

Lori Tan Chinn and Awkwafina in *Awkwafina Is Nora from Queens* (Photo: Comedy Central)



Executive Summary

Define American's third study with the University of Southern California's Norman Lear Center finds immigrant representation on television has shifted in important ways.

Television is a powerful storytelling tool. When the pandemic confined us to our couches, television was a lifeline to the world and also an escape from it. Network and cable television reached 122.4 million¹ U.S. homes in the 2021-2022 season, making up 64% of all time spent on TV, with streaming making up 26%.²

Define American believes that pop culture is a lens through which we see the world. From our body of research, we know that the intimacy of television has the power to create meaningful connection between fictional characters and captive audiences. It can even help viewers understand how to feel about other cultures and people with differing worldviews from their own.

To understand both how often and how well immigrant characters are represented on television and streaming, we analyzed 167 characters across 169 episodes of 79 scripted series that aired between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2022.³ Over the course of four years of research, our findings show shifts – both positive and negative – in immigrant representation on television. Building on our previous research, we also conducted an audience survey to examine the impact of four television series on attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. We surveyed 1,272 U.S. television viewers of: *Bob Hearts Abishola* (CBS), *Never Have I Ever* (Netflix), *Roswell, New Mexico* (The CW), and *The Cleaning Lady* (FOX).

¹ Stoll, J. (2022). [Number of TV households in the U.S. 2000-2022](#). Statista.

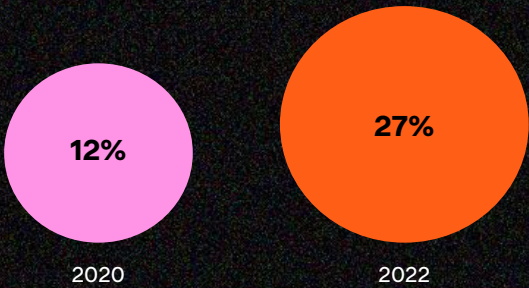
² The Gauge. (2021). [The Gauge shows streaming is taking a seat at the table](#). Nielsen.

³ Because of the small sample size in the 2020-2021 season (largely due to pandemic-related disruptions in production), data are collapsed across the two seasons for all analyses, referred to in this report as the year they were released: 2022. The 2018-2019 season is referred to as the year they were released: 2020. The 2017-2018 season is referred to as the year they were released: 2018

Representation of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) immigrant characters on television has more than doubled since our 2020 study.

These gains are a step forward for Asian American representation; however, specifically Pacific Islander, or Pasifika, representation is lacking and is often erased from broader AAPI discourse.

AAPI Immigrant Characters



There are twice as many Black immigrant characters on television than there were in 2020.

The growing representation of Black immigrant characters is in large part due to the sitcom *Bob Hearts Abishola*, from creator Gina Yashere. The television landscape also saw the inclusion of three Black undocumented characters, whereas our previous research found no representation.

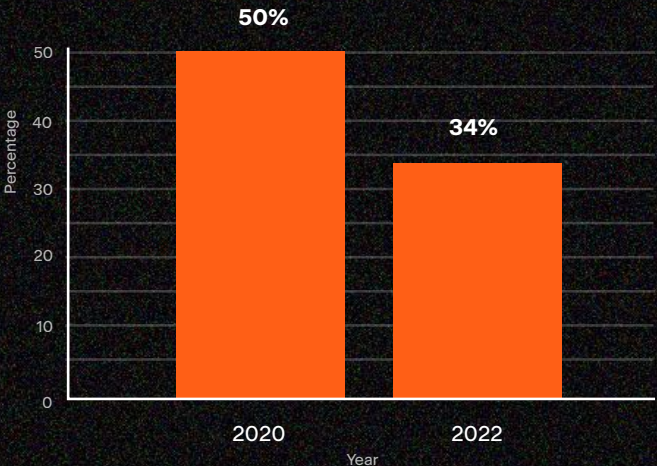
Black Immigrant Characters



Representation of Latine⁴ immigrant characters has plummeted since 2020.

In reality,⁵ Latine immigrants comprise 44% of all U.S. immigrants.

Latine Immigrant Characters



⁴ Also known as Latinx. Define American uses “Latine,” which originated within the Latine genderqueer community, because it’s easier to conjugate in Spanish and due to criticisms of the anglicization of “Latinx.” Like identity, language is constantly evolving, and we look forward to seeing how this conversation continues.

⁵ When we compare on-screen numbers with “reality” in this report, we are specifically referring to the latest available U.S. statistics and projected counts.

We saw slight but notable improvements in representation of communities previously invisible on U.S. television.

In our previous research, many groups within the larger immigrant community were missing from the television landscape. We have seen improvements, but these minor increases are not enough and only the beginning of the road toward meaningful representation.

Immigrant characters with disabilities



3 in 2020



5 in 2022

Undocumented Black immigrant characters



0 in 2020



3 in 2022

Transgender immigrant characters⁶



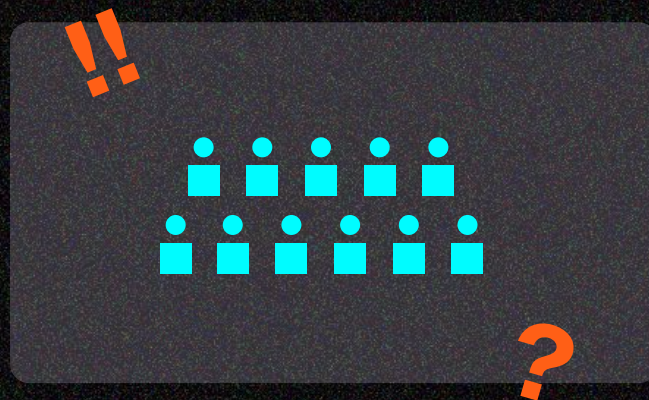
0 in 2020



2 in 2022

Increased representation is not always better.

