

Voiceless Victims and Charity Saviors: How U.S. Entertainment TV Portrays Homelessness and Housing Insecurity in a Time of Crisis

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Despite the social justice urgency and escalation of homelessness and housing insecurity in the United States, insufficient attention has been given to understanding how the country's most popular scripted television programming depicts these issues and thus helps to shape public perceptions about them. In response, this study employs content analysis to explore how the 40 "most watched" scripted entertainment television programs in the United States represented these urgent social issues over one full season of programming. Results reveal several harmful paradigms of homelessness and housing insecurity being reinforced by popular culture programming, signaling a need for industry-wide scrutiny and narrative change. Among its central findings, this study highlights how charity-first solutions—rather than structural responses from government or private-sector actors—are overwhelmingly advanced on the basis of stigmatized portrayals of people experiencing homelessness. This underscores the need for more attention to the consequences of neoliberal narratives and hegemony within entertainment media.

Keywords: social justice, homelessness, housing insecurity, diversity studies, television, cultural studies

In an episode of the popular scripted CBS drama program *NCIS* (Bellisario & McGill, 2018), two military police officers discuss homelessness as an increasing problem among women who are military

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veterans, referencing a female veteran character who lost her housing after suffering traumatic brain injuries. Throughout the episode, viewers learn that the woman is unable to find a stable job because of her psychiatric problems. In its resolution, the story points toward a nonprofit organization called Final Salute, Inc., as capable of, and responsible for, addressing the problem. On the one hand, this episode reflects a well-meaning effort by *NCIS* showrunners, perhaps, to tell a contemporary story about the social justice challenge of homelessness in the United States. And yet it also reflects a pattern of popular U.S. television portrayals of homelessness that depict the issue in broad categories, like “veterans experiencing homelessness,” and external solutions, like “charity saviors,” which together reinforce inaccurate and harmful narratives that fail to reflect the urgency and nuance of present-day homelessness in America, on the steady uptick since 2016 (Henry, Watt, Mahathey, Ouellette, & Sitler, 2020).

In reality, the issue of homelessness and housing insecurity is an increasingly central facet of American life. It is a social justice challenge that can hardly be relegated to tidy and archetypal portrayals of broken individuals, or as extraordinary cases that merely require charity. Subject-matter experts submit that public understanding of homelessness and housing insecurity must transcend othering practices, general public anxiety, and charity-first thinking for any effort to be effective at addressing its root causes (Hyra, 2017; Simone, 2017). Thus, understanding cultural and news portraits of homelessness stand to serve as a central contribution to this social problem.

In addition to news portrayals (Borum Chattoo, Young, Conrad, & Coskuntuncel, 2021), Americans’ cultural realities and portraits of contemporary homelessness—and those who experience it—are absorbed through popular culture. In a new heyday of U.S. TV programming in the streaming era, audiences are watching a full spectrum of entertainment across platforms. And yet no contemporary peer-reviewed research examines the composite “story” of homelessness in most-viewed entertainment TV programming in the United States, or the producers of those narratives, even as the severity of the challenge continues to reveal itself. This study endeavors to fill that gap by examining the storylines, characters, credited producers, and showrunners in top entertainment TV programming that deal with homelessness and housing insecurity.

Literature Review

The Urgency of Housing Insecurity in the United States

As the COVID-19 crisis unfolded in 2020, causing economic upheaval—resulting in unemployment rates not seen since the Great Depression—the country’s inability to tackle pressing issues related to homelessness and housing insecurity were drawn into deeper focus. Despite some relief from government moratoriums to protect against evictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of renters were evicted anyway (Dougherty, 2020), and millions more evictions loomed as these supports came to an end. An estimated 30–40 million people—reflecting between 29% and 43% of U.S. renter households—remain at risk of eviction in 2021 (Benfer et al., 2020). Thus, the United States is on the precipice of a fresh housing crisis about to bear down on the country’s already worsening homelessness struggle.

In January 2019, just before the pandemic, government statistics estimated that 567,715 people were experiencing homelessness in the country (Henry et al., 2020), a count that is widely considered to be a gross underestimate (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2019). This nearly 3% annual increase is the result of substantial increases in rates of unsheltered (30%) and chronic (25%) homelessness since 2014 and 2016, respectively, marking the end of a decade-long downward trajectory and the start of an uptick that is approaching unprecedented heights (Henry et al., 2020). And issues of housing insecurity are a matter of growing national concern. As part of its monthly assessment of Americans' concerns about public issues, Gallup found that the percentage of Americans who worried about hunger and homelessness "a great deal" rose from about 37% in 2003 to a record 49% by 2018 (Norman, 2019). Within the same time frame, Gallup polls also revealed that nearly 70% of low-income adults said they worried "a great deal" about hunger and homelessness, a dramatic increase from prior years (J. M. Jones, 2017, p. 1).

The Myths, Roots, and Experiences of Homelessness in the United States

This study proceeds from a set of core facts about homelessness and the dismantling of four common myths. First, homelessness is not only experienced on the streets: A majority (63%) of those experiencing homelessness stay in sheltered locations (Henry et al., 2020) and survive through temporary housing found in a myriad of places—by staying in cars, abandoned homes, or couch surfing.

