The Horror of Dolores Roach* (Prime Video)~~

~~*Freeridge* (Netflix)~~

~~*Lopez vs. Lopez* (NBC)~~

Country of Origin of Latine Immigrant Characters



- Mexico (56%)
- Ecuador (12%)
- Colombia (8%)
- Honduras (8%)
- Panama (8%)
- Venezuela (4%)
- Dominican Republic (4%)

Percentages are calculated by the number of Latine immigrant characters with known countries of origins. 15 Latine characters had unknown countries of origin.

Just as important as the drop in numbers is the type of representation. A large portion of Latine immigrant characters in our sample come from the *FBI* and *FBI: Most Wanted* franchise. Without it, total representation falls to just 17%.

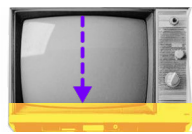
Additionally, no characters were explicitly identified as Afro-Latine, and the rich ethnic, racial, and national diversity within Latine communities continues to be flattened into a narrow set of representations.

The result is the steepest decline in Latine immigrant representation in the history of this research, from a historic high to well below the U.S. Latine immigrant population:



50%

Latine immigrant representation on TV in 2020



23%

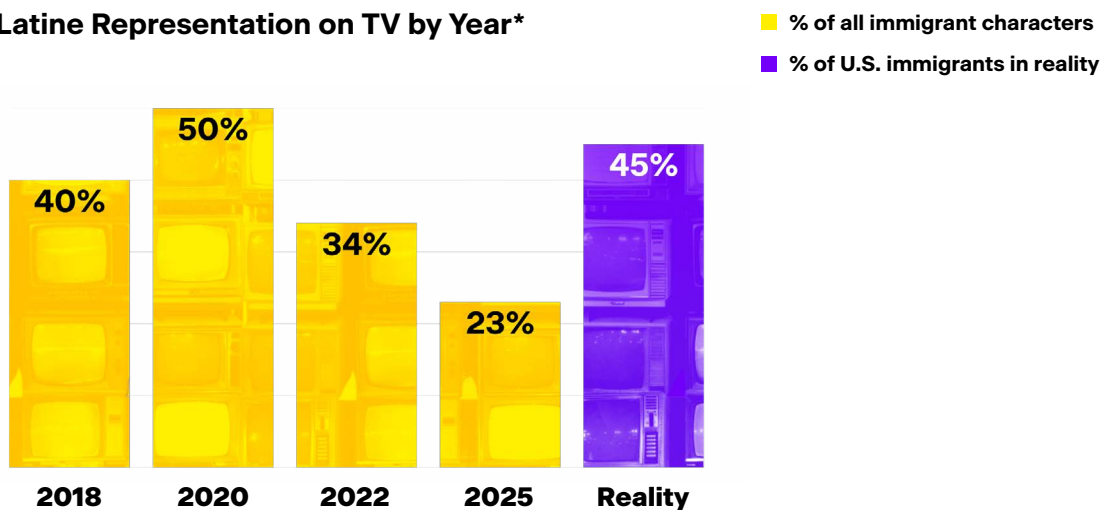
Latine immigrant representation on TV today



45%

of the total U.S. immigrant population are Latine immigrants

Latine Representation on TV by Year*



*NOTE: Latine is not a race but a broad ethnic category that encompasses numerous ethnic identities. It is included here under race to enable comparisons with real-world census data. Also one immigrant character (0.6%) was coded as 2+ races.



SAM LAYBOURNE ON ACAPULCO

Working as a showrunner on Seasons 3 and 4 of *Acapulco* was an incredibly rewarding experience because we had the support of Apple TV to create a show that featured a largely Latine cast. This allowed our actors to inhabit roles for Mexican and other Latine characters that we often don't see on English language television. This experience was empowering to everyone involved and because we had so many Latine characters, we were able to represent a true spectrum of lived experiences. We could steer clear of stereotypes and really dimensionalize the people who worked at the hotel we portrayed from the 1980s. This meant diving into the rich personal experiences of our actors and writers to make sure that there was real authenticity in our storytelling.

Out of this authenticity we are able to not only give our large Latine audience a mirror to reflect their own culture, but we also gave our non-Latine audience a window into a beautiful culture that is so much more complex and nuanced than popular culture often suggests. This kind of work is important in scripted television and here's the kicker: it is also good for the bottom line!

- Sam Laybourne, Showrunner of *Acapulco*

THE OPPORTUNITY

Rebuild Latine on-screen representation in writers' rooms, in development, in the green-light decisions that determine whose stories get told for sustainable change.

MO AMER ON MO

This show comes directly from my life and from my family's life, going back generations. My family is Palestinian. They fled Haifa. They ended up in Kuwait. And then when I was nine years old, the Gulf War happened and we had to flee again, on a school bus through Baghdad, to Jordan, and eventually to Houston, Texas. That's the kind of generational displacement – generational trauma – that I really wanted to show. Because it doesn't start with you. By the time you arrive somewhere new and try to start over, you are already carrying so much.

Writing a comedy was a great way for me to filter pain and go to humor in the most serious of situations. It was a natural thing in my life, turning to comedy to balance out tragedy. My hope was that the show would build compassion and empathy toward what it's like to have an immigrant, asylee experience in America, but also universality. You don't have to be an immigrant to understand what it's like to work your butt off to provide for your family while juggling emotionally challenging things in your life. That's something everyone can grab onto.⁵

- Mo Amer, Creator and Lead Actor on *Mo*

MENA Representation: A New Era of Authenticity

Creators and longtime collaborators Mo Amer and Ramy Youssef are blazing a trail with shows like *Ramy*, *Mo*, and *#1 Happy Family USA*, where MENA immigrant life is centered with specificity, humor, and emotional complexity. Unlike earlier television portrayals that often relied on stereotypes or flattened cultural cues, these series expand the range of what MENA immigrant characters can be, not wholly defined by conflict or geopolitics.

