

“I’M RARE AS AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE...OR GOING TO WEALTH FROM WELFARE” *

Poverty & Wealth Narratives in Popular Culture

INTERIM SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

PREPARED FOR:

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*The title of this report comes from lyrics in the song, “Big Bank,” by YG, featuring 2 Chainz, Big Sean and Nicki Minaj.

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INTRODUCTION

The USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center — with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (the foundation) — is conducting a cultural audit of poverty narratives. A cultural audit is a method of gaining a deeper understanding of priority audiences by understanding the pop culture narratives they consume. The project has two overarching goals. The first is to provide evidence-based insights to the foundation's Voices for Economic Opportunity grantee cohort, a group of organizations who are designing new narratives of poverty to correct misconceptions and address systemic barriers to mobility. The second is to establish a baseline of existing narratives for longitudinal tracking by Harmony Labs, another foundation grantee.

The formative research summarized in this report examines how poverty and wealth are constructed in the pop culture narratives in which media consumers are immersed — specifically scripted TV and film, popular music, and top-selling video games.¹ In later stages, the Lear Center will expand this analysis to TV news and unscripted content. Thus far, we have:

- Analyzed an existing public opinion dataset — the Lear Center's 2018 Entertainment and Values survey — to understand the media preferences of different audience segments, categorized based on their beliefs about poverty;
- Curated previous research on representations of poverty in the media and their effect on audiences;
- Interviewed thought leaders in the entertainment industry, academia, and advocacy;
- Qualitatively analyzed poverty and wealth themes in scripted TV and film, music lyrics and videos, and video games from the last five years.

Our findings from this formative research highlight the following narrative themes in entertainment media:

1. **Narratives of meritocracy — wealth accumulation through hard work — are dominant** in media messages, but they look different depending on the genre. There are, however, notable exceptions to this dominant narrative, which suggest opportunities for storytellers and content creators.
2. These exceptions include stories about the **limitations of meritocracy**, showcasing characters who play by the rules, do everything right, and are still unable to escape poverty.
3. Some stories go even further, highlighting the **systemic barriers that maintain economic inequity** as the reason why meritocracy so often fails.
4. In an effort to avoid evoking racial stereotypes, some content creators may employ a colorblind

¹ See Appendix for the methodology of each activity.

approach or avoid the topic of race altogether. Highlighting the **role of racial discrimination in perpetuating poverty**, through what is called a *race-class narrative*, is essential.

5. In video games and music, alternatives to meritocracy often take the form of **individual-level solutions such as altruism, cooperation, and philanthropy**. We also see TV and film portrayals of resilience.
6. We also find stories that **model systemic solutions by showing victories achieved through collective action**. Drawing upon existing research and interviews with stakeholders, we highlight the effects of each of these key narratives on different audiences, and the challenges of integrating system-oriented narratives of poverty into entertainment. We conclude with recommendations for communicators and content creators who seek to tell more accurate and inclusive stories about poverty.

Background

In 2016, the foundation and the Urban Institute launched the U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty to identify solutions and strategies for increasing economic mobility in America. This initiative focused on shifting the cultural narratives that inform Americans' knowledge and attitudes about poverty; it also identified several common misconceptions (Poo & Shafir, 2018, p. iv).

- People in poverty have no one to blame but themselves.
- People in poverty are helpless victims.
- The American dream is available to anyone who works hard enough.

As part of this early “narrative change” effort, the foundation commissioned GOOD, Inc. (2019) to conduct research on public perceptions and poverty-related narratives. This research identified a set of six dominant meta-narratives — consisting of 22 beliefs about individuals, communities, and institutions — that frame the public’s perceptions about poor and working-class people. GOOD concludes that several of these narratives are false, misleading, and incomplete. As a result, these flawed narratives limit the public’s ability to understand the causes of poverty and create effective solutions.

1. CHARACTER

- Poor people are dishonest.
- Poor people are dirty.
- Poor people have low intelligence.
- Poor people are a drain on society.
- Poor people have no one to blame but themselves.
- People generally get what they deserve.

2. SYSTEM

- Racism makes discrimination against poor minorities worse.

- Poor people experience prejudice and discrimination in hiring and promotion at work.
- Poor people are the victims of discrimination.
- Poor people lack opportunities for training and continuing education.
- Our government is insensitive to the plight of the poor.
- Poor people lack affordable housing options.
- People are poor due to circumstances beyond their control.
- There just aren't enough good jobs for everyone.

3. GREED

- There is a lot of fraud among welfare recipients.
- Welfare mothers (welfare queens) have babies to get more money.
- Poor people think they deserve to be supported.

4. MERITOCRACY

- Everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.
- Everyone has an equal opportunity to get a good education.
- Anyone can attain the American Dream.

5. FATE

- Almost by definition, someone has to be poor.

6. CULTURE

- There is a persistent subculture of poverty in America.

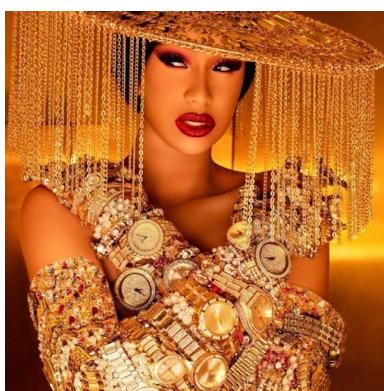
Based on adherence to these narratives, GOOD's research identified four distinct audience segments. The characteristics, beliefs, and media preferences of these segments have been further developed through research by foundation grantee Olson Zaltman (2020), as well as secondary analysis of the Lear Center's 2018 Entertainment and Values survey data (Blakey et al., 2019).

- **BOOTSTRAPPERS** largely subscribe to the meritocracy narrative and believe that individuals can attain success through hard work. They also endorse the character and greed narratives that view the poor as lazy and greedy, with a sense of entitlement to government handouts. Bootstrappers believe that escaping poverty is easier now than it was in the past, and that there is dignity in the struggle for economic advancement. While Bootstrappers consume the least amount of television of the audience segments, they enjoy some specific programs, including *Duck Dynasty* and *NCIS*. They are politically conservative and tend to be older, whiter, less educated, and more family-oriented than other groups.
- **PROGRESSIVES** predominantly endorse the system narrative. They emphasize the structural causes of poverty and the need to change systems to address social problems. They view the poor as victims of systemic forces, and recognize that the problems of and solutions to poverty are complex. They are

politically liberal, majority female, and tend to be highly educated, non religious, and relatively young. Their entertainment choices reflect their ideology: this group is the most likely to tune into progressive hits like *Modern Family* and *Orange is the New Black*.

- **CONFLICTED** audiences are aware of poverty as a social problem and generally feel sympathetic toward poor people. However, they believe that individuals are responsible for breaking the cycle of poverty even when it is against the odds. They largely avoid the issue because they do not believe they can have much of an impact. Recent research suggests they may have experienced poverty themselves and endorse many of the narratives at once. They are conflicted about the extent to which those in poverty are to blame for their situation and about viable solutions. This group tends to be politically moderate, mostly male, younger, and whiter than the others. Conflicted audiences have high news consumption, and are more likely than the other groups to get their news from network television.
- **STRIVERS** hold largely systemic views about poverty and generally recognize the role of systems in creating and maintaining inequality. But at the same time, they buy heavily into the meritocracy narrative, believing that these barriers can be overcome through individual efforts, and often point to themselves as examples of overcoming obstacles. They may characterize people in poverty as social outcasts and believe that poverty arises when people become disconnected from religious institutions, families, and other community-based support systems. Strivers consume the most fictional entertainment of the four groups, and enjoy a wide variety of genres of television and movies. This group is racially diverse, moderately educated, and tends to be female, and older.

MERITOCRACY: THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE



BODAK YELLOW (CARDI B): "I WAS BORN TO FLEX...DIAMONDS ON MY NECK."

