UNDERSTANDING POVERTY IN MASS MEDIA

Opinions and Insights

INTERVIEWS WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS

www.learcenter.org

TABLE OF
CONTENTS

APPENDICES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with thought leaders in academia, advocacy, and the entertainment industry with expertise in poverty or experience writing about it. The interviews addressed public understanding of poverty, how broadcast news and entertainment television perpetuate public misconceptions, and how advocates and content creators can better communicate the complex factors that keep individuals and communities in poverty.

Interviewees agreed that the meritocracy narrative is the most powerful and misleading narrative that shapes public understanding of the causes and solutions to poverty. Also common are character and greed narratives that paint poor people as lazy, unambitious, greedy and unscrupulous. Mass media contribute to the perpetuation of these flawed frameworks.

Stories about those living in poverty are often superficial in their portrayals, have inadequate character development, defaulting to tropes and racial stereotypes, and are apt to use exploitative imagery. According to the interviewees, the entertainment industry is reluctant to depict the realities of poverty, preferring instead to focus on aspirational stories that obscure the systemic causes of economic inequity.

The current coronavirus pandemic presents an opportunity for storytellers to highlight the pervasiveness of poverty and the tenuousness of financial success, but it may be too soon to tell if the entertainment industry will be more accepting of these storylines, or if audiences will prefer escapist fare.

This report summarizes the themes and findings that emerged from the interviews. It ends with a series of recommendations for content creators based on these conversations.

Cultural Narratives of Poverty

- Stakeholders identified meritocratic narratives as the dominant narratives in our culture, perpetuating the myth of the American dream and the notion that anyone can lift themselves out of poverty.
- Character and greed narratives reinforce racial stereotypes and perpetuate tropes like the "welfare queen." Greed narratives also frame depictions of the ultra-wealthy.
- People living in poverty are largely invisible in mass media. When they are represented, they are treated as monolithic — often as drug addicted or mentally ill.
- These narratives are so pervasive that even those living in poverty come to believe them of themselves and of their communities.

- Counternarratives must recognize the structural forces that perpetuate poverty and highlight racism and the economic barriers that impede prosperity.

Media Coverage of Poverty

- The poor are underrepresented in all entertainment media and when depicted, they are seldom shown in a realistic light.
- Mass media tend to characterize the poor in relation to race and criminality.
- Narrative devices like the "hero's journey," "rags-to-riches," and racial stereotypes and tropes dominate media representations.
- There are a handful of recent TV series and film that have effectively and creatively communicated the lived experiences of individuals and communities living with poverty: FX's *Atlanta*, HBO's *Insecure* and *The Wire*, Comedy Central's *Nora from Queens*, Showtime's *Shameless*, Netflix's *Orange is the New Black*, and ABC's *Roseanne/The Conners*. Films include *Hoop Dreams*, *The Florida Project*, and *Mudbound*.

Challenges Facing Content Creators

- Creatives are in a unique position to counter the dominant narratives about poverty in their storylines. However, studio and network gatekeepers are often reluctant to tell these stories.
- Hollywood's consumer-driven business model focuses on giving audiences "what they want." As a result, Hollywood tends to put out aspirational stories that equate hope with wealth.
- Writers should not be heavy-handed in their approach to telling stories about poverty. They should keep it as subtext and make poverty tangential to the plot.

The Impact of COVID

- Mass media have the potential to showcase the pandemic's consequential effects on people's livelihoods, and showcase the vulnerability of people in poverty.
- Whether the industry and audiences will want to hear these stories or will prefer escapist entertainment is too soon to tell.

Recommendations for Content Creators

- Build a writers' room with a diversity of experiences and give writers resources to research and learn about poverty from first-hand accounts.
- Develop partnerships to research and better understand the experience of poverty.
- Documentaries can be an effective genre for telling powerful, personal stories within the context of complicated and nuanced systemic forces that keep people in poverty.

- Humanize poverty by telling true-to-life accounts or those based on real experiences to demystify poverty and increase empathy.
- Avoid aspirational "hero's journey" stories and instead tell stories from multiple perspectives.
- Be creative in using humor to make the poverty experience more real and relatable to audiences.