Second, reducing the cause of homelessness to poor decision making or individual struggles is not accurate; mental illness, substance use, and crime, for example, are often symptoms—not causes—of homelessness (Min, 1999). Studies have repeatedly found that structural, not individual, causes are to blame for the persistent problems of homelessness and housing insecurity in the United States (Buck, Toro, & Ramos, 2004), particularly lack of affordable housing, gentrification, unemployment, rising rents, ineffective systems of health care, and poverty (Hyra, 2017; Lee, Tyler, & Wright, 2010; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2019).

Third, it is not just that a disproportionate number of those experiencing homelessness in the United States are people of color (Henry et al., 2020), but rather that people are often forced into homelessness *because* they are people of color. In other words, the complex problem of homelessness in the United States cannot be explained by demographics alone; it requires a careful consideration of the historic racial disparities within it, which scholars have shown to be the result of systemic failures in social and housing policies, underscored by centuries-old patterns of racism and discrimination across issues of affordable housing and criminal justice to wages and education (Lurie, Schuster, & Rankin, 2015; Patel, Arango, Singhvi, & Huang, 2019), all of which disproportionately impact people and communities of color.

Fourth, and final, the pervasive myth that charity-based acts, like moving people from the streets into shelters, are capable of fixing homelessness has been debunked by experts and organizations across government, research, and nonprofit agencies. There is broad consensus that solutions to homelessness must be locally (rather than nationally) rooted and systemically (rather than individually) based (Lee et al., 2010; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2020; Varma, 2019).

Cultural Portrayals of U.S. Homelessness

In the United States, news and popular culture together provide composite cultural portraits of people and social problems. A growing body of research details the ways in which mainstream news reporting in the United States falls short in its depiction of homelessness by repeating harmful stereotypes and familiar solutions. These studies largely tell the same story: Through the lens of daily news, both in print and TV, homeless individuals are portrayed as *others*—that is, not only economically disadvantaged but also morally inferior, criminally inclined, deviant, and thus individually responsible for their situation; needy victims who can only be saved through acts of charity (Borum Chattoo et al., 2021; Gent, 2017; Min, 1999; Varma, 2019). Drawing on studies of poverty discourse more broadly, this focus on individual responsibility casts people as undeserving and fosters policy solutions more focused on personal failings than redressing underlying systemic inequalities (Gans, 1995; Katz, 1989; Rose & Baumgartner, 2013).

These studies continue to contribute to important conversations, convenings, and projects dedicated to reform within the news industry, and elucidate the relationship between news media and public policy. However, a similar level of research and scrutiny has not yet taken place within the Hollywood world of entertainment television, which is more expansive than ever. Across the board, from scripted to reality television programming—including the expanding universe of “poverty porn”-style (Squires & Lea, 2013, p. 12) television where homelessness is often cast as a form of play and viewers are entertained as rich people experience homelessness for a day—research has not sufficiently explored portrayals of homelessness or housing insecurity. Indeed, social class more broadly is sorely ignored in cultural communication scholarship.

Scripted entertainment TV is of particular interest given the supported effect of narratives in fostering deep audience connections with characters, absorbing viewers into narrative worlds, and building transportive storylines that elicit emotional responses capable of changing perspectives and behaviors (Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, Chung, & Jain, 2011). And while no peer-reviewed research—recent or distant—is yet dedicated to understanding, at a large-scale, how popular (nonnews related) scripted entertainment television programs frame homelessness for American audiences, adjacent scholarship in television and entertainment research, as well as news studies around this topic, are meaningful in this context.

The news media’s resistance to proper contextualization in its coverage of homelessness, and its tendency to disguise indelicate truths with more comfortable narratives—such as charity-saviors as opposed to government or systemic failures—can be situated, in part, in work concerned with the increasing, albeit long present, pervasiveness of “neoliberal” ideology and hegemony in TV, and entertainment media more broadly (Chouliaraki, 2013; Couldry, 2008; Grazian, 2010). Neoliberalism is generally used here to account for the dominance of market logics in society, whereby “non-economic areas and forms of action” are delegitimated and recast “in terms of economic categories” (Lemke, 2001, p. 198). As Couldry (2008) puts it in his study of reality TV: “The ‘truths’ of neoliberalism, would be unacceptable if stated openly, even if their consequences unfold before our eyes every day” (p. 2); instead, those truths are reshaped by TV into “an acceptable version of the values and compulsions on which that cruelty depends” (p. 2). Similarly, in Chouliaraki’s (2013) development of the concept of post-humanitarianism, she observes how human rights appeals and TV news apply a neoliberal logic to stories of global suffering “that [ignore] the systemic causes

of global poverty and [turn] humanitarianism into a practice of depoliticized managerialism," (p. 9) whereby complicated, systemic social issues are transformed into problems that are solvable through charity-centered coffee sales, T-shirts, and concerts.

