

# QUARTZ

## US immigrants are three times more likely to be undocumented on TV than in real life

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Of the immigrant characters on US TV last year with an explicitly stated immigration status, 63% were undocumented, according to a report by the USC Norman Lear Center and the nonprofit advocacy group Define American. In reality, just 24% of US immigrants are undocumented.

The [report looked at 129 immigrant characters](#) (pdf) across 59 scripted TV shows on US networks and streaming services. The vast overrepresentation of undocumented immigrants is just one example of US television's habit of framing stories involving immigration around criminality.

Nearly a third of episodes with immigration themes were about deportation, the report found, while 25% mentioned US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Mentions of the word "illegal" in an immigration context were not far behind, at 22%.

A quarter of immigrant characters were "associated with a crime," even though US immigrants—documented or otherwise—[commit crimes at a lower rate](#) than native-born Americans, according to a 2018 study by the Cato Institute. Meanwhile, 10% of immigrant characters were incarcerated and 9% were connected to drugs.

Like everyone else, immigrants in the US lead complicated lives that don't constantly center around their citizenship statuses. But you wouldn't know either of these things by watching TV.

On TV, there is little mention of any other issues that often disproportionately affect real-life immigrants in the US, like discrimination and language or cultural barriers. Nor are there many shows in which immigrants just get to be characters with normal TV character problems that don't somehow call out the fact that they are immigrants. Instead, their story lines are more likely to focus on whether or not they've committed a crime or if they're at risk of being deported.

The report argued that, much like how depictions of police on TV [shape Americans' views toward law enforcement](#), representations of immigrants change viewers' attitudes—and "can actually compensate for the absence of real-life contact with immigrants," said Erica Rosenthal, one of the report's authors. It pointed to shows like *Superstore* and *Madam Secretary* as successful examples other shows should follow to foster more inclusive attitudes.

To some extent, an overrepresentation of undocumented characters is to be expected. TV is built around drama, and the threat of deportation and ICE raids is undeniably dramatic. But it also furthers lazy stereotypes, particularly about Latino immigrants. US TV shows are missing a huge opportunity to cultivate positive views of immigrants—while at the same time discovering new story lines their viewers might not have seen several times already.