5. Define American with Jose Antonio Vargas (2022). Define American sits down with Mo Amer [Video]. YouTube.

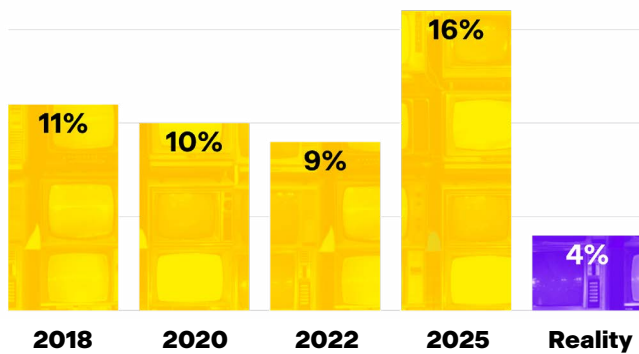


THE OPPORTUNITY

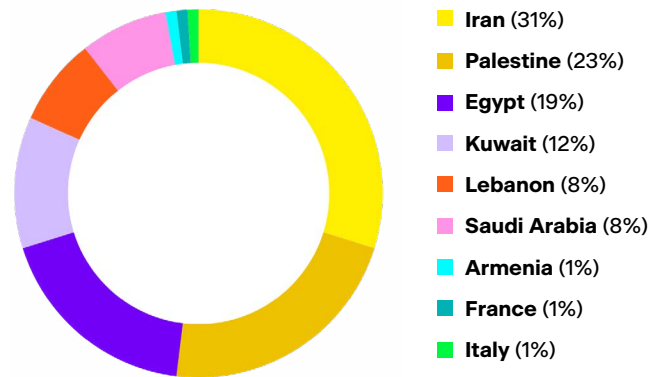
Expand pathways for immigrant creators to build, write, and lead the stories that define how their communities are seen.

MENA Representation on TV

■ % of all immigrant characters
 ■ % of U.S. immigrants in reality



Country of Origin for MENA Immigrant Characters



Percentages are calculated by the number of MENA immigrant characters with known countries of origins. 1 character had an unknown country of origin. Additionally, the percentages add up to more than 100% because 3 MENA characters were coded as having both Palestine and Kuwait as their countries of origin.

For the Love of *Mo*: An Impact Study

The Netflix series *Mo* follows Mo Najjar, a Palestinian-American asylee navigating life in Texas alongside his family, balancing humor and heartbreak with the weight of unresolved legal immigration status

spanning decades. Created by Mo Amer and Ramy Youssef, it blends comedy with an unsparing portrayal of what the asylum process actually feels like to a family. With 13 immigrant characters, *Mo* features more immigrants than any other show in our sample and stands as one of the most authentic depictions of the asylum experience on American television.



Our impact study examined how a single episode storyline from *Mo* shaped viewers' attitudes, emotions, and support for immigrants and asylees.

Methods

Approximately 1,000 regular U.S. television viewers were recruited to watch one of two clips: an immigration-centered clip, in which Mo Najjar's asylee status and struggles within the immigration system are made explicit, including watching his ankle monitor be put on and taken off by an ICE agent; or a control version of the clip with the immigration context removed. Data were collected online via PureSpectrum (December 22–29, 2025) among U.S. adults 18+ with Netflix access who had not previously watched *Mo*. The sample was census-matched for age, gender, and race, and balanced across political ideology, education, income, religiosity, and region.⁶

Impact of Watching *Mo*

Among those who saw the immigration-centered storyline:

62% said *Mo* increased their understanding of the challenges immigrants and asylees face in the U.S.

54% said *Mo* made them more likely to support refugees or asylees in their community.

Regardless of their age, gender, political identification, religiosity, or geography, audiences who felt sadness while watching the immigration-centered storyline had a stronger desire to support immigrants including:

- ◆ **Posting on social media**
- ◆ **Signing a petition**
- ◆ **Donating to immigrant-serving organizations**
- ◆ **Contacting members of Congress**

6. The full appendices for this report, including methodology, reliability data, and complete lists of shows and characters, are available online. <https://defineamerican.com/research/change-the-narrative-change-the-world-2026/>

Connection with “Mo Najjar”

Regardless of which clip viewers watched, what predicted immigration attitudes was how they felt while watching *Mo*.

Viewers who felt a stronger sense of connection to Mo Najjar were less likely to endorse harmful stereotypes about immigrants.

The stronger the sense of connection viewers felt to Mo as a character, the more their immigration attitudes showed positive behavioral intentions toward immigrants in real life and the less likely they were to endorse harmful stereotypes. **These effects were stronger for viewers with little or no real-life contact with immigrants.**

Empathy toward Mo was associated with the following attitudes:

- ✦ Being less likely to support restrictive immigration policies
- ✦ Being more likely to support humanitarian policies, such as providing asylees with prompt work authorization and repealing border expulsion policies

Feeling Mo's pain drove real action.

Viewers who felt sadness while watching were more likely to say they would:

- ✦ Speak with friends and family in support of immigrants
- ✦ Post on social media
- ✦ Sign petitions
- ✦ Learn more about immigration law
- ✦ Donate to immigrant-serving organizations
- ✦ Contact members of Congress

And they said they:

- ✦ Agreed that the U.S. has a moral responsibility to grant asylum
- ✦ Believed that refugees and asylees who have contributed to the country should be able to stay
- ✦ Agreed that immigrants strengthen the American economy

Feeling hope for Mo was similarly powerful.

Viewers who felt hopeful were more likely to:

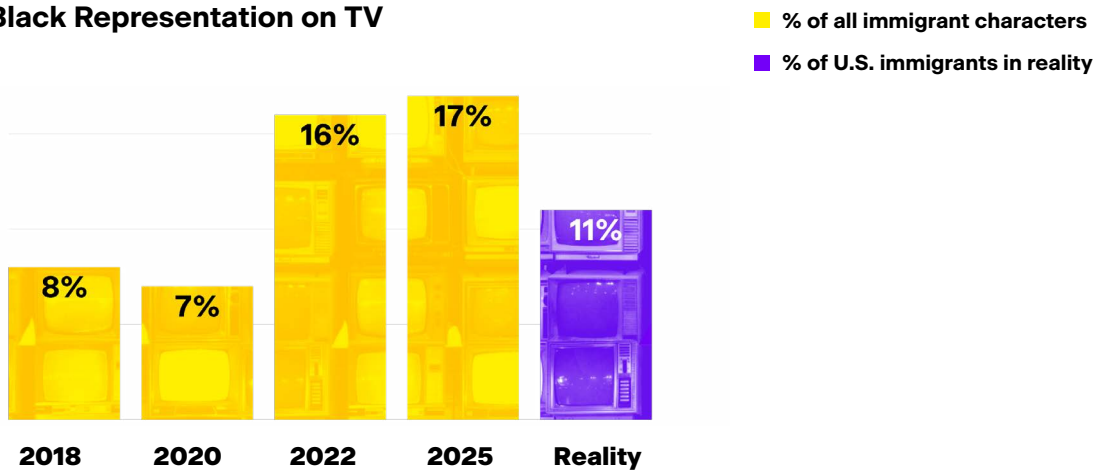
- ✦ Take action in support of immigrants
- ✦ Feel more comfortable with the idea of living near refugees and asylees
- ✦ Oppose restrictive immigration policies
- ✦ Support humanitarian policies



Black Representation: One Show Shouldn't Be the Whole Story

17% of immigrant characters in our current sample were Black, which is holding steady from 2022 and more than double the 7% we found in 2020. This represents one of the most consistent positive trends across our longitudinal research.

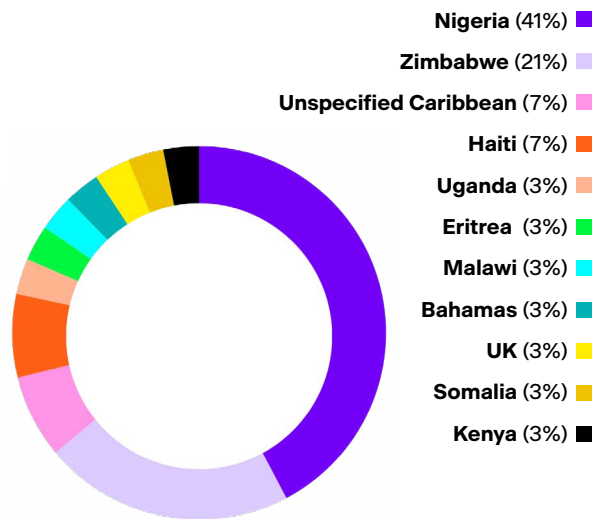
Black Representation on TV



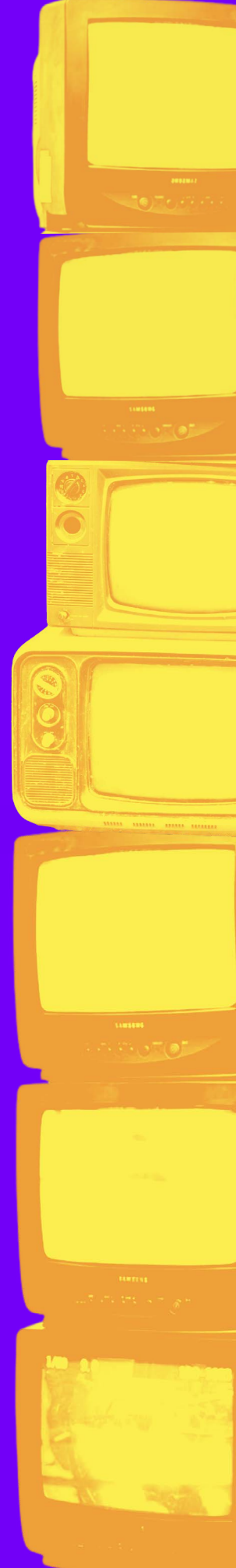
Within that growth, representation remains unevenly distributed. Nigerian characters account for the largest share, with 12 Nigerian immigrant characters appearing across the sample.

But more important than who appears is where that representation is sustained and what happens when it isn't.

Country of Origin for Black Immigrant Characters



Percentages are calculated by the number of Black immigrant characters with known countries of origins. 1 Black immigrant character had an unknown country of origin.



Bob Hearts Abishola: A Case Study in Sustained Black Immigrant Representation

B *ob Hearts Abishola* has been one of the most significant forces shaping Black immigrant visibility across multiple rounds of this research, centering 10 immigrant characters and 1 child of immigrants. **Its conclusion marks more than the end of a series; it represents the loss of one of the few sustained sites of Black immigrant family storytelling on broadcast television.**

That gap matters. When representation is concentrated in a small number of shows, entire communities can rise in visibility through a single narrative and just as quickly lose that presence when it ends, leaving few sustained on-screen anchors for visibility.

At the same time, there are signs of expansion within that visibility. Our 2022 report celebrated the first appearance of undocumented Black immigrant characters on screen. In our current findings, we saw five undocumented Black immigrant characters. This is an early indication that new dimensions of Black immigrant experience are beginning to enter the television landscape.



Bob Hearts Abishola / CBS

17% of all immigrant characters are Black



Bob Hearts Abishola

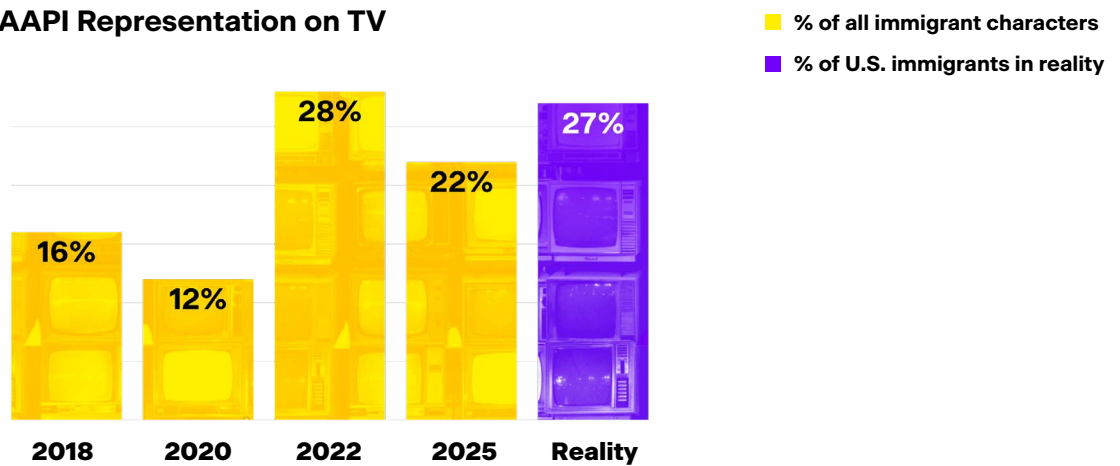
THE OPPORTUNITY

The immigrant story is incomplete without Black immigrants, and right now, an extraordinary opportunity exists for networks and showrunners to change that. Move beyond isolated moments of visibility toward sustained Black immigrant storytelling woven across multiple shows and narratives. By integrating these stories fully across networks and genres, no one series has to carry the weight alone.