There is no shortage of people and organizations that have raised concerns about the social implications of overly simplified portrayals of homelessness in pop culture, and many activists have noted that the people telling stories about homelessness do not seem to know what causes homelessness or what it is like to experience it (Barajas, 2015; Horvath, 2017). This raises another overlooked question within television studies and research about housing insecurity: Who are the storytellers behind the most popular mediated narratives of homelessness?

A developed and growing base of work highlights the racial and gender disparities of the country's leading content creators—and systematic underrepresentation of women and people of color in decision-making content creation roles—from studies of award-winning films (Borum Chattoo, 2018) to Hollywood filmmakers (Hunt et al., 2020) and TV's decision-making showrunners (Hunt et al., 2020). Further, research on the impact of gender, racial, and ethnic diversity is clear: Greater diversity among directors and showrunners leads to a different set of narratives and issues appearing on screen (Smith & Choueiti, 2011). And yet, despite the unique racial, ethnic, and gender dynamics of homelessness and housing insecurity, no study has attempted to explore who is creating the "most watched" scripted entertainment television narratives on these issues. This study endeavors to fill this gap.

By focusing on this nexus between the popular entertainment narratives of homelessness and the storytellers themselves, this study extends a long tradition of media theory and scholarly inquiry into the ways in which cultural hegemony—the intellectual, moral, and ideological influence of the dominant classes—and stereotypes function within society broadly, and within the arena of television programming in particular (Gitlin, 1979; Molina-Guzmán, 2016; Turner, 2001). This design is guided by theorists, like James Carey (1989) and Stuart Hall (1992), who point to the significance of examining the texts of communication and media as a space where cultural power is enacted over important social issues and through which the "world outside" is significantly shaped (Hall, 1992, p. 14). It is similarly informed by Gitlin's (2003) foundational writings on hegemony in television, which he describes as a struggle of compulsion and consent between the "dominators and dominated" (pp. 253–254). Far from being a top-down process, hegemony is a contradictory, complex, uneven process rife with struggle. At the intersection of this struggle, theorists argue that media and cultural industries play a role in the "production, relaying, and regearing of hegemonic ideology" (Gitlin, 2003, p. 254) as they are "involved in making and circulating products that . . . have an influence on our understanding and knowledge of the world" (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 9).

In this context, entertainment media is key to shaping a society's perception of reality—and often, its willingness to take action to remedy social problems. This study brings to the fore long-overlooked entertainment television representations of homelessness and housing insecurity, and the makers behind them, as a way not only to understand their depictions of these critical social problems but also to reconstitute them.

Research Questions

This study's research questions were designed to understand precisely what narratives of homelessness and housing insecurity are appearing in the country's "most-watched" scripted entertainment TV programs. We investigate the ways in which causal attributions and solutions to homelessness were made visible through characters and storylines, as well as the broad racial and gender demographics of the program's producers. These questions derived from the 2017–2018 moment, which reflected increasing public concern about, and worsening rates of homelessness in America, trends that are even more pressing today.

R1: How frequently are issues of homelessness and housing security portrayed in America's most watched television programs?

R2: How are people who experience homelessness or housing insecurity portrayed?

R3: How do the television programs portray causal attributions for, and solutions to, homelessness and housing security?

Additionally, while not our primary focus, we looked for and present the extent to which women and historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups are represented and included as credited producers of these programs.

Method

This study employed content analysis to analyze *how* most watched contemporary entertainment television programming in the United States represent urgent social issues related to homelessness and housing insecurity, along with *who* is making these programs. The study was carried out in six phases: (a) identifying a sample of "most watched" shows, (b) creating a comprehensive codebook based on the literature relating to housing insecurity and homelessness (causes, solutions, demographics), (c) preliminary viewing of the programs, (d) refining the coding instrument based on intercoder reliability, (e) manually coding each of the episodes, and (f) analyzing the results. This process was inspired by recent research of entertainment programming more broadly, albeit not focused on homelessness issues (Borum Chattoo, 2018; Smith, Choueiti, Choi, & Pieper, 2019).

Sampling Protocol

The first step was to identify the relevant universe of "most watched" scripted shows aired in the 2017–18 season. We identified 140 "most watched" television shows—based on Nielsen data for the top 100 broadcast television programs (de Moraes & Hipes, 2018), as well as top 20 programming from Netflix (2017) and HBO (Nielsen, 2018), the two most popular non-broadcast entertainment platforms in 2018, with 142 and 125 million subscribers, respectively. Other platforms—like Amazon Prime (at 100 million) and Hulu (at 17 million)—trailed significantly (Molla, 2018).