INTERVIEW METHODOLOGY

We conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews between March 31 and May 11, 2020 with thought leaders in academia, advocacy, and the entertainment industry. An interview protocol was developed and used as a guide, but the conversation could stray to follow topical trajectories that were important to understand the issues. Interviewees had wide-ranging expertise in the topics of poverty, policy, entertainment and developing agenda-setting narratives for prosocial impact.

Interviews ran between 30 and 60 minutes and broadly 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?

This report summarizes the interviews and identifies common themes and findings, with direct quotes (in italics) to provide supporting context and recommendations. Stakeholder biographies and interview questions can be found in the appendices.

ADVOCACY
Elisabeth Babcock, MCRP, PhD, President and CEO, EMPath (Economic Mobility Pathways)

ACADEMIA
Peter Clarke, PhD, Professor of Communication, USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism

Susan Evans, PhD, Research Scientist, USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism

Pennie Foster-Fishman, MA, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Department of Psychology, Michigan State University

Doe Mayer, MA, Professor, USC School of Cinematic Arts and USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism

Jamila Michener, MA, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Government, Cornell University

ENTERTAINMENT
René Balcer, Series Creator, Writer, *FBI: Most Wanted, Law & Order: Criminal Intent;* Writer, *Law & Order*

John David Coles, Executive Producer, *House of Cards, Law & Order: Criminal Intent, New Amsterdam*

Chris Keyser, JD, Series Creator, Executive Producer, and Writer, *The Last Tycoon*, *Party of Five*

Katie Mota, MA, Executive Producer, *East Los High*

Mauricio Mota, MBA, Executive Producer, *East Los High*

Dave Pederson, Producer, *POOR the Movie, Super Size Me*

Erika Green Swafford, MBA, Executive Producer and Writer, *How to Get Away with Murder;* Consulting Producer, *New Amsterdam*

Roger Weisberg, Director, Producer and Writer, *Broken Places*

CULTURAL NARRATIVES OF POVERTY

"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

The Dominant Narrative

Stakeholders agreed that there are certain frameworks through which the American public comes to understand poverty and wealth inequality. These frameworks manifest through narratives — or stories — shared through social networks and mass media.

Stakeholders commonly identified *meritocracy* narratives as the most dominant and misleading narrative in our culture. These narratives perpetuate the myth of the American Dream, the notion that anyone has the capacity to lift themselves from poverty. These narratives are powerfully influenced by the bootstrapping ethos. *"We have this idea of personal responsibility in this country."* Roger Weisberg said. *"We have this ethic that people need to take responsibility and pull themselves up by their bootstraps…People are trapped in poverty because they're making bad choices."* Chris Keyser referred to these as *Social Darwinist* narratives, which place responsibility at the foot of the poor themselves. *"It's this thing we believe in, which is that every person here in this country has some ability to change the course of his or her life. But the truth is that America has in fact the least social mobility of any Western country."*

Dave Pederson identified neoliberal influences in these narratives: *"We believe, 'let the free market dictate.' 'Let them pick themselves up by their bootstraps.' People don't have healthcare. They're making $7.25 an hour. You can't live on $7.25 an hour."*

Other frequently mentioned narratives were those that highlight the character flaws and unscrupulous behavior of the poor, or what are described as *character* and *greed* narratives in GOOD, Inc.'s (2019) research[1]. These narratives perpetuate the idea that *"people who are poor are lazy; people who are poor are there because they're not really trying hard enough. They lack*

---

[1] GOOD Inc. (2019). *Public perceptions; Narratives of poverty in the U.S.* (final project report) [PowerPoint slides]. https://roar-assets-auto.rbl.ms/documents/6139/ Public%20Perceptions%20&%20Narratives%20of%20Poverty%20_%20Executive%20Summary.pdf

ambition. They are trying to game the system," explained Elisabeth Babcock. "*These are powerful kinds of narratives.*" Pennie Foster-Fishman said these same descriptors appear in community interviews she's conducted with people across the country: "*Poor people are lazy and they don't care about their kids…I would say that is the number one narrative that is in most communities — it comes from everybody. It comes from poor people themselves as well as other mixed-income individuals and the service sector producers and community leaders and elected officials. It's universal.*"