AAPI Representation: Taking Space and Holding Ground

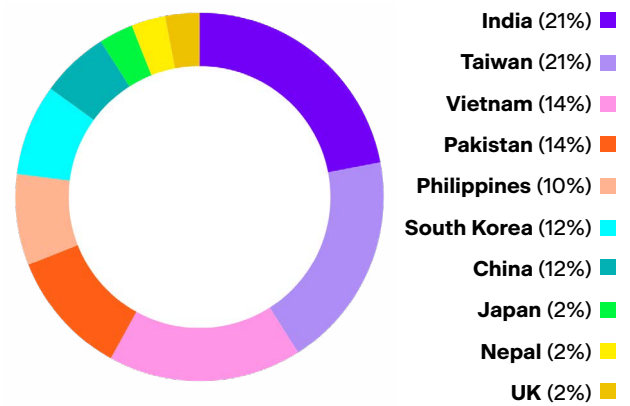
Representation of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) immigrant characters reached 22% in this round of research.

AAPI Representation on TV



The gains in Asian American representation have been a real step forward. However, they also underscore a persistent blind spot: Pacific Islander, or Pasifika, communities remain largely absent and are often flattened or erased within broader AAPI narratives. **In our current sample, not a single Pacific Islander immigrant character was identified.** And while Asian American representation continues to grow in visibility, immigrant diversity within the broader category is not always seen on screen.

Country of Origin of AAPI Immigrant Characters



Percentages are calculated by the number of AAPI immigrant characters with known countries of origins. 2 characters had unknown countries of origin.

Charles Yu on *Interior Chinatown*

A show like *Interior Chinatown* could not have existed 20 years ago—maybe not even 10. Through our show (and others), AAPI viewers have the chance to live in a world, however fictional and brief, populated by characters that look like them. That is progress. That is really important. But just as important—maybe more so, is that we see ourselves in people who don't look like us. This is the magic of fiction. This is true representation. Not narrowing our self-conceptions, but expanding them. To acknowledge difference but also commonality. To see things we all struggle with, value, dream of. Because as we all know (even if we sometimes need reminding): People are more than one thing. We are more than demographics. We can be defined by our roles but we don't have to be limited to them. So I hope Asian Americans will watch *Interior Chinatown* and see themselves in Willis, but I also hope everyone else will as well.

- Charles Yu, Author and Showrunner of *Interior Chinatown*

THE OPPORTUNITY

The most urgent gap is Pasifika invisibility, a significant omission that reveals how often the "PI" in AAPI goes unrepresented. The goal is not just more AAPI characters, but the full spectrum of experiences across the Asian diaspora.

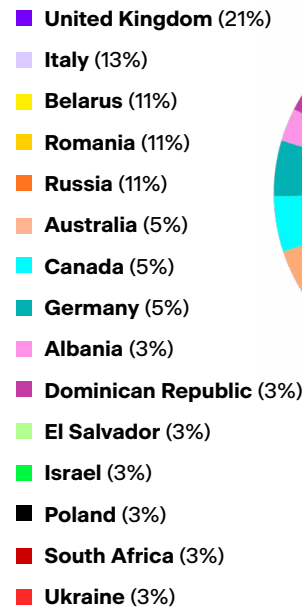
White Representation: The Assimilation Assumption

The representation of white (non-Latine) immigrant characters has risen to 22% in our current sample.

When white characters are immigrants, their immigration status can appear to be a backdrop rather than their central story. Their ethnic heritage may surface in a family dinner, an accent, or a cultural reference but the machinery of immigration, particularly the legal precarity, rarely drives their storylines. Their immigration is treated as already-resolved, a chapter closed before the show begins.

This is the assimilation assumption at work. White immigrant identity on television is portrayed primarily through culture rather than through the lived experience of navigating a system that was not built for them. This type of

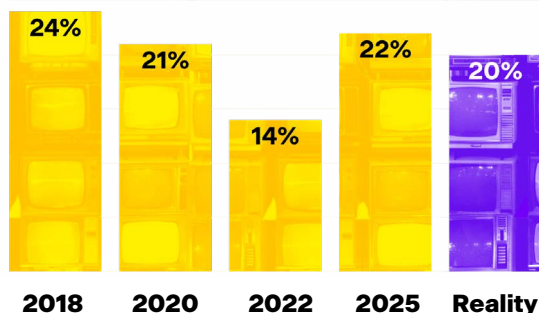
Country of Origin for White Immigrant Characters



All of the white immigrant characters had known countries of origins.

representation does not reflect the reality of many immigrants' lives, even accounting for the advantages of white privilege. When immigrant identity is not written into the text, it cannot move audiences the way Mo Najjar's story moves them. It also quietly perpetuates a damaging myth that legal precarity and systemic struggle are burdens only for immigrants of color. Belonging is not promised to any immigrant. That is a story television has yet to fully tell.

White Representation on TV



Yellow bars: % of all immigrant characters
Purple bar: % of U.S. immigrants in reality

Marco Calvani on *The Four Seasons*

Realizing that Claude's immigrant experience wasn't a quirk was important. It was his emotional core. Once I understood that, everything clicked. Even after years of living in the U.S., he still feels like he has to prove he belongs, that he has to earn his place at the table or the time to speak in a conversation. I know that feeling personally. Pouring that into Claude made his over-anxiety feel real rather than comedic. And therefore, it became even funnier!