We then filtered the 140 programs to a manageable universe to focus on present-day “contemporary homelessness,” removing programs that did not air new episodes in 2018, programs related to unscripted reality programming and sports entertainment, and programs that were not set in the present day and/or are programs in a fantasy or sci-fi genre. The final sample included the following 40 television programs—crossing genres from comedy to drama, and from episodic to serial—as best reflecting the “most watched” television programming in the United States: *Roseanne* (Williams & Barr, 2018), *This Is Us* (Fogelman, 2018), *Mom* (Lorre, Gorodetsky, & Baker, 2018), *Life in Pieces* (Adler, 2018), *Kevin Can Wait* (James, 2018), *The Middle* (Heline & Heisler, 2018), *Good Girls* (Bans, 2018), *American Housewife* (Dunn, 2018), *Empire* (Strong, 2018), *Rise* (Katims, 2018), *Star* (Daniels, 2018), *Glow* (Flahive & Mensch, 2018), *Young Sheldon* (Molaro, 2018), *Modern Family* (Levitan, 2018), *Man With a Plan* (Filgo, 2018), *The Goldbergs* (A. Goldberg, 2018), *Superior Donuts* (Goldman, 2018), *Black-ish* (Barris, 2017), *Me, Myself & I* (Kopelman, 2018), *Disjointed* (Javerbaum & Lorre, 2018), *Atypical* (Rashid, 2018), *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre, 2018), *Ballers* (Levinson, 2018), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (David, 2018), *Silicon Valley* (Judge, 2018), *Splitting up Together* (Heeno, 2018), *High Maintenance* (Blichfeld & Sinclair, 2018), *Crashing* (Holmes, 2018), *Big Little Lies* (Kelley, 2018), *Sharp Objects* (Layton, 2018), *Law and Order—SVU* (Wolf, 2018b), *NCIS* (Bellisario & McGill, 2018), *Blue Bloods* (L. Goldberg, 2018), *NCIS: New Orleans* (Hayman, 2018), *9-1-1 (LA)* (Murphy, 2018), *The Good Doctor* (Shore, 2018), *Grey’s Anatomy* (Rhimes, 2018), *Chicago Med* (Wolf, 2018a), *The Resident* (A. H. Jones, 2018), and *Code Black* (Seitzman, 2018).

As a final step, three episodes within each television program were identified for analysis, based on previous studies that found three episodes to be a reasonable sampling population for assessing one season of television content (Manganello, Franzini, & Jordan, 2008). Given the low salience of the issue, we used a hybrid of purposive and random sampling to ensure adequate relevant content for the analysis. Specific episodes were purposively selected for analysis based on a comprehensive search for explicit storylines related to homelessness, or any broadly related housing security issue. Searches included reviews of industry journals and popular television and entertainment publications (i.e., *The Hollywood Reporter*), as well as keyword searches of synopses and character listings for every available episode ($N = 410$) from the 40 television programs. Definitive topical episodes ($N = 24$) were supplemented by the first episode for each program, if not previously selected ($N = 36$); a random number generator was then used to identify any subsequent episodes ($N = 60$). This process allowed us to identify episodes with relevant topics or characters that were portrayed, perhaps peripherally, but not captured by the topic search. In the end, we arrived at a sample of 120 television episodes for analysis ($N = 120$).

Coding Protocol

A team of three trained researchers analyzed the 120 episodes to explore both broad themes related to the topic, character representation and visibility, and more targeted narrative framing related to causes and solutions. A codebook with a set of strict coding protocols was developed based on an iterative process informed by codes used in extant literature on housing insecurity and coder consultation and evaluation processes. The final codebook contained comprehensive and mutually exclusive categories for topics, characters, causal attributions, and solutions. To ensure intercoder reliability, each episode in a reliability sample ($N = 24$ episodes; 20%) was analyzed by at least two coders. Categories were removed

where appropriate reliability could not be achieved. For all reported variables, Krippendorff's alpha was at least .72.

Variables of Interest

Topics

Each of the 120 episodes was coded for topic relevance based on its relation to the research topic. Episodes were selected for further analysis if they contained any reference to homelessness or housing insecurity, broadly speaking. Relevant episodes included any portrayals of homelessness, including shelters, temporary housing, rough sleeping (i.e., on the street, without a roof), squatting, sofa surfing, sleeping in car; affordable housing (including Section 8 housing), public housing, housing projects, evictions, foreclosure, displacement, mortgage, rent and/or utilities; or gentrification, including the appearance of new buildings or businesses, loss of buildings or businesses, the arrival of new communities, or the displacement of communities.

Characters

If a character experiencing homelessness appeared in any episode, a subsequent set of codes explored various aspects of character representation and visibility. This included role size, or character salience to the overall episode and program (i.e., recurring or one-episode only), and codes to establish agency, perspective, and context of the character, which involved determining whether a person experiencing homelessness was depicted through (1) a *character* (seen and heard, with spoken lines), (2) a *conversational* topic (talked about, but neither heard nor seen), (3) a *setting* (seen, but not heard), or some combination thereof.

Narrative Framing

Coding also examined the narratives around homelessness and housing insecurity, through a careful accounting of the ways in which the causes of and solutions for homelessness and housing insecurity are portrayed in the episodes' narratives and character histories. Causes were explored as attributed to either individual or structural relations. Individual causes of homelessness are those attributed to individual or group decisions, actions, or behaviors, including criminal behavior, mental illness, substance use, disability, child runaways, or failure to meet bills. Structural causes are those in which responsibility is attributed to societal or systemic forces, including lack of affordable housing, low wages, foreclosures, eviction, unemployment rates, racism, sexism, criminalization policies, domestic violence policies, and lack of social awareness about the problem.

