



FilmDis Disability Representation on Television 2020-2022 – The Pandemic Years Study Fact Sheet

FilmDis decided to do something different this year. Our annual study saw big changes during the pandemic, as many television shows shut down and studios scrambled to find content. As such, rather than present a one-year annual study, we wanted to follow the trend.

Thus, we present to you the **FilmDis Disability Representation on Television – The Pandemic Years Fact Sheet**.

This study looks at television that aired specifically between June 1, 2020 and May 31, 2022. These were the years primarily impacted by lockdown and other pandemic protocols – especially during the early days of the pandemic.

For this study, we watched 250 television shows. We watched a total of 282 seasons of television, because some shows aired for two seasons during this two-year period.

Out of those 250 shows, 216 shows feature at least one disabled character. This means 86% of the shows we watched feature a disabled character.

That is down from 218 out of 250 shows, which is what we found in [our last study \(2019-2020\)](#).

TV Shows, Networks, & Disabled Characters

Network	# of shows
CBS	25
CW	23
NBC	22
ABC	21
Netflix & PBS	14

Table 1.1 – Number of Shows by Network

Despite the fact that there are less shows with disabled characters, there are more disabled characters total.

The pandemic years changed things a little bit with the 216 shows featuring 1,342 disabled characters played by 1,348 different actors.*

The top five networks by character are actually much different and much more surprising from the top five shows by network.

Network	Character Count
NBC	300
ABC	206
CBS	177
CW	116
FOX	88

Table 1.2 – Number of Disabled Characters by Network

Here is how network television compares to cable and streaming.

Network television:

By Character: See Table 1.2

By Show: CBS (25), CW (23), NBC (22), ABC (21), PBS (14)

Cable television:

By Character: FX (41), Showtime (35), AMC (30), HBO (26), TNT (19)

By Show: HBO (8), AMC (6), FX (6), Showtime (5), Starz (4)

Streaming television:

By Character: Netflix (51), HBO Max (41), Amazon Prime (26), Hulu (22), Disney+ (20)

By Show: Netflix (14), Disney+ (9), Amazon Prime (9), HBO Max (7), Peacock (6)

The most represented disabilities by communities:

Least Represented Disabilities

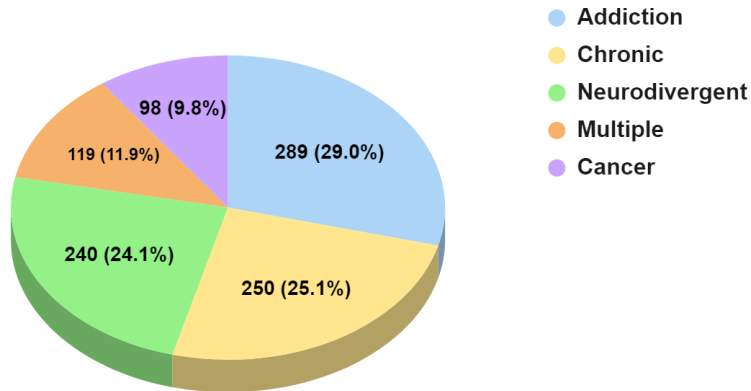


Image 1.1 – Most represented disability by community

Just like last year, the category with the most disabled representation is Addiction.

The top five is identical to last year except for the order of the last four.

Last year, immediately after Addiction was Multiple Disabilities, followed by Chronic Health, Neurodivergent, and Cancer.

Here is how the top five categories fare for disabled characters in this study.

Disability	Character Count
Addiction	289
Chronic	250
Neurodivergent	240
Multiple	119
Cancer	98

Table 1.3 – Most rep – by disability

By contrast, here are the least represented disabled communities for this study:

Least Represented Disabilities

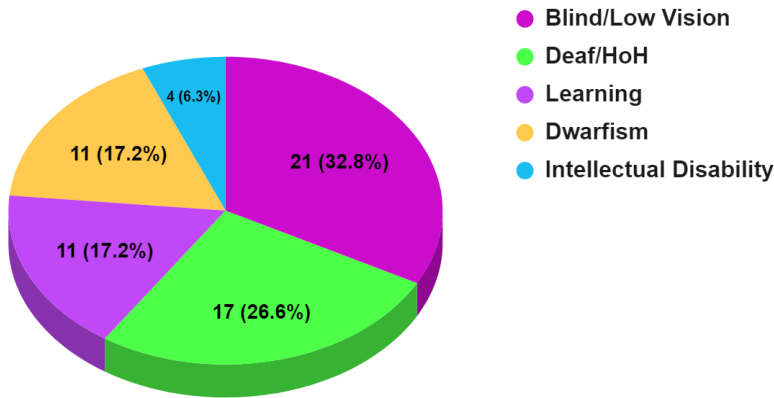


Image 1.2 – Least represented disability by community

The least represented categories echo last year with the same five categories represented.

Deaf/HoH representation and Blind/Low Vision representation changed places with more Blind characters being represented than Deaf.