When writers and actors refuse to reduce immigrant characters to where they come from, something remarkable happens: the characters become less one-dimensional, more specific, and therefore more universal. The audience relates in surprising ways. A Midwest woman can recognize herself in an Italian man, a straight cis man can relate to a gay man. I've seen this happen. It's an opportunity for us as creators and for the audience too – to be given a different experience, to learn from the perspective and (soul) language of someone who comes from somewhere far away. That's not an immigrant story. That's a human story.

- Marco Calvani, Filmmaker and Actor in *The Four Seasons*

THE OPPORTUNITY

Belonging is not guaranteed to any immigrant community, regardless of race and ethnicity. Integrating those struggles adds another layer, and one that's currently not widely explored.

Many Languages, One Home



94%

of immigrant characters spoke English

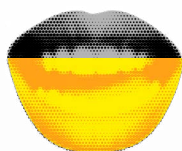


100%

of children of immigrant characters spoke English

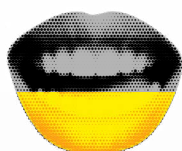
This directly counters the persistent stereotype of immigrants as non-English speakers.

Multilingualism is common rather than exceptional:



56%

of immigrant characters spoke a second language



35%

of children of immigrant characters spoke a second language

Across the sample, 20 languages were spoken, reflecting the linguistic reality of immigrant communities rather than treating language as a barrier to be overcome.



Interior Chinatown / Hulu



These include:



Spanish

30 characters



Urdu

6 characters



Arabic

19 characters



Vietnamese

5 characters



Hindi

7 characters



Shona*

5 characters

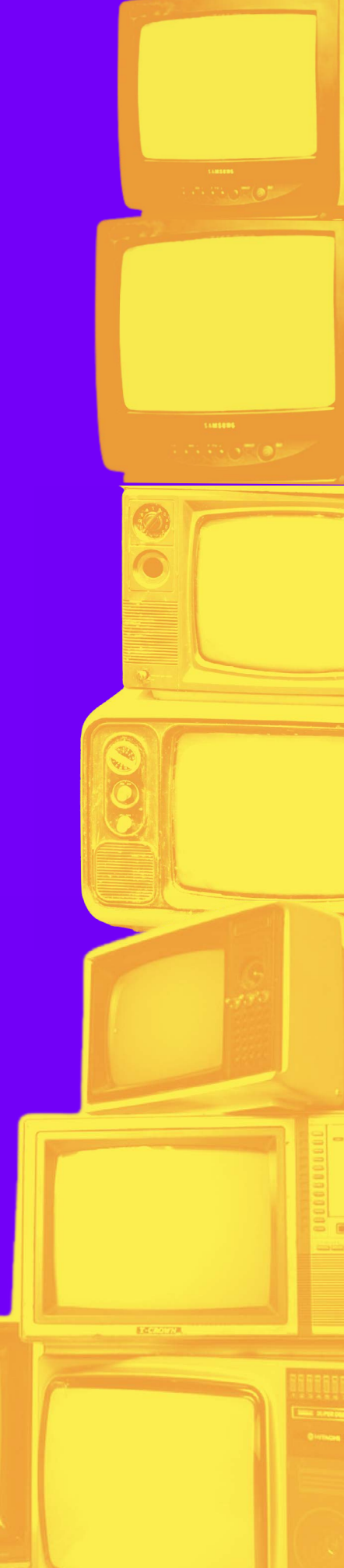


Farsi

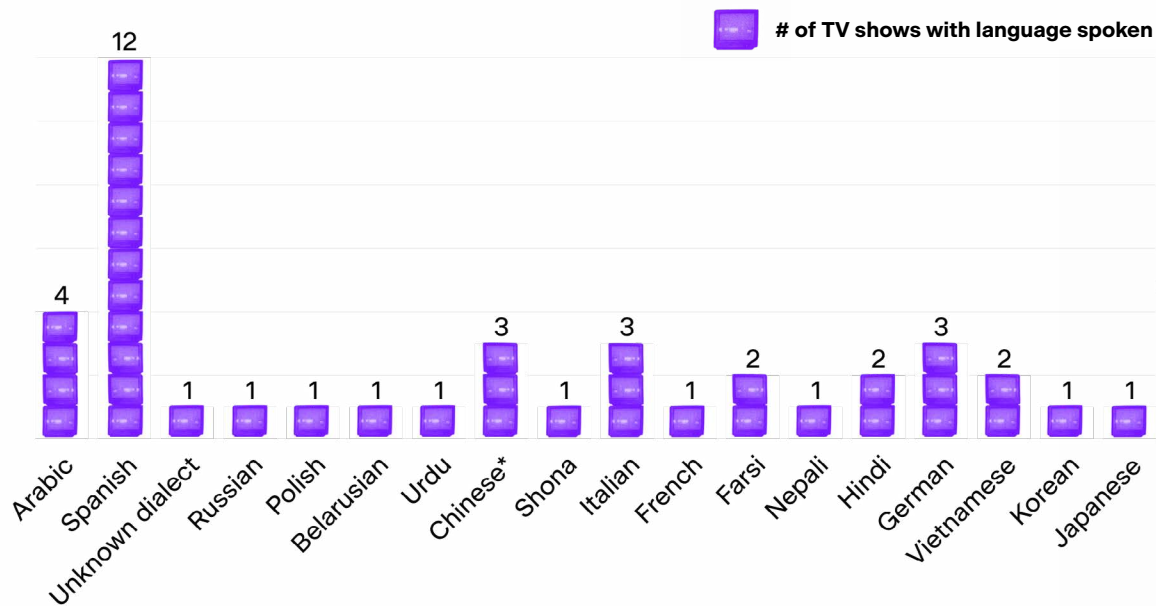
7 characters

*Shona is a Bantu language spoken largely in Zimbabwe, whose appearance reflects the growing breadth of African immigrant representation on screen.