Peter Clarke said that many believe that poor people are "*unimaginative*" and "*indifferent to the opportunities that are there for the taking all around them.*" Susan Evans added that many think those living in poverty are drug addled and mentally ill. "*The idea of the homeless Vietnam Vet for example. These are images many people reference.*"

Stereotypes of the poor as greedy, deceitful, and corrupt dovetail with the trope of the "welfare queen," which both Pederson and Jamila Michener noted has shaped many public policy debates. Pederson referenced its history, beginning in the 1980s but evolving into policy discussions today. "*We see the same tropes that have been around for decades, beginning when Reagan rolled out the welfare queen. You're still seeing it now. Like when Lindsey Graham said that 'we don't want people to get used to living on unemployment benefits.' They're echoing these same ideas.*" Michener said that these tropes inform our perceptions of "*deservingness*" — who deserves our empathy and support. "*Reagan really built a lot of his approach to the social welfare system on this trope of the welfare queen…[which permeates] our political system all the way to the bureaucrats who interface with Medicaid beneficiaries on a day-to-day basis.*"

Pederson added that greed narratives are not exclusively about the poor. The ultra-wealthy can also appear immoral and exploitative — achieving success off the backs of the working class. "*That's what rich people do, right? They hoard money, they hoard assets. They keep wanting more and will pay the least amount they can to their employees.*" Clarke said a powerful misunderstanding about wealth inequality is that most Americans are unaware of the extent of the stratification. "*Study after study demonstrates that people hugely underestimate how concentrated wealth is. They think it is much more widely distributed. Or they underestimate how hard intergenerational mobility is to achieve,*" he said.

Michener added that imbued in these understandings of deservingness are racial overtones that vilify poor people of color. "*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.*"

John David Coles noted that the public tends to ignore issues of poverty, *"and act like the poor are invisible when they're real and poverty is everywhere."* Evans said there is a tendency in our culture to lump all poor people into a single category and not recognize the nuances of each person's situation. *"Everyone who is poor is painted the same, the same level — usually the most severe level — of poverty. But we want to explain that there are lots of levels of poverty that people can fall into and emerge from."*

A recurring theme in the interviews was that many of these narratives are false and misleading and so completely permeate the culture that even those living in poverty come to believe them of themselves. The narratives become internalized, said Babcock: *"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."*

In her interviews with Medicaid recipients, Michener found that they too ascribe these characteristics to their peers. *"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."*

Interviewees agreed that the public fails to understand the social, economic, and political causes of poverty. Weisberg said: *"There are so any 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."*

Counternarratives

Several participants proposed counternarratives that recognize the structural forces that perpetuate poverty — systemic narratives that highlight racism, and barriers to good jobs, housing and education that impede prosperity. Michener said that counternarratives should address the racial overtones of existing narratives. *"Embedded in narratives…or juxtaposed next to it needs to be another narrative that is chipping away at undermining racial stereotypes…Because you can't get people to believe, for example, that healthcare is a human right if they're worried that those benefits are going to go to people who don't look like them and whom they therefore don't want to have healthcare benefits."*

Babcock suggested what she termed *"goals-based counternarratives"* that rather than focusing on the deficits of the poor, emphasize their abilities, motivations and likelihood of success (sometimes described as asset-framing, though Babcock did not discuss it in these terms). Dismissive narratives keep poor people in poverty, but she cited research indicating those living in

poverty can also be influenced by more positive narratives that can become self-fulfilling prophecies. *"The way others feel about us impacts how we think and can influence our life choices…Anybody who has had a very challenging set of life circumstances who is able to overcome or push through those circumstances, you'll inevitably hear them say, 'I did it because he or she believed in me.'"*

MEDIA COVERAGE OF POVERTY

"There's not very much that I see on TV that talks about people in poverty that says, 'hey, they're not different from you and me.' That poverty is not a result of somebody's failure. That just doesn't happen. That's a very long, sophisticated story that requires living in a world that most television shows just don't want to live in." — Chris Keyser

Entertainment Narratives

Interviewees agreed that those living are underrepresented in all forms of entertainment media, and when they are depicted, those stories seldom reflect their actual lived experiences. Stakeholders cited poor character development, often defaulting to tropes and racial stereotypes, and a tendency toward exploitative imagery (sometimes referred to as poverty porn). They offered some examples, however, of television series and films that do a better job of humanizing the poverty experience and depicting the structural causes of poverty.

