



Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity

WHO WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

African Americans are an ethnic group of Americans with total or partial ancestry from any of Africa's Black racial groups. The term typically refers to descendants of people who were enslaved in the U.S. It's important to note that not all Black Americans, particularly those from Latin America, South America, Africa, and the Caribbean consider themselves African American. Like any community, Black Americans reflect a wide range of experiences based on ethnicity, culture, identity, and geography.

HERE'S WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Hollywood has long mis- and underrepresented African Americans. Stories featuring African Americans are frequently told via negative or "problem" frames like violence, crime, drug addiction, and poverty. These distorted portrayals, rampant tokenization, and stereotyping have fueled harmful public attitudes and stoked flames of vigilante and law enforcement violence against African Americans.



African American consumers lead content consumption across multiple platforms.

AFRICAN AMERICANS

OVERREPRESENTED STORIES & HARMFUL STEREOTYPES

- **Black Pain:** Lives filled with great pain, sadness, and tragedy, until and unless someone else (usually a white person) brings joy and rescue.
- **Colorblind Existence:** Stories where African American identity doesn't shape a Black character's beliefs and behavior or those of other characters around them. Colorblindness ignores significant aspects of how people think, speak, and feel.
- **The "Magical Negro":** African Americans who are patient, wise, and may use magical powers to benefit others with little to no regard for themselves.
- **The Token or Sidekick:** The best friend to a white protagonist. These characters are used to nominally diversify a show without fully-realized stories of their own.
- **Un- and Undereducated:** Black characters drawn as uneducated or not valuing education, though possessing "street smarts" or some other form of wisdom.
- **Poverty:** African Americans are disproportionately portrayed as growing up in poor urban areas (often inappropriately called "ghettos*") in single-mother households. While poverty is real for many, it's not the primary reality to depict.
- **Colorism:** Stories that ignore the real-life impact of colorism* and unique challenges endured by darker-skinned individuals. Likewise, fair-skinned Black people and biracial individuals face unique conflicts and obstacles rarely explored on screen.
- **Criminalization:** Portrayed as gang members and called "thugs*." (*Saying "thug" has become a nominally polite way of using the N-word.*) This stereotype perpetuates the falsehood that African Americans are more prone to violence than others.
- **Hyper-Sexualization:** Portrayals of Black people (of all genders) as sexually promiscuous, even at young ages. Characters are objectified and fetishized, which is particularly harmful for young viewers.

THINGS WE'D LIKE TO SEE MORE OF

- **Black Joy:** Show joyful Black characters with carefree, hopeful stories.
- **The Truth About Criminal Justice:** More accurate depictions of the criminal justice system and its impact on Black communities (e.g., militarized policing*, racial profiling, and racist sentencing practices). (For more tips, see our Criminal Justice fact-sheet.)
- **Empowerment:** Stories about characters with ambition, intellect, and integrity told from their own points-of-view.
- **Black Women Being Loved:** Black women and girls are often looked to for strength, dignity, resilience in impossible circumstances, and the caretaking of others. It's time to also see them being loved, protected, and allowed to express their full humanity.
- **Patriotism:** Explore what patriotism means to African Americans in a country that doesn't reciprocate that allegiance. Tell stories examining the U.S. and its history through an African American lens.
- **LGBTQIA+:** Queer African American stories and characters, particularly with transgender and non-binary characters.
- **Fantasy, Genre, and Sci-Fi:** Social media and convention participation show the voracity of Black fantasy audiences. When building imagined worlds, include Black people and tell Black stories.
- **Intact Families:** Family is the heart of the African American experience. Show Black people clinging to each other in love, affection, and necessity, regardless of marital status. Shift away from biased depictions that turn society against Black families (e.g., absentee father*, baby mama/daddy*).
- **Everyday Activists:** Fighting for things other Americans take for granted (e.g., clean water, good schools, community safety) is a way of life for many Black people.

*Denotes a term in the glossary

QUICK FACTS

- ➔ African American film directors filled 44.5% of on-screen or named roles with Black actors. When non-Black directors were attached, the percentage of Black characters dropped to 11.3%.
- ➔ According to Nielsen's Diverse Intelligence Series, African American consumers lead content consumption across multiple platforms, gravitating toward content that reflects Black images and storylines—particularly among younger viewers.
- ➔ More than 40 million Black people live in the U.S., about 14% of the U.S. population. More than half are millennial age or younger as of 2018, with a median age of 32.
- ➔ African Americans are diverse in religious affiliation. 20% of the U.S. Muslim population is Black, 2% of America's 7.5 million Jews are Black, and 12% of African Americans claim no religious affiliation at all.
- ➔ 91% of the transgender or gender-non-conforming people who were violently killed last year were Black, according to the Human Rights Campaign.

ONLINE REFERENCES & RESOURCES:

- [Black Mamas Matter Alliance](#)
- [Black Trans Advocacy Coalition Mission](#)
- Chapman University: ["Documenting Portrayals of Race/Ethnicity on Primetime Television over a 20-Year Span and Their Association with National-Level Racial/Ethnic Attitudes"](#)
- Color Of Change and Family Story: ["Changing the Narrative About Black Families"](#)
- Human Rights Campaign: ["A National Epidemic: Fatal Anti-Transgender Violence in the United States in 2019"](#)
- [Justice for Black Girls](#)
- National Museum of African American History & Culture: ["How the Camera Sees Color"](#)
- Pew Research Center: ["A Religious Portrait of African-Americans"](#)
["Fact Tank: Black Muslims account for a fifth of all U.S. Muslims, and about half are converts to Islam"](#)
- The Opportunity Agenda: ["Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys"](#)
- ThoughtCo.: ["5 Common African American Stereotypes in TV and Film"](#)
- USC Annenberg: ["Inequality in 1,200 Popular Films"](#)

GLOSSARY

Absentee Fathers:

Though there are fathers of all races and ethnicities who have minimal presence in their children's lives, "absentee" isn't used to describe most of them, just Black ones. In reality, CDC data shows Black fathers are more likely than other dads to be with their children on a daily basis.

Baby Mama/Daddy:

These terms have a context-specific meaning within Black culture, but when used by people who aren't Black, especially in official capacities (like newscasters), the meaning changes. They undermine the seriousness of real relationships and imply a lack of personal responsibility.

Colorism:

Also called Skin Color Stratification. Prejudice or discrimination against those with darker skin tones, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group. It privileges light-skinned people of color over dark in areas such as income, education, housing, and dating. (Colorism is prevalent across many cultures, not just African American.)

Ghetto:

A racist and classist term for poor Black neighborhoods. It ignores the role of government policy in creating blight and suggests there's no way to correct it.

Police Militarization:

The use of military equipment (e.g., armored tanks, grenade launchers, and assault rifles) and tactics by police officers, often doing "normal" police work.

Thug:

Through consistent misuse, it has taken on racial connotations. It is used to elicit stereotypes of Black criminality and to dehumanize Black people. It's often used to blame Black people for social unrest and to declare property as more valuable than Black lives.

For in-depth definitions of the above terms and definitions of additional terms (affirmative action, African diaspora, Black, Black Lives Matter, enslaved person vs. slave, misogynoir, racial profiling), please visit our [Expanded Glossary](#).

In-kind support and materials for this factsheet were provided by the following partner organizations. Please contact them for additional information, story guidance, and in-room consultations.



Hollywood.ColorOfChange.org

Storyline|Partners|

StorylinePartners.com

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A list of the most up-to-date
contact information for all
of our partner organizations
can be found on our website:

WriteInclusion.org/factsheets

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY:



**Geena Davis Institute
on Gender in Media**
"If she can see it, she can be it."