Narratives of meritocracy imply that everyone has the opportunity to achieve the American Dream. Inherent in these narratives are the belief that all Americans have an equal chance to attain success, wealth, and a good education by virtue of their own merit and grit. Captured within meritocracy narratives are the characteristically American ideas of rugged individualism and the role of personal choice in one's success or failure. Our qualitative analyses of TV, film, music, and video games suggest these narratives dominate the pop culture landscape, but they manifest differently depending on the genre.

In popular music, which is predominantly Hip-Hop, poverty is all but invisible. The dominant narrative is one of *flexing* or wealth signaling

through brand names, jewelry, cars, and displays of cash.² There is also frequent reinforcement of the potential for class mobility through hard work. Popular artists commonly reinforce a meritocratic narrative of achieving a life of luxury through natural talent, effort, or “hustle.” In her hit 2019 song “Money,” rapper Cardi B flaunts her wealth: “I

**was born to flex...Diamonds
on my neck/ I like boardin'
jets, I like mornin' sex...But
nothing in this world that I
like more than checks.”**

On “Bodak Yellow,” she refers to her artistic work ethic as her method for acquiring this

wealth: “**Dropped two mixtapes in six months, what b**** working as hard as me?...They see pictures, they say, ‘Goals,’ b****, I’m who they tryna be.**” This music suggests that if someone hustles enough they will become a star, and if they are successful, they must deserve it. On the rare occasions that poverty appears in Hip-Hop lyrics, it does so as a condition that artists escape through hard work, thereby reinforcing the meritocracy narrative. As Kodak Black raps in the song “ZEZE,” “**Sleepin’ on the palette turned me to a savage. I’m a project baby, now I stay in Calabasas.**”

The commercial rise of Hip-Hop over the past several decades has produced the archetype of the “Hip-Hop mogul,” usually a Black and male artist who is wildly successful as a musician and an entrepreneur. One notable example is Jay Z, who famously rapped: “**I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man.**” Such rags-to-riches stories of successful Hip-Hop artists and moguls suggest that people can use music as a pathway out of poverty. In reality, very few musicians will ever turn their art into wealth. The world of

video games has produced a comparable archetype in the form of the live streamer who makes millions of dollars per year by broadcasting themselves playing video games on the platform Twitch. This small number of elite gamers have become wealthy by amassing thousands of online followers while securing sponsorships and cash prizes.



MARIO BROTHERS

pure meritocracies and establish a direct relationship between merit and reward. With relative ease and deceptively minimal effort, Mario runs and jumps through various fantasy worlds to accumulate a stockpile of gold coins. Meanwhile, the *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) franchise benefits from a meritocratic structure: the player’s merit is rewarded with new missions, abilities, and items. This game both rewards greed and uses

Variations on the meritocracy narrative are also common in video game stories and structures. Wealth accumulation is often built into video game structures in which players are incentivized to acquire goods and money. Many games function as

²While less commercially successful or “underground” Hip-Hop includes more nuanced messages about wealth, the scope of our analysis was limited to songs that charted on the Billboard Hot 100.

poverty as a motivation for characters. Many best-selling video games have clear individualistic, meritocratic, or economic components. This reward structure is intended to produce an enjoyable experience, and not necessarily to realistically mimic real-world challenges.

While popular video game structures are meritocratic in many ways, they commonly provide extra safety nets that are intended to create a manageable but rewarding gaming experience. Games often offer extra

lives, cheat codes, and/or progressively difficult challenges to create the *illusion* of a pure meritocracy. Such subtle aids may be easily forgotten by the gamer who is more likely to attribute gaming success to skill than designer intervention.

Meritocracy narratives are also evident in TV news and entertainment. Research suggests broadcast news favors *episodic framing*, an approach that

“Game structures...only reward merit to the extent that doing so is satisfying or fun for the player. While mimicking a meritocracy can give the player a sense of accomplishment, games allow players to sidestep the barriers of a pure meritocracy by providing a safety net that in real-life only exists for the wealthy.”

— ***From Poverty to Final Boss: Meritocracy, Greed, and Despair in Video Games***

emphasizes individual-level stories and actions (Kim et al., 2010). A subtype of episodic framing is *exceptionalism framing*, which refers to the tendency to highlight inspirational stories about people who escape from poverty through hard work and dedication (Kendall, 2011). Both of these framing devices contribute to the prevalence of meritocratic narratives.

Whereas news media focus on success stories, entertainment television and film perpetuate meritocratic narratives by blaming poor characters for their failures to achieve upward mobility. Holladay (2015) and Murphy (2014) studied scripted and unscripted television shows (including *Raising Hope*, *Duck Dynasty*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Shameless*) and found that neoliberal frameworks — emphasizing individualism and financial success — shape character depictions and that characters' personal choices reinforce the notions of deserving versus undeserving poor.

In our own analysis of scripted TV and film, we noted similar trends. *The Middle* includes multiple episodes that attribute poverty to individual spending decisions. In one episode, the Heck family is shocked when matriarch Frankie Heck splurges on “name brand peas.” In another Frankie is chastised for buying an expensive coffee. After her son splurges his paycheck on an expensive TV, she concludes that they are both “bozos” when it comes to spending decisions. These examples highlight the *character narrative*, which suggests that poor people only have their own unwise



THE MIDDLE (ABC): THE HECK FAMILY

decisions and laziness to blame for their circumstances.

We also meet characters in TV and film who achieve upward economic mobility through personal hard work. A classic meritocracy story structures the 2015 film *Joy*, which offers a rags-to-riches tale of a woman who starts a business empire with nothing but a clever idea and an intrepid spirit. The film explicitly defines America as a country that offers financial opportunity for anyone who works hard enough: “***in America, all races, and all classes, can meet and make whatever opportunities they can.***” The 2016 film *Barbershop: The Next Cut* also offers strong meritocratic messages. One character subscribes to a classic meritocratic narrative: “***...this is America. Everybody has equal opportunity to make it here.***” The film ends by quoting a meritocratic slogan from a real-life Chicago charter school: “***We are college bound. We are exceptional. Not because we say it, but because we work hard at it.***”

Effects of the Meritocracy Narrative

Narratives of meritocracy in pop culture obscure the structural causes of poverty, making this concept especially challenging for the general public to grasp. *Attribution theory* is an area of psychology describing how individuals assign responsibility for behavior and events. *Internal attributions* are inferences that locate the cause of behavior in personal character traits or choices, squarely within the control of individuals. *External attributions*, on the other hand, are inferences that locate the cause of behavior in external factors

outside an individual’s control. How Americans make sense of poverty depends on the extent to which they attribute the causes of these outcomes to internal factors such as laziness, or external forces such as discrimination.

“I think we’re all in some ways shaped by the stories and the narratives that we heard growing up, whether that would be on TV, in our families, in our communities. The buyers of these narratives are also products of these. To dismantle the narratives around poverty takes a lot of time.”

—Katie Mota, *East Los High*

Though an emphasis on personal stories and experiences can humanize the issue of poverty, episodic framing fosters internal attributions, placing responsibility for societal problems on affected groups. Research shows that internal attributions for poverty can translate into lower support for systemic policy solutions (Applebaum, 2001). Further, narratives that place responsibility on the individual for their own success or failure increase stigma and victim blaming, and decrease empathy toward not only the fictional character, but also those living in poverty (Saguy et al., 2014; Savani et al., 2011).

Our analysis of the 2018 Entertainment and Values survey data found *Bootstrappers* and *Progressives* have dramatically different values and attitudes toward key social and economic issues. For example, *Bootstrappers* are far less likely than other groups to believe the government should help everyone to achieve the American Dream. These attitudes and values likely influence how different audience segments process and respond to meritocracy narratives. For example, a *Bootstrapper* may see meritocracy narratives as confirming their preexisting beliefs about effort and success, whereas a *Progressives* might focus on the unfairness of the barriers the protagonist had to overcome.