"We're just not so great at showing the range of experience when it comes to lacking the social safety net, as well as the experience of poverty," Swafford said. Pederson agreed, adding: *"You don't see much of it. It's sanitized. Most outlets aren't willing to show the true story of poverty and how bad it is in America."*

Clarke said he was less inclined to blame the media for its inadequate depiction of poverty and more likely to fault policymakers, *"who make it a national pastime to ignore poverty and misunderstand its causes, and actually not appreciate the depths of it."* He added: *"Media don't go out of their way to illuminate the lives of very low income people. But they're forgotten across the board."*

Doe Mayer added that American media tend to rely on character narratives that emphasize personal responsibility and blame. *"The 'hero's journey' is the frame for most storytelling in the*

United States and I would argue the world. Most cultures try to connect audiences with an idea through the use of character." The challenge is depicting systemic issues when the perspective comes from a single protagonist. "*It becomes very difficult to parse out,*" she said. Coles agreed that depictions seldom address societal causes: "*Most [depictions] seem concerned with how the people who are poor for whatever reason are out to game the system.*"

Several stakeholders noted that meritocracy narratives — which propagate the myth of the American Dream — are so prevalent in our society that they dominate media depictions as well. Mayer again referenced the *"hero's journey"* as one that gives prominence to meritocratic narratives: "*The 'superhero' person who comes out of poverty and is successful…whether it's poverty or any other problem, that's the frame. Because poverty is such a structural issue, it's very hard to do it through a person without simplifying it or stereotyping it. The poor person becomes the rich person, pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. That kind of messaging can be very dangerous.*"

Mayer cited the *Archie Bunker effect* as a potential peril of using the protagonist to represent specific issues or values. The Archie Bunker character from the 1970's sitcom *All in the Family* was intended to highlight and parody bigotry. But the audience often internalized his value system. "*The audience saw him as a hero…we need to be aware of the complexity of this.*"

Mauricio Mota said Hollywood loves to make stories that highlight individualistic themes, or what he called *"the American myth."* Swafford agreed, adding that developing a counternarrative to shift the meritocracy mindset might be the most challenging. "*It's really hard to change something that has been that ingrained.*"

"*You can just pull yourself up and make money and be happy and live happily ever after,*" Mayer said. She called the *rags-to-riches* story a popular Hollywood trope, which can also manifest as the *Cinderella* story, or the fish out of water. She notes, for example, "*The Beverly Hillbillies trope of a poor family that gets rich and now their problems are the problems of poor people in a very rich world.*"

Characters in Entertainment

Coles noted that characters in fictionalized accounts of poverty repeatedly embody the same tropes and themes: "*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.*"

Mauricio Mota lamented Hollywood's tendency to rely on exploitative depictions and images that focus the audience on the character of the protagonist and obscure the causes of and solutions to poverty. *"Hollywood is obsessed with poverty porn."*

Some stakeholders suggested entertainment media's reliance on tropes perpetuates racial stereotypes that disparage people of color in poverty. *"When you have television shows that include people of color, you often have some kind of comedic ne'er-do-well, or the person looking to game the system. It's for laughs but the media reinforces these stereotypes,"* said Babcock. Swafford adds that she also sees these portrayals in news media: *"they 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."*

Rene Balcer suggested that some writers may turn to stereotypes as a *"lazy"* and *"easy"* method of getting across a character. *"Writers rely on stereotypes or very quick sketches because you only have 42 minutes to tell a story and you want to engage the audience quickly."*

Michener said these stereotypes bleed into the public's understanding of deservingness of government benefits and support. Advocacy organizations will sometimes spotlight *"sympathetic"* recipients of Medicaid to bolster support for the program, like a widow or a single mother, she said. *"That's a sympathetic trope or stereotype. We want to help a person like that. But the flip side of that trope is someone who doesn't have the same sympathetic characteristics. What if you're a man? What if you're not a widow but unemployed and you can't find a job?…Even when we try to create an image of a deserving or worthy public assistance beneficiary, we end up creating or reinforcing stereotypes about deservingness,"* she said.