Solutions were classified according to whether individual or structural issues were featured. Individual-level solutions included individuals depicted as needing to overcome an inclination for crime, overcome substance use disorders, get a job or show more initiative to meet bills, fix marital or other family-related problems, get help for disability, or "other" individual behavior change. Systemic-level solutions included: help from civic organizations or charities, help from communities, increasing employment rates,

raised wages, addressing racism, sexism, and criminalization, and improved policies relating to housing, mental illness, disability, substance use, and domestic violence.

Producers/Showrunners

Creative decision makers in television—that is, credited producers (including executive producers who are the lead writers and “showrunners” of entertainment TV)—determine the content of what we see and experience on TV (Caldwell, 2008). To ascertain a general portrait of the racial and gender identities of the decision-making content creators for this sample of entertainment TV programs, each episode was coded according to its credited producers ($N = 294$), including a broad identifier of their racial (“White” or “BIPOC,” the latter of which refers to “Black, Indigenous, and People of Color”) and gender (“man” or “woman”) categories. The decision to include binary gender data, as well as binary racial categories (i.e., “White” or “BIPOC”) is a known limitation of this study, stemming from the limitations of the visual-based coding method and third-party data sources; however, this method has been used successfully in similar studies of racial and gender representation in entertainment TV and film (Borum Chattoo, 2018; Smith et al., 2019). Data were independently verified by two coders and cross-referenced using a combination of the official TV program’s website, the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) industry and episode profiles, media coverage, interviews, and the personal websites and social media accounts of the producers.

Results

Homelessness and Housing Insecurity as Program Topics

Sixty-five percent of the 40 “most watched” shows ($N = 26$) addressed one or more of the housing insecurity issues studied here in at least one episode; 35% of the television programs did not reveal a meaningful reference to homelessness, housing security, or any of the key issues of this study in any of the episodes. Of the 120 episodes analyzed, $N = 40$ contained storylines or references to one of the key issues related to homelessness, affordable housing, or gentrification. Recall that $N = 24$ were purposively selected based on a topic search. This means that 16 additional episodes (17%) from the 96 first and randomly selected episode pool were also identified as representing homelessness and/or housing insecurity. Extrapolating to the entire population, we can estimate that about 22% of all 410 episodes reference homelessness or housing insecurity in some way. In other words, almost one in four episodes contribute to Americans’ cultural realities about this topic, which is somewhat surprising, given the low salience of this issue in news media.

Characters Experiencing Homelessness

Nearly 70% ($N = 27$) of the 40 episodes with relevant topical content included a depiction of homelessness through a character who was either “seen,” “heard,” or “talked about.” In these episodes, the individual experiencing homelessness was only afforded the opportunity to speak about 60% of the time ($N = 16$; see Figure 1). This means that a character experiencing homelessness was not given a single line of dialogue in one of every three episodes in which they appeared.

In the episodes in which a character experiencing homelessness was “seen” and/or “heard,” rather than just talked about, the individual was a single-episode character 68% of the time ($N = 13$ of 19 episodes). In only six of these 19 episodes did the character have a storyline that crossed multiple episodes. These narratives involved a foster child and her mother who were forced into homelessness when the mother used money to pay bail for her boyfriend rather than rent (in *This Is Us*; Fogelman & Asher, 2018); a young autistic doctor who retells his experience being homeless as a child over time (in *The Good Doctor*; Shore, Park, & Straiton, 2017); an undocumented immigrant from Colombia who hid from immigration services at the back of a donut shop (in *Superior Donuts*; Daily, Goldman, Donovan, & Mendoza, 2018); an adult who experienced homelessness as a foster child and struggles with alcohol addiction throughout the series (in *Mom*; Lorre, Gorodetsky, Baker, & Widdoes, 2018); and a foster child who ran away and was missing until a friend’s drug overdose forced her to contact her foster parents (in *Code Black*; Seitzman, Ball, McGarry, & Wright, 2018). For these recurring characters, the narrative often focused on individual shortcomings and bad behavior.