Because meritocracy narratives are so pervasive, they infiltrate many areas of public life, including public policy. According to Elisabeth Babcock of Economic Mobility Pathways (EMPath), meritocratic narratives become internalized even among those living in poverty. “**They very much affect the capacity that people have in poverty to defy those stereotypes. It’s an additional set of leg weights beyond all of the structural impediments that people have to getting ahead.**” Jamila Michener of Cornell University sees these narratives emerge in interviews with Medicaid recipients: “**So much of those conversations are infused with these ideas that it’s hard to think of in any other way other than that these are cultural ideas.**”

Through this research, we have identified a number of alternative narratives in TV and film, music, and video games that counter the dominant meritocracy narrative. Research on messaging strategies, highlighted in our landscape analysis, suggests some of these narratives could be effective at shifting attitudes toward a more systemic understanding and fostering support for government interventions.

DEPICTING THE LIMITATIONS OF MERITOCRACY

An emerging trend, particularly in TV comedy, is narratives that demonstrate the limitations of meritocracy: What if hard work is not enough? The FX series *Atlanta* follows the financial trials and tribulations of Earnest “Earn” Marks, a former Princeton attendee who struggles with housing security and manages his cousin Al’s budding rap career. Al’s most popular song reproduces the familiar Hip-Hop image of lavishly spending money at a strip club:

*I'm stackin' up this paper, man and I could make that paper flip
That paper flip, paper flip, watch me make this paper flip
Then head to Magic City and I bet that paper make her strip*

Earn’s lived experience, however, highlights the contrast between modern Hip-Hop’s representations of wealth and the reality of poverty. When Earn visits a strip club, he is unable to impress his date as the club



ATLANTA (FX): EARN SLEEPS IN A STORAGE LOCKER.

“People who are born rich stay rich, their kids stay rich. And people who are born poor, their kids are far less likely to ever get out of poverty. The data is there. And so, the question that becomes what are the causes? And understanding the systemic causes is helpful in the public narrative.”
— Elisabeth Babcock, EMPath (Economic Mobility Pathways)

consistently overcharges him. On the same night, a club owner insists that his \$100 bill is fake. Another episode shows Earn on a quest for a missing jacket, which seems to contain something very valuable. We eventually learn that it holds a key to the storage locker where Earn sleeps at night, from which he is soon evicted. To make ends meet, Earn turns to various schemes — like participating in a gift card scam. No matter how hard Earn works, he is unable to achieve the kind of success that is depicted by meritocratic rap lyrics. Earn captures his predicament in the pilot episode of the series “**I just keep losing. I mean are some people just supposed to lose?**”

The Comedy Central series *South Side* has a similar premise. Its protagonists live on the lower-income South Side of Chicago and must turn to schemes and crimes in order to make ends meet, even though they are college educated. At the end of each episode, we see that they are still unable to escape poverty.

The Conners — the recently renamed reboot of *Roseanne* without Roseanne Barr — depicts poverty in a similar light. In a 2019 episode, patriarch Dan Conner confronts a sleazy lawyer who got his family’s hopes up about securing a large worker’s compensation payout: “**You made my family think that things were going to work out for once, and then you bailed on us. I should have known better.**” Like most sitcom episodes, this story ends in a restoration of the show’s status quo — which in this case means persistent poverty and financial hardship. The message is that it is difficult for a hard-working family to catch a break and transcend their enduring poverty.

While many video games are structured to enable success, game designer Hal Milton notes that games can end in character failure and still be enjoyable: “**The journey is the destination. Compelling gameplay will bring the player in, like reading a story where you know the main character is going to fail.**” For example, *Tetris* is in some ways a meritocratic game: The player collects numeric points and advances through increasingly difficult stages according to their effort and skill. However, as Milton observes, in *Tetris*, failure is also an “**inevitable part of the experience...The player gets offered more and more terrible choices until the player is overwhelmed and they fail.**” The *GTA* franchise also partially challenges the meritocracy narrative. While the game’s structure is meritocratic, it also presents an explicit narrative involving highly unethical and illegal behavior — suggesting that not all who achieve success do so ethically or legally.

Likewise, numerous films and TV shows highlight the shortcomings of meritocracy by featuring characters who engage in criminal or immoral acts merely to survive. In the film *Little Woods*, Ollie King lives in a rural and impoverished town. She learns that she must come up with \$6,000 to save the house where her newly-pregnant sister will raise her children. This situation pushes Ollie to make a dangerous journey to Canada where she will obtain a shipment of illicit medicine to sell on the black market. This film presents her risky decision as an understandable response to a set of difficult financial circumstances. As Ollie’s sister learns from this ordeal, “**Your choices are only as good as your options are.**”



TETRIS

Similarly, the 2019 film *Hustlers* shows characters who commit crimes in order to get by under difficult circumstances. After the 2008 financial crisis severely impacts their livelihood, a group of strippers drug and rob a class of bankers who they blame for the economic downturn:

“We gotta start thinking like these Wall Street guys. You see what they did to this country? They stole from everybody. Hard-working people lost everything. And not one of these douchebags went to jail. Not one. Is that fair?...This game is rigged. And it does not reward people who play by the rules.”

Challenging the meritocracy narrative, this character believes that “playing by the rules” does not lead to financial success. This belief justifies her decision to steal from wealthy financiers so that she can provide for her young daughter.



“BIG BANK” (YG): “I’M A FIRST GENERATION MILLIONAIRE (HERE)/I BROKE THE CURSE IN MY FAMILY NOT HAVING S*.”**

his wealth in the song “Big Bank” (“***I’m a first generation millionaire (here)/I broke the curse in my family not having s***.***”), the song also acknowledges enduring barriers to economic mobility and financial stability: “***I’m rare as affordable health care (oh God)/Or going to wealth from welfare (Goddamn).***”

Messaging Implications

Stories that highlight the failures of meritocracy are particularly needed for the *Bootstrapper* and *Striver* audience segments, who strongly endorse meritocracy narratives and tend to believe that following the rules pays off in the long run. While *Bootstrappers* are the least likely of the audience segments to watch television, content that

challenges the meritocracy narrative could be incorporated into the programs they do enjoy, such as *NCIS*. *Strivers* have much higher entertainment

“There are so many issues that trap hardworking Americans in poverty that make it impossible for them to lift their families out of poverty. Even though they are hardworking and aspire for the best for their families. These structural barriers are rarely discussed.” — Roger Weisberg, *Broken Places*

consumption levels and enjoy many types of entertainment genres. This group may be reached effectively through content that highlights economic inequality specifically as it relates to issues that they care deeply about, such as jobs and unemployment.

HIGHLIGHTING SYSTEMIC BARRIERS AS THE REASON MERITOCRACY FAILS



THE BIG SHORT: "IT'S NOT MY FAULT DUDE! I'VE BEEN PAYING!"

bank's predatory lending to the theft of Native American land by European colonizers:

"150 years ago, all of this was my ancestors' land. Everything you could see. Everything you saw yesterday. Till the grandparents of these folks took it. And now, it's been taken from them.

Except it ain't no army doing it. It's [the banks].

By addressing the systemic processes that take property away from people, the film provides broader historical context for the financial plights of individual characters."

Other films demonstrate how America's financial system produces unfair challenges for poor

We identified a number of examples of system narratives in pop culture. System narratives go beyond pointing out the gaps in the meritocracy narrative by highlighting the systemic forces that create and maintain these gaps. These systemic forces include workplace discrimination and limited access to education, affordable housing, and job training.

For example, the film *Hell or High Water* highlights the role of America's financial system in perpetuating poverty for individuals. It tells a story of two siblings who commit robberies in order to prevent a bank from foreclosing on their home. An Indigenous character compares the



LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE (HULU): "YOU DIDN'T MAKE GOOD CHOICES. YOU HAD GOOD CHOICES."

characters. *The Big Short* (2015) educates the viewer about the abstract processes and decisions that led up to the 2008 housing crisis. It also humanizes these processes by showing how the economic downturn affected working-class individuals. One character learns that he will have to leave his home, which has been foreclosed upon, even though he has been paying rent on time: “**Am I gonna have to leave? My kids just got set up in this school man...It's not my fault dude! I've been paying!**” This example shows that doing everything right doesn’t always lead to desirable financial outcomes.