Systemic Narratives in Entertainment

That said, most interviewees were able to name television programs and films that shed some light on systemic causes and paint nuanced, effective portraits of the poor. Shows like FX's *Atlanta* and HBO's *Insecure,* Katie Mota said, make poverty part of their *"ethos."* *"They show struggling people 'trying,' which I think is very interesting."* Swafford cited the classic *Good Times* and the contemporary series *Nora from Queens* (Comedy Central) as shows that use humor to help humanize the poverty experience. *"They make light of their situation, but you always see the issues surrounding it…like [in* Good Times*] the elevator was never working, so they were walking up 15 flights of stairs and you're like, 'Oh yeah, that's a real reality.'"*

Several stakeholders cited The Wire as an effective drama that Keyser described as a deep dive into *"urban poverty."* Coles called the HBO series *"a meditation on the broken institutions in America, and one of them is this very poor neighborhood in Baltimore."*

Other frequently mentioned television programming included Showtime's *Shameless*, ABC's *Roseanne* and its spinoff, *The Conners*, and Netflix's *Orange is the New Black (OITNB)*. Michener said these shows do an excellent job of *"presenting people with narratives that are counter to the typical narratives."* Mayer appreciated OITNB for the way it presents stories from multiple perspectives, and *"multiple characters who deal with structural issues like poverty and race very differently."*

Foster-Fishman credited the film *Hoop Dreams* for exposing many people to disparities that force some into poverty. *"It shows kids starting out of the same place but having two different sets of opportunities and what those opportunities meant…For one, the electricity was turned off. Their school had bars. The difference in the educational experiences between the two kids. You couldn't miss the difference. It allowed you to follow two lives that started out at the same place but were given different opportunities."*

The Florida Project, Les Miserables (2019), *Mudbound,* and *Roma* were mentioned by interviewees as films that transport audiences into the varied experiences of the poor, while also, as Mayer put it, *"celebrat[ing] the possibility of the human spirit in an impoverished world."*

CHALLENGES FACING CONTENT CREATORS

"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." — Katie Mota

Content creators in Hollywood are in a unique position to tackle the dominant, flawed, and detrimental narratives about poverty in entertainment. But stakeholders cautioned that there are serious hurdles built into the Hollywood system that challenge writers interested in addressing poverty in their work.

The most often cited barrier was Hollywood's consumer-driven business model that tends to give audiences what they think they want. *The problem is not so much creatives running the show,"* Pederson explained. *"It's the bean counters…It's all about the money. Your projects have to make money."* Industry leaders want an *"easy and simple"* revenue generator, Mayer said. Pederson added that those living in poverty have few advocates within the industry who are willing to push their stories through studios and networks. *"The problem is the poor have no one working for them."*

"The one thing about television is that it is geared toward consumption," Balcer said. He added that networks have shied away from hard-hitting offerings *"because they don't want to depress their audience and they want everything to be bright…They want people to tune in, not get bummed out."* Stakeholders agreed that entertainment industry decision-makers favor hopeful and goal-oriented stories that they believe are more marketable to large audiences. *"We live in a very aspirational society,"* Coles explained. *"Network executives and development people are going to develop aspirational stories as opposed to near realism, which is what poverty narratives require."*

