

# Study: Most-watched television shows oversimplify, stereotype issues of homelessness

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As the fall television season kicks into high gear, some of our favorite shows aren't doing a good job depicting issues of homelessness and

housing insecurity, according to new research from American University's Center for Media & Social Impact CMSI).

Homelessness & Housing Security in U.S. Culture: How Popular Culture & News Depicts an American Challenge gathered data from Nielsen, Netflix, and HBO to analyze 120 episodes of 40 of the most-watched [television programs](#) from 2018. Shows included NBC's breakout *This Is Us*, ABC's *black-ish*, and HBO's *Sharp Objects*.

"The deep challenges of housing insecurity face thousands of Americans, and yet, we don't know much about how this complex issue is portrayed culturally—that is, through journalism and entertainment media," CMSI Director Caty Borum Chattoo said.

The researchers found that while the most-watched [television](#) programs depict homelessness as a problem, the shows often lean on stereotypes about people experiencing homelessness, the causes of homelessness, and housing insecurity.

Stories told about homelessness frequently oversimplified solutions. More than 60 percent of references to ending homelessness was related to supporting charity organizations. Individual fixes were often common, with characters being encouraged to get a job (12 percent), end their drug addictions (12 percent) or turn away from criminal activity (12 percent).

Additionally, more than 80 percent of characters experiencing homelessness appeared in just a single episode. More than half had less than ten speaking lines.

"Our findings are not ambiguous, many of the stories told about homelessness and [housing](#) security was either insufficiently covered or inaccurately told in 2018," said CMSI post-doctoral fellow David

Conrad. "We hope that this work will help inform and jolt conversations within newsrooms and television writer rooms about how they can do better."

Conversely, topic-based popular culture programs such as *Insecure*, *Shameless*, *Atlanta*, and *The Last OG* presented fuller and more nuanced portraits of homelessness. Every character experiencing homelessness on those shows was a regular or recurring [character](#) with more than ten speaking lines. Causes of homelessness also included structural or systemic inequities 67 percent of the time.

"We believe it's vitally important to understand those reflections as homelessness solutions are debated and advanced at the policy level," Borum Chattoo said.

**More information:** [cmsimpact.org/report/homelessn...hallenge/p/overview/](https://cmsimpact.org/report/homelessn...hallenge/p/overview/)

Provided by American University

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