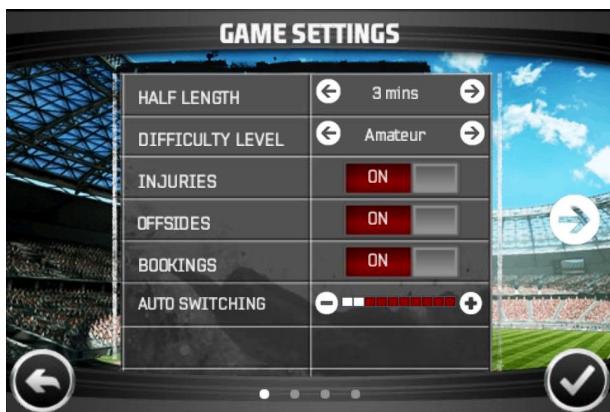
Some content reveals the hidden hardships that affect a character’s ability to succeed. In the Hulu series *Little Fires Everywhere*, struggling Black Mother Mia confronts wealthy white mother Elena about the concept of individual choice in economic and other outcomes.

ELENA: *A good mother makes good choices. And she doesn't drag a child from town to town.*

MIA: *You didn't make good choices. You had good choices. Options that being rich and white and entitled gave you.*

In this way, the series evokes compassion for those who make what initially seem like questionable choices, thereby complicating the character narrative.

Our interviews with video game creators reveal that they often default to meritocratic game structures in order to produce a rewarding gameplay experience. Juan Gril commented, “**In order to be effective, a game must fundamentally be fun. If gameplay does not engage, the theme is lost.**” This presents challenges for introducing poverty-related themes into video game stories and structures. According to game designer Nick Fortugno, experiencing poverty often means feeling a sense of frustration and unfairness: “**When I was poor, I could do everything right and still fail.**” And frustration generally does not make for a fun video game.



POVERTY COULD BE SET AS A GAME MODE.

However, some have suggested that offering a more difficult “poverty mode” in video games can engage the gaming audience while subtly embedding lessons about systemic barriers. Juan Gril points to one extremely difficult video game challenge that was designed as a joke, insofar as it was estimated to require over 25,000 hours of gameplay to succeed. Nevertheless, some gamers rose to the occasion, and one player ended up completing the challenge. Moreover, heavy-handed messaging about poverty can potentially backfire in game stories. As Milton observes, “**Nobody says ‘being poor is bad’ in *The Grapes of Wrath*,**” yet it is still remembered as a classic and engaging novel

about poverty. Similarly, some video game features could be harnessed to convey the structural barriers faced by those living in poverty without risking an overt message that might alienate audiences.

Messaging Implications

Narratives that highlight broad social trends, systems, and institutions that constrain individual choices and influence outcomes are known as *thematic framing*. Whereas episodic framing fosters internal attributions of responsibility, thematic framing promotes *external attributions*; blame is focused on the system rather than the individual in poverty. External attributions are associated with public support for systemic policy changes, such as increased federal spending on social services (Applebaum, 2001).

While thematic framing is more effective than episodic framing at challenging meritocratic beliefs, it is not a perfect solution. Some research suggests that it may be too abstract and dispassionate, ignoring the humanity in poverty (Kendall, 2011; Owen, 2016). For example, media coverage that references trends, statistics, and government interventions can give context to the scale of poverty but may inadvertently promote ideas of the poor as powerless victims to systemic forces (Kendall, 2011; Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin, 2010; Owen, 2016; Poo & Shafir, 2018). This may discourage poor people and their advocates (FrameWorks, 2018) or mischaracterize the poor as indifferent to their situation (Duchsherer, 2015).

Research suggests that messages framed using a *hybrid approach*³ — in which individual choices and behavior are situated within the larger structural context — can address the limitations of thematic framing. Such messages tend to elicit greater empathy than thematic framing alone (Niederdeppe et al., 2015; Churchill, 2019), and are associated with increased support for policies to address structural inequities (Gollust et al., 2019; Niederdeppe et al., 2015). While there is little research on hybrid framing in the context of poverty, this strategy is becoming common in messaging around health equity, and the web of social and environmental forces — including poverty — that influence health outcomes. When media content employs this type of frame, audiences are more open to the idea that society is partly responsible for health outcomes (Carger & Westen, 2010) and are more supportive of public policies that address health inequities (Gollust et al., 2019), relative to content that uses thematic framing of health messages alone (Gollust & Cappella, 2014; Niederdeppe et al., 2008; Niederdeppe et al., 2015).

Research suggests this type of framing works especially well for conservative audiences, such as *Bootstrappers*, as it aligns with some of their political values and may cushion the impact of introducing new ideas about systemic inequality (Carger & Westen, 2010). Messages that acknowledge the role of personal choice in health outcomes, while still highlighting social and environmental factors, result in less anger and debate among conservative audiences (Gollust & Cappella, 2014). Such an approach could also be effective for the *Strivers* audience segment, as many in this group have personally experienced discrimination, but also adhere to meritocratic narratives. Content that highlights how individual choices are constrained by structural context may encourage *Strivers* to have more compassionate and holistic attitudes towards others they perceive to be “cheating the system” or not “doing things the right way.”

³ Our conceptualization of “hybrid framing” is drawn from Churchill (2019), who uses the term to summarize a thread of health communication research suggesting the effectiveness of introducing the element of personal responsibility into health equity messaging (see Carger & Westen, 2010; Gollust & Capella, 2014; Niederdeppe et al., 2015). However, we use the term more broadly to refer to messages that combine elements of episodic framing (individual choices/responsibility) and thematic framing (structural context).

DISCUSSING THE ROLE OF RACISM

In an effort to avoid evoking racial stereotypes, news and entertainment content creators often avoid the topic of race altogether or feature mostly poor whites (Carretero, 2017; Owen, 2016). Research suggests, however, that adopting what is sometimes called a *race-class narrative* — discussing race, identifying racial scapegoating as a tactic used to divide, and linking racial justice to economic success for all — consistently outperform traditional progressive, race-neutral narratives of poverty (Demos, 2018). The race-class narrative can be viewed as a subset of system narratives that focus on the ways that systemic racism intensifies

discrimination against poor people of color, and Black people in particular.

In our research, we identified a number of films and television episodes that highlight the ways in which racial bias keeps people of color in poverty.

“What undermines the success of any counternarrative is the deep racial divisions we have in this country. When people hear about the government helping people, they are often afraid that the government is helping the wrong people. The people who are Black or brown and who aren’t like them and don’t deserve that help. It’s not a coincidence that in a lot of countries where the welfare state is most robust, the populations are very homogenous.” — Jamila Michener, Cornell University

In an episode of *Little Fires Everywhere* titled “70 cents,” a young white girl is allowed to take the bus even though she is 70 cents short of the fare. No such exception is made for Bebe, a Chinese immigrant who is refused baby food when she is 70 cents short of the price. Bebe’s inability to purchase baby food influences her painful decision to surrender her child outside of a fire station. This episode shows how the intersections between racial discrimination and poverty can lead to decisions that some might find impossible to understand.

The series also provides a great example of the race-class narrative in action. For example, when Mia says to Elena, **“White women always want to be friends with their maid,”** she points out the incentive white people have to minimize or ignore the economic differences that separate many white and Black communities. In the best-selling novel on which the TV series was based, Mia’s race was not identified, leading readers to imagine her as white. Thus, the show’s creators made an explicit decision to bring race to the forefront of a story about class conflict and systemic injustice.