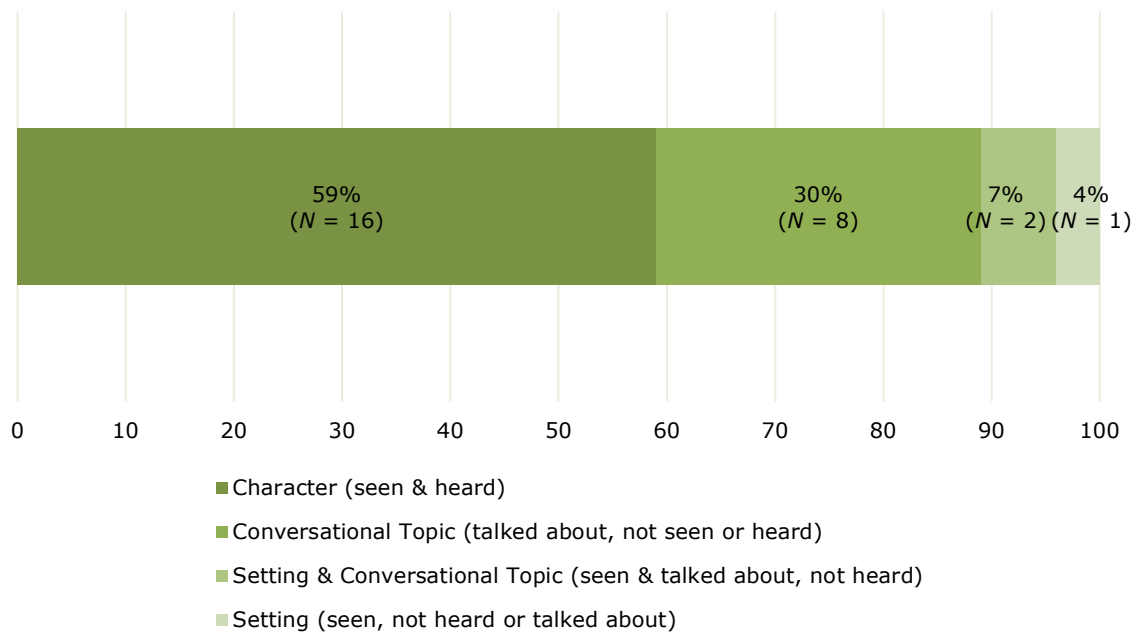


Figure 1. Visibility of homelessness in “most watched” U.S. scripted entertainment TV (2017–2018).

The experience of unhoused characters is misrepresented in several ways. While about 65% of the people who experience homelessness in the United States live in shelters, and about 35% live in unsheltered locations, the country’s most watched television programs depict an alternate reality. Among the 19 episodes that depicted at least one character experiencing homelessness, the vast majority (84%; $N = 16$) depicted “rough sleeping” (i.e., sleeping on the street or without a roof), crashing in cars, or squatting in other places not intended for human habitation—circumstances often associated with chronic homelessness,

the worst and most difficult cases to overcome. In only one instance did an episode depict an unhoused character as living in a shelter.

Demographic representations of characters experiencing homelessness were highly skewed. Statistically, about 7% of people experiencing homelessness in the United States are military veterans (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2020). And while 25% of foster children are estimated to become homeless within two to four years of leaving the foster care system, children—including both foster and nonfoster children—represent only about 20% of the population experiencing homelessness in the United States. However, nearly 60% of episodes ($N = 11$ of 19) in which at least one character was portrayed centered around either a foster child or a veteran experiencing homelessness. A foster child without a home was present in nearly half of all episodes containing at least one character who experienced homelessness. Moreover, individuals without homes were predominantly depicted as children (58%), as opposed to adults (42%). In reality, about 80% of people experiencing homelessness are older than 18 years of age (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2020). And while recent studies have found that anywhere between 11 and 40% of all youth without homes identify as LGBTQ, there was not one single portrayal of a queer or transgender unhoused character in any of the episodes.

Narrative Framing

Here, we present the composite story that emerges from an analysis of individual and structural responsibility for homelessness and housing security, and the solutions that follow. Of the 27 episodes that included a reference to homelessness, 70% ($N = 19$) depicted at least one cause for homelessness. Among these episodes, 95% ($N = 18$)—all but one—pointed to the characteristics and behavior of the individual as a contributing factor in their homelessness. According to the most watched programs, homelessness primarily results from substance use, an inability to pay bills (i.e., poor spending habits, not working), and criminal behavior. In only one episode was a systemic or structural issue referenced as a central cause of the character's homelessness. More often, references to structural issues are secondary, or peripheral, to individual blame. Forty-two percent ($N = 8$ of 19 episodes) included a mix of both individual and structural causes, and over half ($N = 10$ of 19 episodes) referenced individual causes exclusively.

Across the 19 episodes, there were $N = 32$ mentions of the 12 individual and structural causes of homelessness (see Figure 2). Notable among the host of attributed causes was the fact that only 10% of the episodes ($N = 2$) pointed to the foster-care system as an underlying structural cause of homelessness, even though foster children were present in nearly half of the episodes with a homeless character. In summary, the poor decisions and/or instability of characters experiencing homelessness formed the primary narrative through which the episodes laid fault for their circumstances.