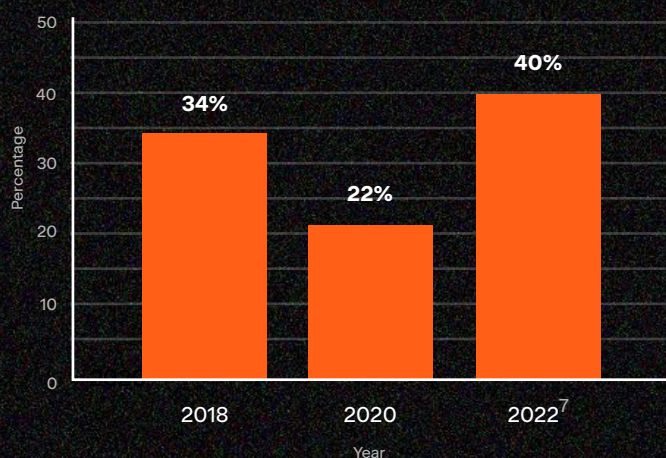
When immigrant characters are largely depicted in reductive or stereotypical ways, audiences could develop inaccurate perceptions of immigrants and their experiences.



Immigrant characters associated with crime is at an all-time high.

We celebrated the dramatic drop in depictions of immigrant characters associated with crimes in 2020. Unfortunately, the trend did not continue. Additionally, six times as many immigrant characters were featured in crime shows and procedurals in 2022 when compared to 2020.

Immigrant Characters Associated with Crime

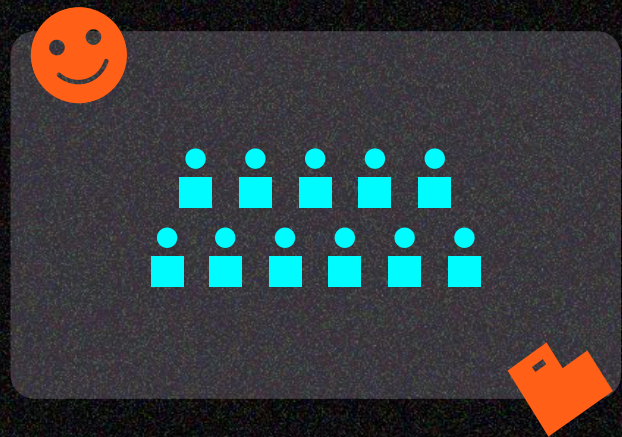


⁶ There was also a transgender, nonbinary, immigrant character in Freeform's *Party of Five*, which premiered in early 2020, falling outside of our study window.

⁷ Because of the small sample size in the 2020-2021 season (largely due to pandemic-related disruptions in production), data are collapsed across the two seasons for all analyses, referred to in this report as the year it was released: 2022. The 2018-2019 season is referred to as the year it was released: 2020.

Viewers of shows that center immigrant experiences had a deeper understanding of real immigrants' lives and more positive attitudes toward immigrants in the U.S.

In particular, a large portion of viewers felt the shows increased their understanding of the sacrifices people make to emigrate.⁸



Compared to regular TV viewers who did not watch these shows...



Viewers of *Bob Hearts Abishola* were more likely to agree that immigrants contribute to American society.

Viewers of *Bob Hearts Abishola* also experienced strong parasocial interaction – a sense of friendship – with Abishola. The more feelings of friendship viewers experienced, the more likely they were to believe immigrants in real life contribute to society and that diversity is a valuable asset.



Viewers of *Never Have I Ever* were more likely to report being comfortable sending their children to a school where the majority of students are immigrants, and support increased immigration.

Comfort with sending their children to a majority immigrant school was driven in part by parasocial interaction with Nalini, mother of Devi. With regard to support for increased immigration, these feelings of friendship with Nalini partially compensated for limited real-life contact with immigrants. Specifically, stronger feelings of friendship were associated with greater support for immigration, primarily among those who have few or no relationships with immigrants in reality.



Viewers of *Roswell, New Mexico* reported greater knowledge of immigration-related issues and were more likely to agree that diversity is a valuable asset to society.

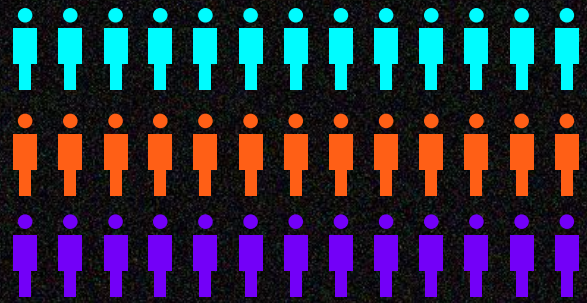
Additionally viewers of *The Cleaning Lady* reported...



The show increased their understanding of what Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) raids look like and what it's like in an immigration detention center.

⁸ Depending on the show, this proportion ranged from 44% to 61%.

In almost all cases, the impact of exposure to these shows held across audiences of varying political ideologies.



Beyond the four primary shows of interest, we asked viewers whether they watched any of 12 additional shows featuring regular or recurring immigrant characters.

The more of these 12 shows viewers watched, the more they reported:

- Believing that diversity is a valuable asset to society
- Knowledge of immigration-related issues
- Taking actions in support of immigrants in the U.S. in the last year