The film *Motherless Brooklyn* shows how a disregard for Black and brown lives has historically created eviction challenges for people of color. One character is based on Robert Moses, a real life “power broker” who famously used eminent domain to evict Black and brown families (Caro, 1974; Williams, 2017). The film depicts Moses as a greedy racist whose illegal actions are enabled by a culture-wide disregard for Black lives. Moses is allowed to use eminent domain in Black neighborhoods after he and his cohorts arbitrarily define them as “slums”:

“...if some Negro slum is where I want to put my Federal project, or an off ramp for my bridge, then all the goodie goodies in the world can shriek and moan as loud as they want...all those people are invisible. They don’t even exist.”

This dialogue highlights how racial bias justifies the process of removing valuable assets from Black and brown communities. The movie reveals a hidden history of discrimination which helps explain why Black neighborhoods today have fewer assets on average than white neighborhoods (Desmond, 2012).

The concentration of Black families in poor neighborhoods has indirect effects on financial opportunities. In particular, schools in poor, Black neighborhoods receive less funding through local property taxes (Spross, 2019). This educational inequality is highlighted in an episode of *Orange is the New Black*, which tells the backstory of Janae, a gifted Black student. When Janae visits a mostly white wealthy campus, she becomes discouraged by the relative lack of resources at her own mostly Black public school, recognizing that “***The system is rigged.***” Her teacher admits that because of Janae’s race she “***may have to work twice as hard to get half as far.***”

After Janae becomes discouraged about her academic prospects, she turns to a life of crime that lands her in prison. The series notes elsewhere that such incarceration creates more poverty for people of color:

“Institutional racism traps the most vulnerable people in our society in this cycle of incarceration which, in turn, leads to a cycle of poverty.”

A storyline on Showtime’s *The Chi* likewise illustrates how American schools offer relatively few educational opportunities to Black communities.

One character complains to his teachers and administrators about the additional educational and financial burdens that affect Black students:

“Students should be able to go on field trips without having the burden to sell 1,000 candy bars!”

“For artists of color to accumulate wealth — which has been systematically and historically denied particularly to Black Americans — is itself a political act. But clearly Hip-Hop moved from grassroots protest music to a commercial celebration of materialism. Interestingly, it did so around the turn of the century, the same time that inequality became more pronounced in the United States.” — Hard to Make a Song ‘Bout Something Other than the Money: A Cultural Audit on Popular Music and Poverty

These stories highlight how discrimination in housing, legal, occupational, and schooling systems creates additional economic barriers for Black people. A character from ABC’s *Black-ish* succinctly summarizes the myriad ways in which systemic racism hinders financial mobility for Black people:



**ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK (NETFLIX):
JANAE LEARNS ABOUT THE RESOURCES AT
A WELL-FUNDED PRIVATE SCHOOL.**

“...rich, young white males are more likely to stay well-to-do, while rich, young Black males are more likely to become poor than they are to stay rich. There are a variety of potential causes for this: Imbalanced incarceration rates, employment bias, and discriminatory

housing policies, to name a few. But, really, it all stems from institutionalized racism reaching back into America’s past as a slave-holding...Damn it! Slavery affects everything!”



SOUTH PARK: THE FRACTURED BUT WHOLE

challenging level of play. Ultimately, this was only a marketing tactic and not a real gameplay feature. While this particular feature was poorly conceived and drew criticism for its glib treatment of racism, it nonetheless opened up a dialogue about how video games might convey the experience of racial discrimination.

Our qualitative analysis of music found few mentions of racism or Blackness in popular music, despite the fact that most Hip-Hop artists are Black. This invisibility of race in popular music is a key finding in and of itself. Early Hip-Hop often contained overt lyrical references to racial and economic oppression. For example, in the classic rap song “The Message,” Grandmaster Flash and the Fabulous Five challenge the idea that escaping poverty is a realistic possibility for poor Black people: ***“I tried to get away but I couldn’t get far/Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car.”*** Over the years, however, commercially popular Hip-Hop has shifted from a form of protest into a genre that largely celebrates individualism.

Messaging Implications

Stories that reveal the invisible social conditions and hidden histories that affect the choices of people of color, and Black people in particular, are a type of system narrative. Race-class narratives can link racial justice to economic justice and populist ideals, thereby highlighting the economic inequality also experienced by the white working class (Demos, 2018). In an empirical test, Demos (2018) found that political messages that

“I think there is room for a breadth of experience within poverty so that it isn’t always about the sad things, or the income disparity, or how to hustle your way out of it. We all have moments of levity and fun that are very relatable, regardless of whether or not you’re in that same financial situation.” — Erika Green Swafford, How to Get Away With Murder, New Amsterdam

overtly adopted a race-class narrative — discussing race openly, identifying racial scapegoating as a tactic used to divide, and linking racial justice to economic success for all — are more effective at mobilizing progressives and persuading undecided voters. Explicitly adding race into voter messaging consistently outperforms colorblind narratives and lessens support for messages endorsing meritocratic beliefs. Underscoring race in messages may capitalize on recent shifts in public opinion (Parker et al., 2020) in the wake of several highly publicized incidents of police brutality and widespread protests.

At the same time, it is important to avoid activating racial stereotypes or unconscious biases. Conscious and subconscious racial biases shape public attitudes toward poverty; individuals with prejudice against people of color are more likely to oppose anti-poverty policies (Opportunity Agenda, 2014). Portraying Black or Latinx communities as devastated by poverty, even when accurate, can lead to victim blaming.

When media portray people of color as poor with little context or explanation, audiences often default to harmful racial stereotypes to justify their economic situation and perceived shortcomings (Kendall-Taylor, 2020; El-Burki et al., 2016; Hopkins, 2009; Opportunity Agenda, 2016; Ryan, 1971).

SHOWING ALTRUISTIC SOLUTIONS AND RESILIENCE

Our research identified some content that focuses on altruism, cooperation, charity or other individual-level solutions to poverty. While such narratives may encourage collaboration, teamwork, or social resilience, they do little to challenge the systems that produce wealth inequality.



MINECRAFT: “IT’S THIS LIMITATION THAT GETS THE WORLD PLAYING TOGETHER.”

For instance, in the immensely popular open-world “sandbox” building game of Minecraft, blocks can only be placed one at a time, which explicitly promotes cooperation between players. Minecraft’s Saks Persson insists that this feature will remain, despite some player protestations: **“It’s this limitation that gets the world playing together.”** The primary “goal” of the game is to build inventive structures which are to be enjoyed and appreciated for their creativity, ingenuity, and aesthetic, rather than their profitability. Newer sandbox games like Mario Maker and Roblox are also premised upon players building scenarios and games for others to enjoy.

While popular Hip-Hop often celebrates the pursuit of wealth, some artists have utilized their fame to encourage philanthropy or giving back to the community. These artists often encourage personal charity, but refrain from critically examining the systems that produce wealth inequality.

For instance, the 2018 music video for the hit “God’s Plan” shows Drake spending the video’s million-dollar budget by giving people free groceries, cash, and college tuition. One line in the song references how Drake looks after his community: **“I make sure that north-side eat.”** In an Instagram post, Drake attempted to turn the emotional effect of this video into real-world action: **“just go out and do something for someone, anything, the smallest thing just to bring another human being some joy.”**

The music video for the Ne-Yo and hit “Time of Our Lives” depicts a community banding together by throwing a party to raise rent for a struggling family. Whereas many rappers boast about their individualistic and egoistic pursuit of wealth, Kendrick Lamar has asked his peers to simply “Be humble” and “Sit down.” Many other popular musicians have histories of donating to poor communities — particularly those who have personal connections with poverty. Kane Brown, a biracial country singer who has experienced homelessness, has raised awareness and money to help Americans who struggle to pay rent. Other philanthropic artists include Rihanna, Eminem, and Justin Bieber.