The only category that is better is Dwarfism. Little People gained three characters from our last study, but considering there were only 8 characters in the last study the bump is not that significant and representation numbers for this community remain abysmal.

Disability	Character Count
Blind/Low Vision	21
Deaf/HoH	17
Dwarfism/LP	11
Learning	11
Intellectual	4

Table 1.4 – Least rep – by disability

Despite our study covering two years/seasons, the number of characters with Learning Disabilities remains the same from last year. Intellectual Disabilities (Down Syndrome) actually lost representation this year.

The number of Deaf/HoH and Blind/Low Vision characters is significantly less from our study totals.

Disability & Identity

White Disabled Representation

Once again for the third study in a row, the most represented characters are cisgender white males.

This year the number of cisgender white males grew to 522. That's almost 20 more male characters than last study.

Cisgender White Males by Sexuality

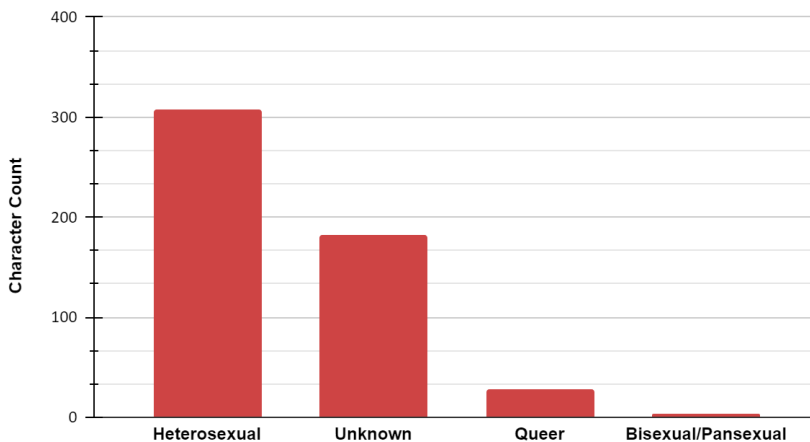


Image 1.3 – Cisgender white disabled males by sexuality+

Cisgender white male heterosexuals remain the most popular forms of representation of disability on television, followed by those with unknown sexuality.

LGB representation for cisgender white disabled males, while the most plentiful LGB rep of all genders represented, still remains horrendous. While white cisgender male gay rep increased, bisexual/pansexual rep stayed the same.

Cisgender white females account for 359 characters. That is over 20 more than last year.

Despite that, the number of cisgender white females only increased for heterosexual or unknown representation. LGB disability representation actually went down.

This year the study had its first cisgender female asexual disabled character.

Cisgender White Females by Sexuality

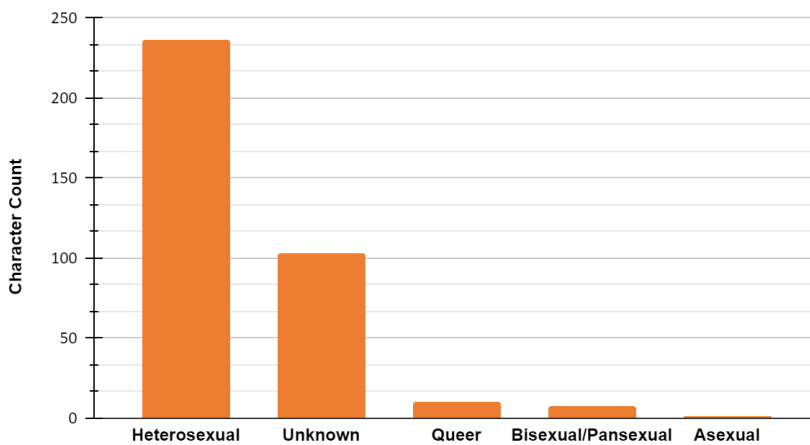


Image 1.4 – Cisgender white disabled females by sexuality+

For the first year we have white trans representation. It's not much but it's a start considering our last two studies had zero representation.

There are two cisgender white disabled characters that are gender nonconforming.

One is a gender nonconforming cis female who has unknown sexuality, and the other is a gender nonconforming cis male who is queer.

There are three trans white females. Two of them are queer and one of them has unknown sexuality.

We have to wonder if this is because there are less white cisgender lesbians and bisexual/pansexual females.

Non-binary characters also made their first appearance in this study.