Weisberg said that poverty stories are hard sells: *"Stories about people trapped in poverty, or the struggles of the uninsured, or stories about the incarcerated or capital punishment…these are stories that are really not very sexy."* Swafford added: *"[Hollywood] would much rather show people who have made it because it's sexier and it's much more interesting. Because whether audiences are watching from a place of poverty or not, they can point to that and go, 'That's what I want to be. That's where I want to get to."* Katie Mota disagreed, however, that aspiration must always be equated with wealth. *"Why does money equate aspiration? Why doesn't passion? Why doesn't giving a sh*t? Why aren't those things aspirational?"*

Interviewees also argued that Hollywood dismisses stories that address both systemic causes and solutions to poverty. As Mauricio Mota explained: *"Hollywood is obsessed with the silver bullet, the quick fix, or the show that will solve all of the problems. They focus on the quick solutions and the quick solutions are not the ones that work."*

Balcer said that creatives writing about poverty must often relay poverty messaging *"tangentially"* to their stories, addressing poverty in the context of, say, criminal justice. He recounted his work on *Law & Order* and *FBI: Most Wanted* as examples of how embedding poverty narratives in dramatic storylines can make them more palatable to studio gatekeepers. Characters whose lives are impacted by income inequality or food insecurity are not there to convey the message about poverty, but to serve a plot purpose. *"But audiences will learn that, 'here's a poor person struggling with this challenge every day.'"*

Swafford cautioned against heavy-handed approaches to storytelling: *"It needs to show up with a lighter touch, where they can address [poverty] without hitting you over the head with it."* Keyser agreed, saying that poverty should be the subtext of the story: *"You have got to find ways of telling stories that are hopeful and painful, but intricate and compelling, having nothing to do with the underlying [poverty] message. A story, for example, that has kids at risk of not having three meals a day — that isn't the point of the story. Instead it's a family story. They're people like you and me, except their budgets are different and the decisions they need to make about how to get by are different."*

THE IMPACT OF COVID

"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

At the time of these interviews, the COVID-19 pandemic was just beginning to shape the national conversation. Many of the stakeholders expressed hope that media coverage of the virus's effect on the economy — the large-scale unemployment, and its disproportionate effect on racial and ethnic minority communities — would bring the issue of poverty closer to home as well as shed light on its systemic causes. *"I hope that we can recognize the grave inequities that exist,"* said Katie Mota.

Both Mayer and Keyser noted that the pandemic is democratizing vulnerabilities, and exposing the tenuous thread that has kept many people from slipping into poverty. Said Keyser: *"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."* Mayer added: *"My generation, the Boomers, are seeing themselves as more vulnerable than we ever have…Seeing the profound connection between vulnerability and poverty."* Pederson said that media imagery of long lines at unemployment offices and food banks makes the realization more stark. *"This is the richest country in the world. No other westernized, industrialized country is going through this."*

Michener saw no better opportunity to reflect on narratives of deservingness than this moment in time. Media narratives should challenge meritocracy and emphasize that *"the market doesn't take care of us in our time of most stark need, and so, what we get can't be dependent on our productivity."*

Interviewees were divided as to whether the pandemic would encourage storytelling about the crisis, or cause audiences to turn to more escapist entertainment. Balcer referenced the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic which gave rise to the jazz age. *"There will be a large number of people, including content makers, who just don't want to talk about it. They have lived it, and they want to leave it behind."* Keyser said he has already heard from broadcasters looking for more *"uplifting television."* Mayer thought the crisis might push writers into more escapist genres.

Swafford said some entertainment genres, like medical dramas, will need to address the pandemic in their upcoming seasons. A producer and writer on the NBC drama *New Amsterdam*, Swafford said, *"People like us have to deal with it upfront. There's just no way that we cannot and stay true to who we are as a show."*

Keyser and Babcock were less inclined to believe the COVID pandemic would have a dramatic impact on the type of content being created. *"I'm not sure that the stories that will get told out of this are going to address all of the issues,"* Keyser said. *"They may be more sympathetic to those who are economically stressed, but the [characters in these] stories will end up finding ways out of poverty because right now it's a temporary situation, which is a little different from the kind of poverty that is generational and hard to climb out of."* Babcock noted that the dust needs to settle on the current crisis in order for storytellers to take stock of the long-term impact, *"but I don't know whether what we'll see…post-COVID is a better understanding of just how uneven the playing field has been."*

Some stakeholders believed it is too soon to tell how audiences will process the pandemic and how that might affect the entertainment industry. *"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,"* Coles said.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTENT CREATORS

"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*.