These examples serve as a challenge to the overwhelming narrative of wealth accumulation in Hip-Hop music. However, they ultimately do little to undermine the meritocracy narrative in that the proposed solutions rely on individual goodness and personal moral character. As Hip-Hop scholar Tricia Rose has noted, the charity of these artists, **“absent a powerful social justice agenda, fosters the status quo even as it temporarily abates the symptoms of inequality”** (2008, p. 212). Some Hip-Hop artists do discuss issues of justice and systemic wealth inequality. Cardi B, for example, has leveraged the fame she earned by rapping about wealth to advocate for minimum wage increases and ending global poverty.



TIME OF OUR LIVES (NE-YO FEATURING PITBULL)

Like individual charity, depictions of resilience among those living in poverty can, to some extent, counter the dominance of individualistic narratives. However, such content risks romanticizing poverty and downplaying the need for systemic solutions.

The Glass Castle (2017), for instance, tells a story about Jeanette Walls, a woman who overcomes her family’s poverty by working hard in school to become a successful writer. At the same time, Jeanette’s dad portrays poverty in a somewhat noble light: **“Rich city folk live in fancy apartments, but their air’s so**

polluted, they can't even see the stars. We'd have to be out of our minds to trade places with any of 'em." This character suggests that he is happy *because* of his poverty, not *despite* his poverty. The film ends with the protagonist enjoying a simple meal with her family around the dinner table: "**I feel really lucky.**"



BEER NEVER BROKE MY HEART (LUKE COMBS)

This romanticization of working-class culture is also evident in popular country music lyrics and music videos. Nostalgia and tradition are valued, and "the good life" is understood to mean returning to the way things once were. Of course, this type of nostalgia problematically erases the struggles and oppressions of women and people of color. Country music also highlights pride in the signifiers of white working-class culture, including trucks, fishing, beer, and whiskey. The title of a song by Luke Combs humorously observes that "**Beer never broke my heart.**"

While popular Hip-Hop generally values individual economic advancement, country music urges us to appreciate the simple things in life and avoid financial conflict or aspiration.

Indeed, the plot of the successful 2017 film *Logan Lucky* explicitly references country music in its message about valuing family over wealth. The heroes of the film drink cheap beer while its villains drink wine and expensive energy drinks. The protagonists resourcefully draw from their working-class background to rob a NASCAR speedway (their crew earns the nickname "Ocean's 7-11"). The heist is successful, but the lead character decides to abandon most of his ill-gotten gains and find more honest ways of spending time with his family. The film suggests the impetus for this decision is seeing his daughter perform the song "Country Roads," the lyrics of which celebrate a white working-class culture: "**Misty taste of moonshine, teardrop in my eye.**" The downside of this wholesome message is the implication that appreciating what one has is more important than collectively challenging social structures that reinforce poverty and wealth inequality.

Research shows that entertainment narratives can have a positive impact on those directly affected by poverty, increasing their sense of agency, self-efficacy, and activism (La Ferrara, 2016). For example, after watching a Black history documentary, low-income Black male youths had improved self-esteem, sense of racial identity, and self-efficacy (Stubbins, 2016). However, narratives that focus on charity and individual acts of kindness can obscure the importance of policy change (Kendall-Taylor, 2020).

Progressives are somewhat more likely than *Bootstrappers* to believe that it is "our duty" to help the less fortunate. Although we did not analyze the data in this way as part of the current project, other analyses of

the same data have identified a subgroup of religious conservatives who believe it is “our duty” but not the “government’s responsibility,” whereas liberals tend to agree with both statements (Watson-Currie & Rosenthal, 2020). This suggests that more religious *Bootstrappers* and *Strivers*, along with the other groups, may respond positively to messages about charity or altruism as a solution to wealth inequality. While these messages of cooperation and philanthropy may partially challenge a neoliberal emphasis on individualism and personal profit, they do little in and of themselves to critically examine the systems and structures that reinforce poverty and wealth inequality.

MODELING SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS

While some content illustrates personal resilience in the face of poverty along with individual-level solutions, our analysis of TV and film uncovered several examples of characters addressing systemic injustice.

We identified a notable trend going back to the 1980s in which TV characters who push back against labor violations are mockingly called “**Norma Rae**”—a reference to the 1979 film in which a factory worker helps unionize her coworkers in the face of unhealthy working conditions. This usage is so prevalent that “Norma Rae” actually serves as an effective search term for identifying scripted TV storylines about labor struggle. At the same time, we saw several recent examples of storytellers countering this trend by portraying collective action—

boycotting, marching, protesting, striking, or picketing—as a viable solution to structural barriers, and particularly by modeling its benefits.

In NBC’s *Superstore*, for example, the employees of a big box store stage a walkout after their manager is fired for trying to give an employee paid maternity leave. While they do not manage to win maternity leave, they do save the manager’s job. A similar narrative appears in the “Tweentrepreneurs” episode of *Bob’s Burgers*,

which shows student laborers fighting injustice at their student-run business by producing a work slowdown, and then engaging in a full strike. Through these tactics they turn their business into a worker-controlled co-operative.



SUPERSTORE (NBC): EMPLOYEES STAGE A WALKOUT.

A comparable workplace conflict takes place in the 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You*. Cassius “Cash” Green has a crisis of conscience about taking a well-paying job after he learns about his employer’s highly unethical and illegal practices, which he then exposes on live TV. After a lackluster public response to his exposé, he

and his coworkers decide to set an example for how to fight back: “**If you get shown a problem, but have no idea how to control it, then you just decide to get used to the problem.**” This dialogue suggests that people are more likely to accept their impoverished circumstances when they can’t imagine plausible tactics for addressing their plight. Accordingly, the film proceeds to model collective actions for resistance by showing the characters preventing strike-breaking scabs from crossing a picket line. To accomplish this goal, Cash organizes a blockade composed of a diverse coalition of strikers, working-class artists, and unemployed former athletes — each bringing unique contributions to the struggle. This film creates a recipe for collective action that involves coalitions from unlikely bedfellows.

We also noted instances of collective action and civil disobedience that occur outside of the workplace. In the Netflix series *Gentefied*, key characters picket outside of a business that is understood to be gentrifying a poor Latinx neighborhood. The organizers are portrayed with expressions of determination as they walk in slow motion to dramatic music,

suggesting that they have achieved a moral victory. Housing-related demonstrations make an impact in *Motherless Brooklyn*, as activists protest “slum clearance” proposals, swaying some government officials to withhold their support for the projects.

Season two of *Pose* (FX) also models collective actions that address the intersections between poverty and racial and sexual discrimination. When some of her mentees become discouraged about the AIDS crisis, a trans woman of color decides to organize a collective action to lift their spirits: “**Y'all stories don't just have to be about failure. It needs to be about resilience.**” She wraps her bigoted landlord’s house in a giant condom to both “**highlight her bigotry and get the message out about condom use.**” While these characters encounter discrimination and barriers to economic opportunity, they are not merely victims of oppression. To the contrary, they creatively and collectively draw from various resources to challenge housing insecurity, health injustice, structural racism, and sexual discrimination.



POSE (FX): THE LANDLORD’S CONDOM-WRAPPED HOUSE.

Messaging Implications

The majority of news stories present problems without explaining why the issues persist. As a result, Americans remain largely uneducated about effective solutions to poverty (Opportunity Agenda, 2014; Rockne, 2018). In the context of news, the approach of emphasizing solutions over problems is called *solutions journalism*. Focusing on solutions and concrete actions can increase audiences’ self-efficacy — confidence in their ability to make a difference (Curry, 2014).

East Los High’s Katie Mota noted that integrating systemic solutions into entertainment is more

challenging: “**Conflict is easy to put in a show. Problems? That’s what we write about. That’s drama. What is hard is illustrating solutions, illustrating glimmers of hope...How do you do it in a way that doesn’t seem cheesy or prescriptive?...To do it well and have it be nuanced and interesting and still hold the audience’s attention. It’s hard on an artistic level, but it is so necessary.”**

Modeling systemic solutions in pop culture may be most effective for the *Progressive* audience segment. This segment strongly agrees with systemic views of poverty, but are only moderately confident that they can make a difference, especially outside of their local community. *Progressives* are also most likely to be motivated by fictional television and film to take social actions. Depicting victorious collective actions can both increase the collective efficacy of this group and serve as an effective call-to-action to inspire viewers’ own social response.