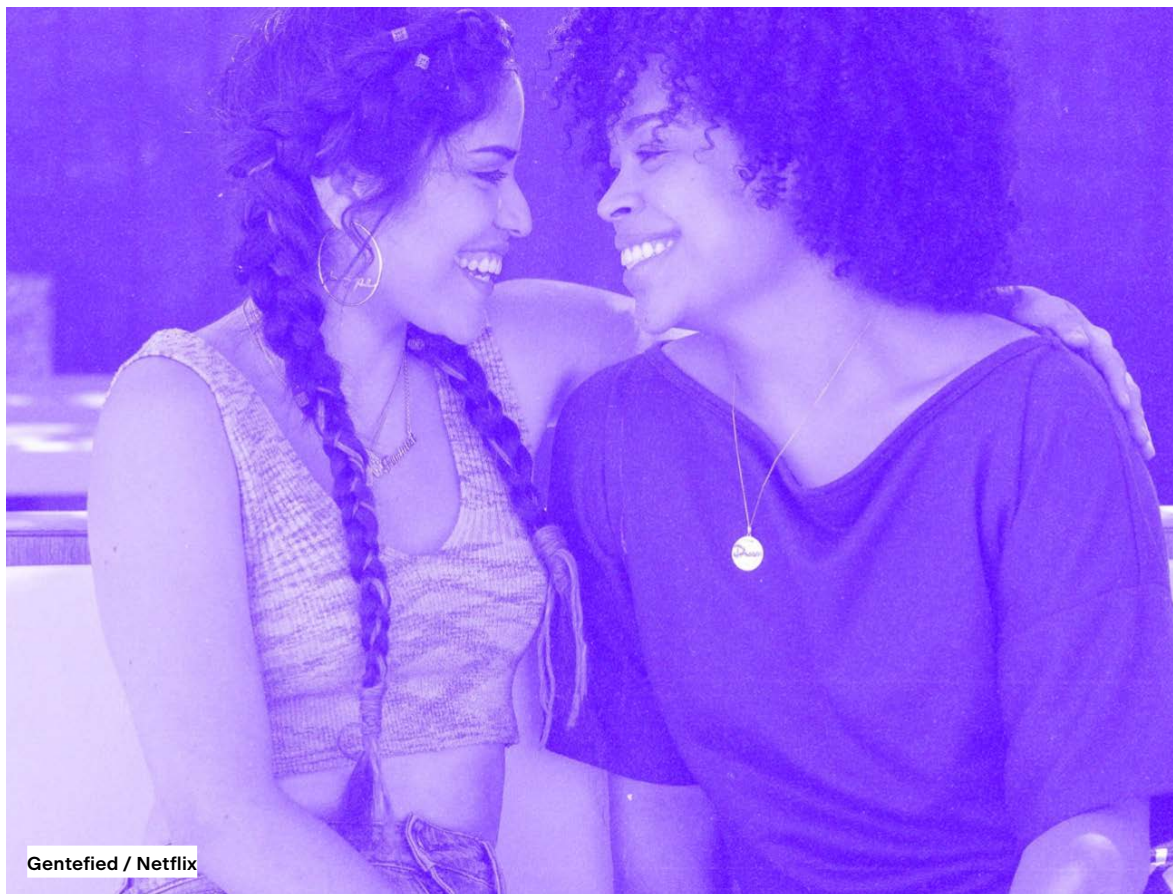
What emerges is a shift in how language functions on television: it is part of character identity rather than a marker of otherness.



A Look at Language Representation:



*NOTE: One show showed Mandarin, one showed Cantonese, and one show was coded as Chinese (unidentified dialect).



Gentefied / Netflix

Immigrant x Gender x Queer: Hard-won Gains, Quick Losses

Among immigrant characters:

56%

were male

44%

were female

Among children of immigrant characters:

59%

were male

41%

were female

LGBTQ+ immigrant representation remains present but limited. In our current sample, 8% representation of LGBTQ+ immigrant characters remains higher than the estimated real-world figure of approximately 3% of the immigrant population.⁷ However, given persistent stigma and underreporting, this remains a likely undercount.

Within that visibility, gaps remain significant. No transgender immigrant characters appeared in our sample, a disheartening reversal after years of slow but hard-won gains, and a reminder that progress in representation is never guaranteed.

Similarly, no immigrant or children of immigrant characters were identified as nonbinary. This absence is compounded by broader limitations in available demographic data, as nonbinary identity is not captured in standard census categories and may also be underreported due to reluctance to self-identify due to risk of violence and discrimination.



7. Goldberg, S.K., & Conron, K.J. (2021). LGBT adult immigrants in the United States. UCLA.



Marco Calvani on Identity

These are scary times. Being an immigrant is a very vulnerable identity right now. There are no comfort zones, the concept of safety is too fluid and never felt so fragile. Every time I step in front of a camera carrying all of who I am – immigrant, gay man, green card holder – I am aware of what's at stake. It costs something real. To be visible right now, in this body, with this passport, with this identity, is already a political act, whether I choose it to be or not. When I moved to this country, the country was different. Its promises were different. And I think that's exactly why these stories matter so urgently right now.

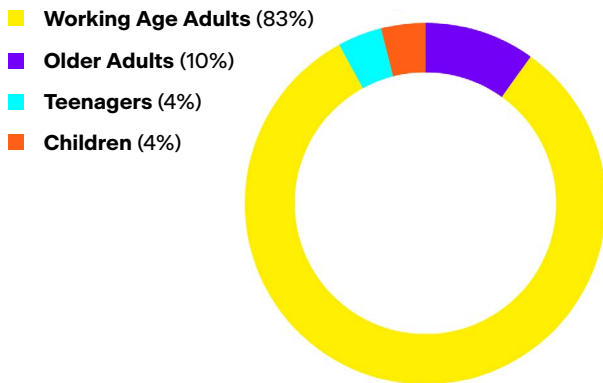
I wish Hollywood could truly understand the impact stories about this state of mind and body could have – the limbo in which immigrants live, a life full of opportunities but of dangers too. We will never fully belong here, and yet we are becoming estranged from our motherlands as well. That in-between space, that vulnerability, is not a weakness to be hidden. It's the very thing that makes the work true. When audiences see it reflected honestly on screen, something opens up in them too. Authenticity isn't just an artistic choice, it's an act of resistance. Borders are made for maps. Not for art.