Stakeholders agreed on the need to counteract individualistic narratives of poverty in both news and entertainment television. Overall, they believed that confronting the dominant narratives would be a challenge, but not insurmountable. *"We're emotional creatures who make decisions emotionally and use the information we have to back it up,"* said Katie Mota. *"That's why storytelling is so important; it can help to break down that emotional barrier to create new stories, narratives and relationships. It's long term work. We don't shift that narrative overnight."*

Stakeholders offered several recommendations that content creators could develop to shift the mindsets of audiences.

Build writers' rooms with diverse experiences.

Several stakeholders believed in the value of creating writers rooms that reflect the diversity of the stories they are telling. Swafford said she's often the only woman of color in that writing space: *"I go into that room and I have a specific lens on the world that is very different from most of the people in the writers' room."* Katie Mota noted that writers' rooms need a diversity of perspectives and lived experiences, adding that *"you get well rounded stories from the push and pull of different people who complement and challenge each other."*

Powerful stories, Mayer said, often come from first-hand accounts, from writers who are sharing personal perspectives. *"Writers will say, 'I wrote about this disease because my sister had it or because my mother died of it.' It's all very personal and it comes back to a very personal frame."* However, when stories drawn from writers' personal experiences are not available, writers should be curious and motivated to ask questions, doing deep research into real-life experiences as necessary. *"Writers should humble themselves if they have not had the experience [of poverty],*

know that they are coming in as a visitor and a guest of that experience," Swafford said. *"Then find out as much as you can."*

Develop partnerships to research and better understand the experience of poverty.

Mauricio Mota credited the success of East Los High to the ecosystem they developed with social justice partners. Katie Mota said that these partnerships with advocacy groups helped to get them out of their *"Hollywood bubble." "You need people who are working with the poor, serving people every day and dealing with these issues in real ways…they can tell you what is accurate and what is not, what could be done better, illustrating real life stories that we can model in our show."*

Connecting writers with the resources and advocates to explain the complexities of the systems and structures that underlie poverty and other social issues is key, said Michener. *"[We need] space for collaboration between researchers and media folks. Those communities couldn't be more different, but that's exactly where the benefit comes in."*

Writers can seek out information in books and articles, field trips, or conversations with people living in poverty. Writers' rooms that lack diversity in race, class or relevant experience could benefit from the resources provided by groups like the Lear Center's Hollywood, Health & Society program. Clarke said *"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."*

Use documentary film to tell nuanced stories about poverty.

Babcock said that the documentary format can be an effective genre for sharing powerful and personal stories that are contextualized within the systemic forces that keep people in poverty. *"The more commercial pop-culture depictions are very challenging to get right, and the documentary approach is often a better effort."* Mayer said the format allows for a much denser, nuanced explanation that can provide a deeper picture of the problem. *"Documentary has always dealt with poverty, more so than entertainment-based frames."*

Added Swafford: *"Documentaries can delve into issues like food insecurity, income disparity, and don't necessarily talk directly about poverty, but tell the stories of the people in those specific situations."*

Weisberg said that documentaries can also relay more information about the politics and policies that have perpetuated wealth inequality in this country. *"There are ways of telling these stories that can infuse them with drama but that can also bring in the broader social context so that they're not just drama, they're stories that shed light on broader social issues."*

Humanize the poverty story.