There may also be opportunities to destigmatize collective action among more conservative audiences. For example, though it was not part of our TV sample, a 2012 episode of *Duck Dynasty* (A&E) — a show exclusively popular with *Bootstrappers* — features the main characters striking to protest new, stricter working conditions.

TWO CRISES

At the time of this writing in July 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic is surging in the U.S., the economy continues to falter, and people of color are disproportionately affected by both. The crisis is illuminating how easy it is for people to slip into poverty.

“Suddenly our invincibility is questioned a little bit in ways that perhaps can leave an opening, when you can talk about — either temporarily or

permanently — we’re all at risk,” said Doe Mayer of USC. TV images of long lines at food banks and unemployment offices introduce opportunities to discuss deservingness, the dangers of free-market capitalism, and the imperative for a strong social safety net. Many of the stakeholders we interviewed expressed hope that media coverage of COVID-related unemployment and its disproportionate effects on communities of color would reinvigorate public discussions of poverty’s systemic causes.

“We are in the midst of a moment that has, in fact, seized people’s attention and introduced them to an alternate way of thinking about our society. We’re at a time when we can recalibrate the national conversation about how people get into and out of poverty.” — Peter Clarke, USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism

Unlike COVID, the crisis of racial injustice is not new, but is no less a pandemic. In the aftermath of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, and the ensuing protests, the entertainment industry is dramatically rethinking its depictions of policing (highlighted in the 2020 Color of Change report *Normalizing Injustice*, on which the Lear Center collaborated). Through the advocacy of Color of Change and others, the long-running reality series *COPS*, and its spiritual successor *Live PD*, have been cancelled.

The Black Lives Matter movement and its call to defund the police may force media makers to confront

their depictions of the intersections between poverty, race, and crime. Said Erica Swafford of *New Amsterdam* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, “[the media] often build a narrative that throws up archetypes...that are very slanted towards showing Black or brown persons, indigenous people in dire straits as a leading story...There's a lot of white poverty in this country and sometimes they'll show that, but they are more likely to show the humanity behind white poverty as opposed to people of color.” John David Coles of *House of Cards* and *New Amsterdam* noted that fictional portrayals of poverty frequently employ tropes of “**criminality, race, drugs, jail, sexual abuse, and brutality...it's striking that I could not think of a movie about the working poor that didn't touch on these issues.**”

Slowly but surely, there can be small advances from generation to generation where we can actually speak truth to power and start expanding the narrative. Not necessarily saying that we have to wipe the old narratives away, but I think media can play a role in that.” — Erika Green Swafford, *New Amsterdam*, *How to Get Away With Murder*

Both crises present opportunities for storytellers to focus on how we as a society can address the systemic causes of poverty and racial injustice. But will they? On this question, our interview subjects were divided.⁴ Some genres — like medical dramas and police procedurals — may not be able to avoid addressing these issues head-on. Some of the stakeholders speculated that the pandemic would push Hollywood to develop more escapist fare as audiences may prefer to cope through avoidance. Others, such as Coles, believed it is too early to tell what the long-term ramifications on the entertainment industry will be: “**It's really hard to ask people how they're going to process the car accident when they're still in the midst of it.**”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STORYTELLERS AND ADVOCATES

From our research, we have synthesized several evidence-based strategies for storytellers and advocates to reshape the cultural conversation around poverty toward one that is more accurate, inclusive, and authentic. New narratives of poverty need to strike a balance between acknowledging systemic barriers to economic opportunity and humanizing the individual experiences of those living in poverty. They must address the role of racial discrimination, but be careful not to inadvertently promote racist stereotypes. They should focus primarily on highlighting the power of systemic solutions over individual ones. Most importantly, these stories must lift up and amplify the voices and experiences of their subjects. One idea, says Peter Clarke of USC, “**Bring writers together with panels of low income individuals to talk about and share their life experiences.**” He added: “**We can share our own experiences, but our experiences are not worth the value of the experience as articulated by those living through it, in their own language.**”

⁴ Our stakeholder interviews predated the summer 2020 protests against racial injustice in policing. Interviewees were asked to speculate on how the pandemic might shape entertainment storytelling, but they were not specifically prompted to talk about racism and the criminal justice system.

DEMONSTRATE the limitations of meritocracy narrative.

Showcase characters who play by the rules, do everything right, and are still unable to achieve financial success. These types of stories are particularly needed for the *Bootstrapper* and *Striver* audience segments, who strongly endorse meritocracy narratives and tend to believe that following the rules pays off in the long run.

HIGHLIGHT systemic barriers as the reason why meritocracy fails.

Educate audiences about the systemic factors and policies that present barriers to economic mobility. Further, evoke compassion by revealing the hidden hardships that affect a character's ability to succeed. Develop hybrid narratives that balance individual and systemic stories in a way that both humanizes those in poverty and encourages action related to structural issues.

CONNECT race and poverty in explicit ways but be mindful of racial stereotypes.

Use race-class narratives to demonstrate how racial discrimination exacerbates poverty, but be careful about perpetuating racial stereotypes. Portraying Black or Latinx communities as devastated by poverty can lead to victim blaming. Amplify the voices of diverse storytellers whose experiences have been shaped by poverty, and empower individuals from poor communities to tell their own stories.

USE caution with individual solutions and stories of resilience.

Individual-level solutions that enable poor people to tell their own stories can increase agency and activism among people who live in poverty. However, stories that focus on charity and individual acts of kindness can backfire by obscuring systemic solutions. Stories of working-class resilience may encourage audience solidarity and identification with poor characters, but likewise risk downplaying the need for systemic change.

MODEL victories achieved through systemic solutions.

Storytellers can portray boycotting, marching, protesting, striking, and/or picketing as a viable solution to systemic barriers — particularly by modeling its benefits. Solutions-focused messaging, which provides audiences with actionable responses to social problems, can also be effective at boosting audience members' sense of individual and collective agency.

The goal of this cultural audit is to better understand existing narratives of poverty in pop culture and the audiences who consume them. The findings from this formative research will, first and foremost, be used to help inform the communication efforts of the foundation's 2020 Voices for Economic Opportunity grantee cohort — 28 organizations that will **"work to correct mistaken assumptions and improve understanding of the barriers to economic mobility through the stories of those who experience poverty."** (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2020).

Second, the research summarized in this report will shape our upcoming research activities. These activities will be used to establish a baseline for longitudinal tracking of poverty-related narratives through

a Narrative Observatory being developed by Harmony Labs.

- **Audience Survey:** At the time of this writing, we are launching a nationally-representative audience survey examining the entertainment preferences and poverty-related mindsets of the four GOOD audience segments. The survey will build upon GOOD's research by examining poverty-related attitudes and values in the context of COVID-19 and racial injustice, studying different conceptualizations of deservingness, and analyzing the entertainment motives of different audiences. We will further seek to answer the open question of how, if at all, audiences' entertainment preferences are changing in the context of COVID-19, and whether they are in fact turning to escapist fare.
- **Music Lyrics Analysis:** We will build upon the qualitative analysis of music by conducting a more in-depth quantitative analysis of poverty and wealth themes in lyrics, using the search terms we have already identified. We will analyze the most frequently used terms in different genres of music, and over time. Given the speed at which popular music slang evolves, we will seek to identify search terms that can serve as stable identifiers of poverty and wealth themes.
- **Retrospective TV and Film Content Analysis:** We will analyze poverty themes in scripted TV and film over the last several years. This analysis will build heavily on the qualitative thematic analysis, but will utilize a quantitative, deductive approach where the coding categories are already established. The sample for this analysis will be drawn from the Norman Lear Center Script Database using a set of keywords derived largely from the thematic analysis.