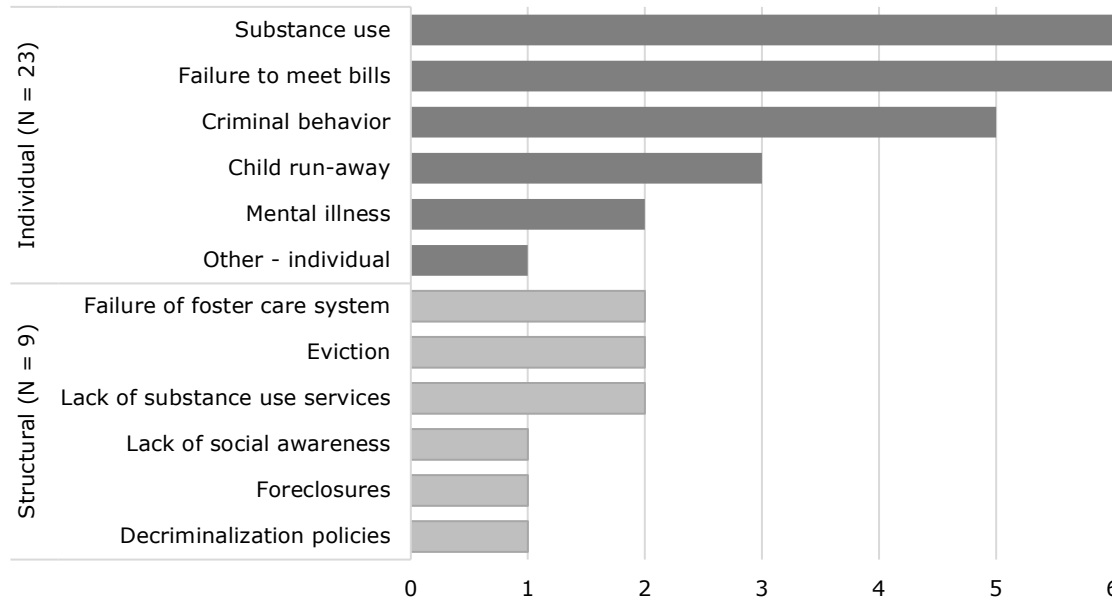


Figure 2. Causes of homelessness, according to "most watched" scripted U.S. entertainment TV (2017–2018).²

The role of structural issues was even less common within discussions of solutions to homelessness. Even within episodes that acknowledged structural causes, or indicated national trends around homelessness, the solutions offered overwhelmingly resided at the individual level, such as charity work, volunteering, going back to (often foster) parents, or donating a dollar at a department store cash register. Solutions rooted in charity were primarily depicted as aid from nonprofit organizations and compassionate individuals.

For instance, in an episode from *NCIS*, we learn that a veteran named Sara has traumatic brain injuries that have led to migraines that make it difficult for her to focus and hold a job; this struggle eventually undermines her ability to pay bills and causes her to lose her home. Other characters describe her situation as "not a unique case" (Bellisario, McGill, Monreal, & Whitmore, 2018, 00:15:10–00:15:15). The characters are aware of rising homelessness rates among veteran women, and demonstrate concern that many are rendered "invisible" because of blind spots in government "counts." "They're not even counted," laments one character, as another notes: "There are not enough resources to help" (00:15:15–00:16:00). Despite honing in on relevant structural issues, the focus is lost when the discussion turns to a solution. They decide that the best course of action is to leave Sara at a charity home of veterans. The episode ends with the characters congratulating one another for a job well done.

²There were no occurrences of individual causes relating to disability or any of the following structural causes: domestic violence policies, sexism, racism, lack of affordable housing, lack of mental health or disability-related services, low wages, or unemployment rates.

In a similar exchange, in a medical procedural drama, *Grey's Anatomy*, homelessness is invoked during a conversation at a wedding. We are told that one of the characters left the hospital to help the homeless. When someone says, "We miss you at the hospital," the character replies: "I miss you too, but these homeless communities are huge, and they have so little access to medical care; and they really need me. It feels good." In response, the other character smiles and says, "I'm glad you feel good" (Rhimes, Vernoff, & Allen, 2018, 00:13:45–00:14:15).

Nearly half (44%) of the references to ending homelessness ($N = 7$) were related to supporting charity organizations. The call for more charitable support was three times as common as the next most referenced solution. The other solutions to homelessness directed individuals to change themselves: to overcome their inclination for criminality (13%; $N = 2$), to end their drug addiction (13%; $N = 2$), or to get a job (12%). Only one episode (on the show *Black-ish*) pointed to the importance of communities in playing a role to end homelessness (Barris, Laybourne, White, & Scanlon, 2017).

And while multiple episodes featured foster children who became homeless, there were no solutions provided other than returning the characters to foster parents. In one episode of the popular series *Law & Order*, we are introduced to Savannah, a foster child whose parents had drug problems and lost their house. She struggles to keep her job and pay her rent. She is also a victim of sexual assault, but for a while the police do not believe her. For Savannah to succeed, one of the characters tells Savannah that she and other foster kids need to stop "seeing themselves as victims" (Wolf, Intrieri, Yellen, & Pressman, 2017, 00:20:37–00:20:40) Through an act of government charity, the police find Savannah a home for a few months, for which she thanks them profusely. No long-term solution is offered.

In the medical drama *Code Black*, a main character searches for her runaway foster daughter. We learn that she is staying with other runaway foster teenagers, suggesting a systemic issue with children who struggle in the foster care system, but the episode does not venture further than this implicit suggestion. In the end, her homelessness is "resolved" when the foster mother is reunited with her teenage daughter and convinces a judge to exonerate her daughter's criminal charges and retain foster custody of her. She wins her appeal through an emotional speech in which she says, as a doctor and foster mother, she is "in the business of saving lives" (Seitzman, Ball, McGarry, & Bowman, 2018, 00:40:45–00:40:50). The episode ends with the whole cast of the show celebrating the decision and the resolution of the homelessness narrative arc.