- Marco Calvani, Filmmaker and Actor in *The Four Seasons*

Age

Immigrant representation on television continues to significantly feature working-age adults. Children, teenagers, and older adults remain underrepresented, particularly older immigrants, who still fall below their share of the real immigrant population.

Age of Immigrant Characters



The majority of children of immigrant characters appeared in adult roles. Less than half were kids or teens:

24% were depicted as children

14% were depicted as teenagers

What remains largely absent are stories that span the full life cycle of immigration — from childhood to aging — limiting how audiences understand immigration as a lifelong and intergenerational experience.

Disability

6% of immigrant characters were shown with a disability. This is a modest increase from 3% in 2022. No children of immigrant characters were shown with a disability.

How do these numbers compare to disability representation as a whole? At first glance, this aligns with limited estimates suggesting that approximately 6% of immigrants live with a disability. But in the broader context of television:

4% of all television characters in 2020-2021 were depicted as having a disability compared to 29% of Americans, showing that representation remains deeply uneven.⁸

50% of people feel that disabilities are underrepresented on television.⁹ For immigrants with disabilities, the stakes are compounded. Often described as navigating a “double minority” experience, they face intersecting barriers that are rarely reflected on screen.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Create characters with disabilities that move beyond mere visibility. Disabled characters can be complex, complicated, and resilient.

8. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2025). Disability and health overview. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

9. YouGov. (2025). Half of Americans say people with disabilities are underrepresented on TV and in film.

Class, Employment, and Education: Overrepresented at the Top

Immigrant characters on television continue to be presented as exceptional, better than the average person in social markers that indicate their worthiness to society.

Of the 30 immigrant characters with identified education levels:

43% held doctorates

17% held college degrees

While this may appear positive, it distorts public understanding of who immigrants are and how they navigate opportunity.

It reinforces the idea that immigrants must be extraordinary to belong, while obscuring the realities of working-class and economically diverse communities.

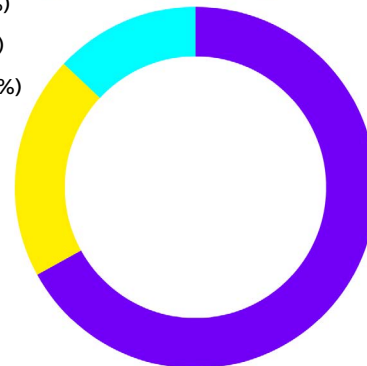
This might also lead people to overestimate the number of immigrants who are eligible for specialty visas, such as H-1B, that are reserved for the highly educated or skilled. H-1B visas are selected as part of a lottery system.

Even "exceptional" immigrants do not have a clear pathway to citizenship.

This pattern extends to class. In our sample:

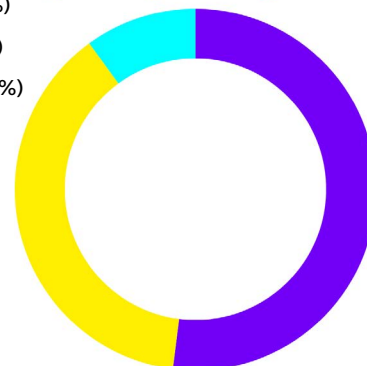
Class of Immigrant Characters

- Middle Class (67%)
- Upper Class (20%)
- Working Class (13%)

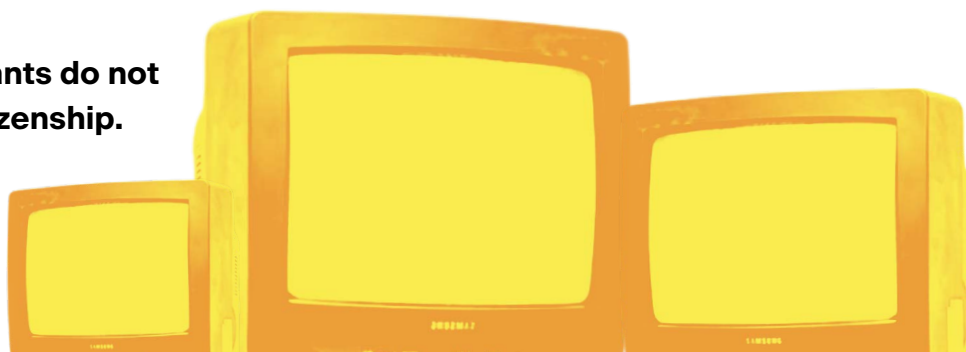


Class of Children of Immigrant Characters

- Middle Class (52%)
- Upper Class (38%)
- Working Class (10%)



The result is a narrowed narrative: one that elevates achievement while rendering everyday immigrant life — and the structural barriers many face — invisible.



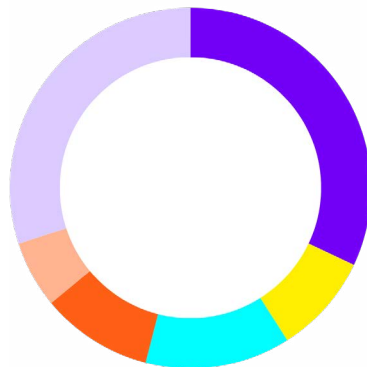
Immigration Status

For the first time in this research, the range of immigration statuses on screen reflects something closer to real-world diversity.

Among 79 immigrant characters with explicitly identified status:

Immigration Status of Immigrant Characters

- **Undocumented** (32%)
- **Other Categories** (30%)
(Student, Work, Diplomatic Visas)
- **Permanent / Conditional Residents** (13%)
- **Naturalized Citizens** (10%)
- **Refugees** (9%)
- **Mixed Status** (6%)



This marks a meaningful shift from earlier findings, where undocumented characters dominated representation. While it might seem like more representation is better, such depictions can foster inaccurate perceptions of the immigrant experience and even perpetuate harmful ideologies.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Depth. Telling the stories that exist within many statuses of immigration that reveal the complexity of families navigating multiple statuses at once, the precariousness that can exist even within legal status, and the bureaucratic and emotional weight that defines so much of immigrant life in America.



Crime and Incarceration

In our 2022 report, we noted that crime involvement among immigrant characters had reached its highest point since we began this research. The association between immigrants and crime remains one of the most persistent and consequential patterns in television storytelling.