“Media need to entertain and they need people to keep watching. How do you do that while you’re also making people uncomfortable? Which is what narrative shifting requires...I don’t know how you do it. But it has to be done.”

— Jamila Michener, Cornell University
- **All-Inclusive TV Content Analysis:** We will systematically analyze the frequency and context of poverty-related content in an all-inclusive TV sample — news, scripted, unscripted, ads, sports, and more — over a 30-day period. Due to COVID-related shutdowns, it is uncertain when production will resume on most scripted TV, or when these series will have their 2020 fall premiere (late night, talk shows, and animation have seen few interruptions in production). As fall 2020 premiere dates are still undetermined, we will schedule data collection to maximize the inclusion of new scripted content in our sample — likely after the November 2020 election.

Ultimately, this cultural audit will inform the foundation's effort to replace the dominant meritocratic narrative of poverty with one that acknowledges the systemic factors that perpetuate wealth inequality and impede economic mobility. Entertainment has unparalleled power to effect culture change, but also has unique challenges. Storytellers who seek to push audience members to confront their biases and outdated mindsets must balance this with the audience's desire for enjoyment and escape. Furthermore, both news and entertainment media operate within an ecosystem in which eyeballs are incentivized above all else.

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APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

Entertainment and Values Survey

In 2018, we conducted a national audience survey in collaboration with the Pop Culture Collaborative and futurePerfect Labs to examine the relationships between entertainment preferences, social values, and demographics. Findings from the original analysis are published in the report *Are You What You Watch?* (Blakley et al., 2019). For the current project, we conducted secondary analysis of this data to better understand the media and entertainment preferences of the four GOOD audience segments. We applied a typing tool designed by Harmony Labs to replicate the original segmentation, using the following variables: gender, race, age, education, religious affiliation, political ideology, and marital status. The breakdown of the sample ($N = 2759$) was 36% *Bootstrappers*, 23% *Progressives*, 37% *Conflicted*, and 4% *Strivers*. Within and across audience segments, we analyzed entertainment preferences and motivations, ideological values and attitudes on social issues, and civic engagement.

Peterson, E., & Rosenthal, E. (2020). [*Poverty & wealth in popular culture: Entertainment preferences & social values of GOOD audience segments*](#) [PowerPoint slides]. USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center.

Landscape Analysis

Drawing upon peer-reviewed academic publications and grey literature (e.g., white papers, technical reports), we conducted an analysis of the existing research landscape to better understand how poverty is portrayed in mass media, through the lens of the six GOOD narratives. We further summarized the literature on the impact of messages on poverty-adjacent topics on audiences and discussed the implications of these findings for developing effective media messages to communicate these topics. We concluded by proposing strategies and recommendations for content creators to counter existing flawed narratives of poverty and noted potential avenues for future research.

Weinstein, D., Jung, E. J., Jauriqui, V., & Rosenthal, E. (2020). [*Rags-to-riches, welfare queens, and broken families: Media representations of poverty and their impact on audiences*](#). USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center.

Stakeholder Interviews

We conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews with thought leaders in academia, advocacy, and the entertainment industry. Interviewees had wide-ranging expertise in the topics of poverty, policy, entertainment, and developing agenda-setting narratives for prosocial impact. The interviews addressed the following questions:

- How does the public typically understand poverty?

- How do both broadcast news and entertainment television perpetuate misunderstandings related to poverty?
- How might content creators better address the complex systemic factors underlying poverty and shift the narrative around these issues? What are the challenges that prevent them from telling these stories?

Jauriqui, V. (2020). [Understanding poverty in mass media: Opinions and insights.](#) USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center.

Thematic Analysis of TV and Film

We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of poverty-related narratives in TV and film. Excluded from the analysis was content that was unscripted (documentary or reality), released prior to 2015, set outside the U.S., prior to 1950, or with significant science-fiction or supernatural elements. Content was identified through internet searches for TV shows/films about poverty, input from entertainment industry experts, and keyword searches of the Norman Lear Center Script Database. The final sample consisted of 57 episodes of 20 TV series and 24 films.

The thematic analysis largely replicated the methodology of Pimpire (2017), but also employed critical discourse analysis (CDA), which involves exploring the ways an individual story relates to a broader social context. Using the six GOOD narratives as an interpretive anchor, for each episode or film we noted the challenges characters face, their strategies for addressing these challenges, and the outcomes associated with these strategies. For example, if a story involves a homeless man working hard and becoming wealthy as a result, we coded this story as an instance of the meritocracy narrative. If a character works hard to overcome homelessness but fails to achieve economic mobility, we coded that story according to the system narrative.

Van Valkenburgh, S. (2020). [Your choices are only as good as your options: Representations of poverty in modern film and TV content.](#) USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center.

Qualitative Analysis of Music Lyrics and Videos

For this analysis, we focused on popular music over the past five years (2015-2019). Our work started with a review of existing research related to popular song lyrics, inequity themes in music, and other related subjects.

MUSIC LYRICS

The sample was constructed from songs on the Billboard Hot 100 for each of the five years, supplemented by the top 10 from each of the Billboard R&B/Hip-Hop and Country charts for the same timeframe. This sampling frame resulted in a total of 465 unique songs.

We used Genius.com and AZLyrics.com to collect the lyrics for each song. As we read through all of the lyrics the first time, we looked for any narrative themes with a particular focus on poverty. We then

conducted a second close reading of the lyrics of each song to mark any reference to relationships, wealth, and further references to being poor.

While the majority of the lyrics analysis was qualitative, we also did some quantitative analysis on references to relationships, wealth, and poverty, by genre. We further conducted word frequency analysis on all of the lyrics, examining words that appeared more than 20 times to identify a set of keywords for future monitoring of wealth and poverty themes in music.

VIDEOS

To understand the visuals being used, we analyzed the official videos for the top 25 songs each year from the Hot 100, plus all of the top 10 R&B/Hip-Hop and Country songs, plus two additional songs that were identified through our lyrics analysis. This resulted in a total of 174 videos. We coded for signals such as quality and quantity of cars, clothes, cash, jewelry, homes and neighborhoods, as well as other working class visuals like diners and small town/ neighborhood bars or dance clubs.

ARTIST SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS

To inform potential efforts to shift poverty narratives in music, we studied the social media accounts of a dozen artists whom we identified because of references to poverty in their lyrics or videos, frequency of topping the charts, or personal history with poverty and diversity. We looked at each artist's 100 most recent posts on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. We examined the ways in which each artist used their social media accounts, and utilized tools like Facebook Insights to understand the demographics of the artist's audience on that platform.

Potts, E. (2020). [*Hard to make a song 'bout something other than the money: A cultural audit on popular music and poverty*](#). USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center.

Qualitative Analysis of Video Games

We examined the 50 top-selling games of all time at two intertwined levels of analysis:

- **Structure:** what the player must do with the game controls in order to manipulate in-game elements and their in-game goal. This structure forms the game's implicit narrative.
- **Story:** the narrative, plot, protagonists, antagonists, and settings that give context to the player's actions and goals. The story provides a reason for the character's behavior and motivates the player to care about the character's success. The story constitutes the game's explicit narrative.

While a game's explicit story can be an important part of the player experience, the game's structure is more critical to the game's commercial success. Because of this, as well as the relative lack of explicit narratives of poverty in video games, we focused our analysis on game structures.

In an effort to further understand the processes, goals, and constraints that take place behind the scenes of video game production, we interviewed five game creators and designers who have worked on major

game franchises. We asked them about the challenges involved in making successful video games, how game designs impact players and audiences, how common narratives about poverty are reproduced or challenged in popular games, and how games might encourage constructive dialogues about poverty.

Ahn, M., Rosenthal, E., & Van Valkenburgh, S. (2020). [*From poverty to final boss: Meritocracy, greed, and despair in video games*](#). USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center.