"The closer you are to somebody who is undergoing something, the harder it is to dismiss them and their struggles." Babcock said. *"The more you know someone, the more you understand their life circumstances."* Telling stories that are true to life, whether based on real people or adapted from lived experiences is critical to demystifying poverty and increasing empathy for those who experience it. Said Pederson, *"it's hard to hide poverty when you put a face on it."*

Weisberg said that humanizing the poverty experience can also help build support for anti-poverty policy initiatives. *"The ability to identify with, share values with, and root for people whom they may not encounter in their daily lives is an important first step to [being] sensitive to and supportive of policies and practices that will improve the lives of those that may not have the same advantages as the viewers."*

Coles added that creating well-rounded characters who experience poverty prevents writers from depending on tropes and other harmful stereotypes. *"The majority of poor people are not criminals, or drug addicts, or sexual abusers, or even romantic artists,"* he said. *"There are many other role models that we can come up with that would be illuminating in terms of the struggle, but they all resonate."*

Avoid the hero's journey and tell a story from multiple perspectives.

Mayer suggested that writers avoid a single protagonist and develop ensemble casts whose individual stories approach the system from different backgrounds and lived experiences. She sees the trends in limited series on entertainment television as an opportunity to explore how different characters confront forces outside of their control, and to see these issues through to a conclusion. *"If you use an ensemble cast where people deal with the issue differently, you model different ways of dealing with the same problem. You can get more at the structural issues."*

Tell a different kind of poverty story.

Poverty does not always have to be sad, nor does it need to portray the poor as victims. Creative storytelling can share the trials and tribulations of poor people, while illustrating the humor,

strength, and tenacity of the human condition. *"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,"* Swafford said. *"We all have moments of levity and fun that are very relatable, regardless of whether or not you're in that same financial situation."*

"Everybody isn't utterly victimized and deadened by their economic situation," Mayer said. *"People who are in poverty still have positive lives."*

Using humor can make the poverty experience more relatable to audiences. Michener said humor can alleviate the discomfort that audiences may feel when introduced to distressing life circumstances. *"It may be hard for audiences to see…Let me show you people and tell you stories so that you're willing to cope with the pain. And then let me alleviate the discomfort with some humor."*

"Poverty," Mayer said, *"is not the only way we should think about someone's life."*

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

A number of key insights emerged from the stakeholder interviews:

- The general public lacks a nuanced understanding of the systemic factors that cause people to be poor. As a result, audiences fall prey to long-dominant cultural narratives of meritocracy, character and greed.
- Mass media contribute to this lack of understanding by focusing largely on individual choices at the expense of the systemic or structural factors that influence these choices. In particular, the common "hero's journey" narrative perpetuates the belief that anyone can triumph over adversity.
- The COVID-19 crisis brings the poverty experience closer to many Americans who now rely more on public assistance through unemployment and food banks, and reveals the tenuousness of financial self-sufficiency. The question remains as to how the crisis will affect storytelling.
- Content creators can more effectively communicate the systemic causes of poverty by diversifying writers' rooms and strengthening partnerships with those who can share personal stories that shed light on the poverty experience. Stakeholders also recommended

documentary film as a format that can tell nuanced stories about those in poverty.

The goal of the larger research project, of which these stakeholder interviews are one element, is to better understand existing narratives of poverty and the audiences who consume them. Coupled with the findings from our analysis of the research landscape and qualitative analyses of poverty themes music and video games, insights from these stakeholder interviews will inform our upcoming research activities:

- We are continuing to explore entertainment narratives related to poverty, such as the hero's journey and *system* narratives that challenge the dominant *meritocracy* and *character* narratives, through a qualitative thematic analysis of scripted TV and film.
- We are preparing to conduct a nationally-representative survey examining the entertainment preferences and poverty-related mindsets of the four audience segments identified through the GOOD research. The survey will build upon the stakeholder interviews by delving into poverty-related attitudes and values in the context of COVID-19 and racial injustice, examining different conceptualizations of deservingness, and studying the entertainment motives of different audiences. In particular, we will seek to answer the open question of how, if at all, audiences' entertainment preferences may have changed in the context of COVID-19, and whether they do in fact prefer escapist fare.
- Over the next several months, we will systematically analyze the frequency and context of poverty messages in TV (news and entertainment), with a focus on scripted TV and film, as well as music lyrics. The themes that emerged from the stakeholder interviews will shape the content coding framework.

Ultimately, this research will inform the foundation's effort to replace the dominant narrative 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. "*Media need to entertain and they need people to keep watching,*" noted Michener. "*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.*"