In our current sample:



22%

of immigrant characters were shown participating in a crime



58%

of immigrant characters appeared in crime or police procedural shows



1 in 4

immigrant characters with a job was shown as a criminal¹⁰

"Criminal" was the single most common occupation category for children of immigrants in our

sample, tied only with business ownership.

Portrayals of immigrants as criminals can foster inaccurate perceptions in real life, ultimately influencing how we treat immigrant communities, our feelings about what it means to be an American, and our policy stances on immigration issues.

These portrayals stand in stark contrast to reality. Decades of research show that immigrants commit crimes at lower rates than native-born citizens.¹¹ Yet the narrative persists and television continues to reinforce it. Over 150 years of U.S. Census data, immigrants have never been incarcerated at a higher rate than native-born Americans.¹²

At the same time, another limiting pattern emerges: immigrants were often portrayed as victims of crime. While intended to evoke empathy, this framing can strip characters of agency and reinforce a different kind of stereotype.

Together, these narratives flatten immigrant identity into two extremes — a threat or a victim — leaving little room for the full spectrum of human experience in between.

10. Characters currently or formerly had criminal jobs.

11. Migration Policy Institute. (2025). Immigrants and crime in the United States.

12. Abramitzky, R., Boustan, L. P., Jácome, E., Pérez, S., & Torres, J. D. (2023). Law-abiding immigrants: The incarceration gap between immigrants and the U.S.-born, 1870–2020 (NBER Working Paper No. 31440). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Immigration Enforcement and Related Storylines

The political landscape surrounding immigration enforcement has shifted dramatically since our last report, with a significant escalation in ICE activity, deportations, and border enforcement beginning in 2025. Whether and how television has responded to this shift will be an important question for future rounds of research.

In our current sample:

4% of immigrant characters were detained by ICE or Customs and Border Patrol

4% were depicted in an immigration raid

7% had other characters threaten to call ICE or law enforcement on them

Writers Resource: A Writer's Guide to Understanding ICE Raids

As ICE operations have escalated dramatically across the country, separating families, targeting people on their way to work, and creating a climate of fear in immigrant communities, Define American has prepared a guide to help writers tell these stories accurately and humanely. Storytellers have a unique power to cut through the noise and present the full human picture. This resource covers what you need to know: immigrants' constitutional rights during enforcement, what workplaces, campuses, and hospitals can do to protect people, the technology and surveillance powering deportations, and how communities are responding with solidarity.



[Download the full guide](#)





The "Good Immigrant" Trap: Exceptionalism Myths on Screen

Television has long sorted immigrants into two boxes: criminality and exceptionalism. Our research shows both tropes are alive and well, and both do damage when presented as the only binary.

On the one hand, the model minority myth presents immigrant success as the product of individual virtue: the hardworking doctor, the brilliant engineer, the child who outperforms everyone against the odds. These stories are valid, and showing immigrants thriving on screen matters. But when 43% of immigrant characters with identified education levels hold Ph.D.s, a positive intention becomes a distorting pattern. Television ends up depicting the exception as the norm, leaving the vast majority of working-class immigrant lives without a story to call their own.

The pressure falls hardest on the next generation.

Nearly $\frac{1}{4}$ children of immigrant characters were shown facing model minority pressure.

And yet the flip side is equally stark: criminal occupation is tied as the single most common job depicted for children of immigrants in our sample.

Between the exceptional and the criminal, there is almost no room for the full, ordinary humanity of real immigrant families.



The Brothers Sun / Netflix



Deli Boys / Hulu





Conclusion

Television has always been a mirror. What this research asks — what it has always asked — is whether that mirror is being held up honestly, and whether the people looking into it can actually see themselves.

Four rounds of this research have given us a clearer answer than we had before: the stories television tells about immigrants are not neutral. They shape how audiences feel about immigration, how willing they are to act, and whether they see the immigrants in their own communities as neighbors or threats.

What the data make clear is that progress on screen is real and fragile in ways that should alarm everyone who makes, buys, or champions diverse storytelling. The global breadth of immigrant representation has expanded. Legal status complexity is beginning to find its way into the stories being told. And the bond audiences form with characters like Mo Najjar demonstrates, once again, when television gives immigrant characters the time and space to become real to an audience, something shifts.

But the structural problems have not been resolved. Nuanced Latine representation has plummeted. Criminal association persists. Working-class immigrant families are less visible.

The political moment makes all of this more consequential. As ICE raids escalate and the climate of fear in immigrant communities intensifies, the gap between what is happening in real immigrant lives and what is being depicted on screen grows harder to justify.

Television writers are not bystanders to this moment. The stories they choose to tell, who gets to be the protagonist, who is shown as the criminal, who gets to be ordinary, all contribute to the conditions in which real people live.

The ask this research makes of Hollywood is not complicated. Write immigrant characters who are allowed to be full human beings. Put them at the center of stories, not the margins. Keep them on air long enough for audiences to fall in love with them. Hire the people whose stories you're telling to help you tell those stories.

The research shows it works. Now is Hollywood's chance to fight for it.



Recommendations

This research was conducted at a moment when the stories television tells about immigrants carry consequences beyond ratings and reviews.

Tell fuller, truer immigrant stories

- ◆ Reflect the true diversity of immigrant communities.
- ◆ Move away from criminal associations.
- ◆ Depict working-class immigrant life.
- ◆ Tell mixed-status family stories.

Build the kind of connection that changes minds

- ◆ Prioritize character development over issue framing.
- ◆ Commit to serialized immigrant storytelling.
- ◆ Make room for comedy.

Make authentic creative decisions

- ◆ Cast authentically. Prioritize actors who share the backgrounds of the characters they play.
- ◆ Hire immigrants as creative collaborators.

Define American continues to consult with writers, showrunners, networks, and studios committed to telling these stories well.



Bob Hearts Abishola / CBS



#1 Happy Family USA / Prime Video



Contact

For more information on our research, contact:

research@defineamerican.com

For inquiries on consultations or how Define American can work with your project, you can reach us at: ent@defineamerican.com

DEFINEAMERICAN.COM

