Immigrant Representation on Television

Immigrants comprise 17% of the U.S. population. Yet, identifiable immigrant characters comprised just 6% of roles. On TV, immigrants of color are more likely to be represented engaging in criminal activity.

% Immigrants represented engaging in criminal activity

- LATINO: 50%
- BLACK: 33%
- MIDDLE EASTERN: 25%
- WHITE: 9%

Storylines about unlawful activities accounted for 25 percent of all storylines involving immigrant characters.

In reality, immigrants are less likely to commit crimes, and be incarcerated, than the native born population.

94% of White immigrant characters were cast in medical, scientific, or military roles, while 25% of Latino immigrant characters were represented in lower-level professions or as unemployed.

The immigrant landscape on television is overwhelmingly straight and male leaving characters that are LGBT, Female, and of color significantly underrepresented.

73% of immigrant characters are male

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reach out to organizations like Define American, which provides services that include reviewing scripts, connecting writers to immigrant communities, providing access to legal counsel, and support on set for immigrant storylines.
- Hire and support diverse writers to help encourage more inclusive storytelling. A recent study on Race in the Writers Room found that over 90% of all the shows examined were led by white showrunners.
- Encourage new storylines that avoid tired, harmful, and fear-based stereotypes.
- Create nuanced portrayals of immigrants that more authentically depict the immigrant experience.
- Consider challenging stereotypes against immigrants through comedy, which has the power to effectively reach audiences whose beliefs differ from our own.
- Add immigrant characters into everyday storylines to appeal to diverse audiences and viewers.

Research from The Opportunity Agenda, Power of Pop: Media Analysis of Immigrant Representation in Popular TV Programs

April 2014 to June 2016 seasons