Finally, for full context, it is worth noting that in 2017–18, credited producers of the "most watched" television programs in America were overwhelmingly White (88%) and men (75%). Nearly half of the 40 most watched shows ($N = 19$) did not have a single person of color among their credited producers, and only nine shows had more than one person of color in creative decision-making roles. And while 34 of the 40 shows had at least four White credited producers, only one of the shows (*Black-ish*) had as many BIPOC creative makers. In other words, the only show with four or more BIPOC producers was specifically about the Black experience in America. Every other television program depicting American life was produced primarily, and often overwhelmingly, by White producers.

Discussion and Conclusion

Given the social justice urgency and escalation of homelessness and housing insecurity in the United States, the primary objective of this study was to create one portrait of how homelessness and housing insecurity issues are portrayed in popular scripted entertainment TV. On the one hand, the portrait it reveals tells an old story, reflecting many of the same harmful, stereotype-driven narratives and depictions of homelessness that have resided within major television news programming for decades. While experts and empirical data tell us that the problem of homelessness in the United States is the outcome of structural causes, ranging from failed affordable housing policies to unemployment and economic inequality, the prevailing entertainment television narratives observed here depict people as being homeless due to substance use disorders, failure to get jobs to meet their bill payments, criminal behavior, or mental illness. Further, this study finds that when people experiencing homelessness are depicted as characters, they are often framed as living on the street—as outsiders to the social world of the show, in contact with main cast members only through unexpected encounters. Within popular television programming, people experiencing homelessness are frequently “seen” or “spoken for” rather than “heard from.”

On the other hand, this study identifies several trends in TV portrayals of homelessness and housing insecurity that should be surprising to even the most observant researcher on these issues. The first is the sheer scale of charity-driven solutions being offered by popular programming—at times, naming specific real-world charities. More than any other solution, homelessness on TV is linked to narrative stereotypes of voiceless victims and charity saviors, advancing philanthropy and charity impulses, as opposed to government or economic reform, as the go-to solution for housing insecurity. This preponderance of charity-centered framings, which seeks to resolve the social complexities of homelessness into comfortable solutions addressable through one-off acts of individual compassion, obscures the injuries caused by capitalist and economic systems and the true economic forces driving homelessness.

These findings reinforce scholarly calls for more attention around the consequences of neoliberal narratives (Couldry, 2008), hegemony (Gitlin, 1979), and post-humanitarian frames of ironic solidarity (Chouliaraki, 2013) within entertainment media more broadly. The findings also extend to poverty discourse and housing insecurity scholarship by presenting and debunking several myths about what causes, and who is best positioned to address homelessness. More specifically, the findings illustrate how people experiencing homelessness are often depicted as “voiceless” (frequently precluded from the opportunity of dialogue) within popular television narratives, “stigmatized” (through inaccurate individual attributions and causes), and “saved by charities” (ineffective solution based on voicelessness and stigma).

When popular media focus on the individual as the cause of and/or solution to homelessness, we argue that any structural issue or link between homelessness and capitalism are erased, reinforcing hegemonic ideologies about homelessness that mask, disguise, and distort the underlying social or economic realities. Within the prevailing “most watched” entertainment TV story of homelessness observed here, a largely uncaring citizenry and failing economic actors—the true causes of homelessness—are cast as heroes in the shape of public and private charities, despite the well-known fact that charities are often not organized to change the structural conditions upon which homelessness rests.

A fuller portrait also emerges when we consider the dramatic lack of diversity among the storytellers/showrunners of “most watched” scripted entertainment TV programming within the context of this topic. One of the most glaring indicators of this inequity is that while more than half of the families experiencing homelessness in the United States are Black, and 40% of all individuals experiencing homelessness are Black (Henry et al., 2020), this study found that only 12% of the creative decision makers who produced the most watched television narratives on homelessness were BIPOC creatives. Scripted entertainment stories reflect the lived realities and perceptions of their makers, and in this case, the demographic disparities are stark.

For researchers, we hope that the findings will spur new investigations into the intersection of popular narratives and other urgent social issues. This study’s strategic focus on the “most watched” scripted entertainment television TV programs also serves as one of its central limitations, as it does not reflect how other programs may be telling stories of housing security more accurately. This study did not seek to make nuanced distinctions between formats (serialized or episodic) or genres (comedy vs. drama, for example) within this topic, nor did it include a special investigation into representations of class. We believe future research would do well to take up these questions within the topic of homelessness and other pressing social justice issues. Further, a study that explores the framing of urgent social issues like housing security and homelessness within a broader universe of TV programming—especially content produced by BIPOC producers and writers—is vital.

In response to these findings, organizations interested in narrative change can also work toward amplifying local solutions, understandings, and approaches that are working to address the root causes of the homelessness and housing security crises. Opportunities for civic imagination and participation are limited when narratives point to charitable giving as the only (or “best”) solution to issues of homelessness and housing security. Future entertainment programming would do well to more accurately spotlight and interrogate the structural realities and challenges of an American problem that may intensify in the years to come.

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