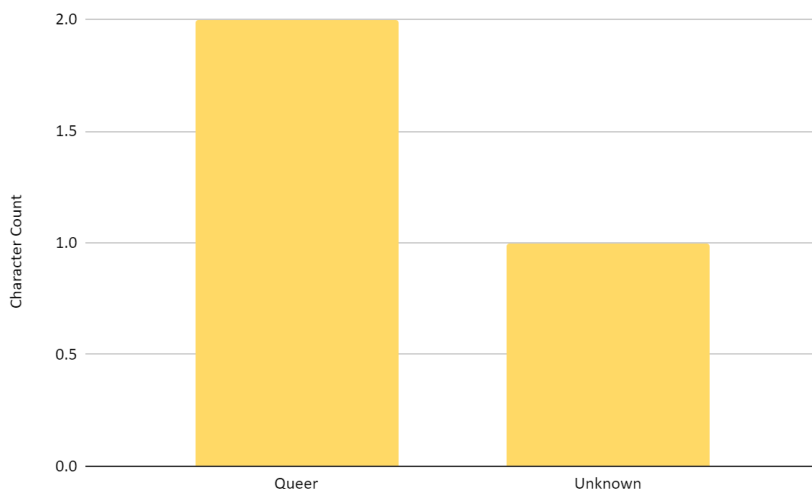


Image 1.5 – Trans white disabled females by sexuality

There are two white non-binary disabled characters. One identifies as a non-binary male and one identifies as trans non-binary.

Again we wonder if trans representation is meant to replace other LGBTQIA representation that has lower numbers for this study.

Four white disabled characters are also Jewish.

This accounts for 887 white characters.

That's a difference of almost 50 more white characters from our 2019-2020 study.

This is 66% of disability representation.

Black Disabled Representation

We were interested to see if Black disabled representation mirrors our last study because Black female and Black male representation were only one number off from one another in the 2019-2020 study.

This year, there is a greater gap between disabled Black cisgender males and disabled Black cisgender females. But the increase was only seen for Black cisgender males.

In fact, the number increases for males by over 30 characters.

There are 137 Black cisgender male disabled characters.

Cisgender Black Males by Sexuality

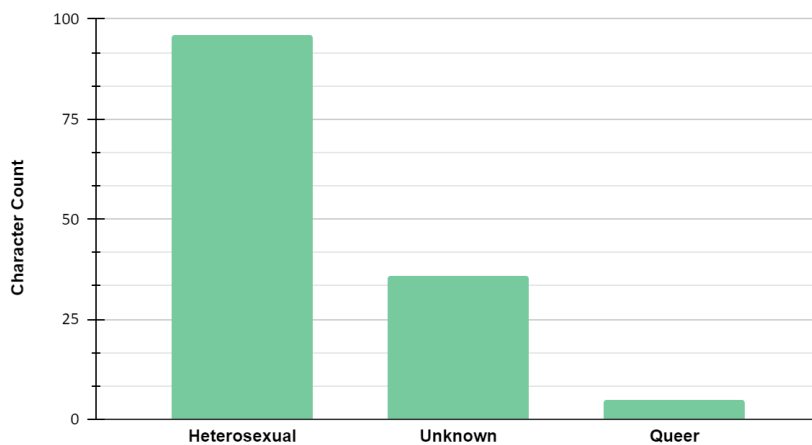


Image 1.6 – Cisgender Black disabled males by sexuality

No Black cisgender male bisexuals are on television, despite having one character last study.

There is a huge significance in losing such representation. Because there are so few portrayals, losing one can mean losing all representation.

There is a slight increase in Black cisgender male gay representation.

This study shows five queer Black cisgender male disabled characters. That's an increase of two characters.

There are 100 Black cisgender female characters that were disabled. An increase of one character from last study.

Cisgender Black female characters had the lowest increase of any community.

Cisgender Black Females by Sexuality

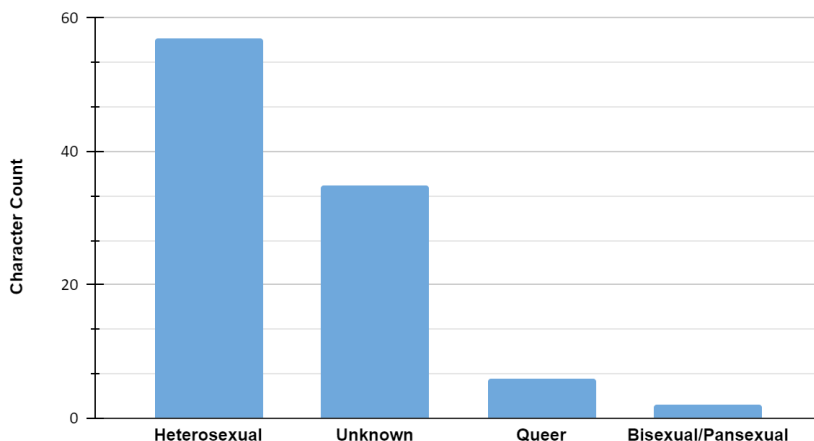


Image 1.7 – Cisgender Black disabled females by sexuality

LGB representation for Black cisgender disabled females is worse than last year.

While lesbian representation is the same with just six characters, there is one less bisexual/pansexual character.

Since there were only three bisexual/pansexual Black cisgender female disabled characters in the 2019-2020 study, that means there are only two characters in this study.

We **LOST** all Black Trans female rep from our previous study. We wonder if perhaps this is what white Trans disabled representation replaced.

For the first time there is Black Trans male disabled representation.

The character has unknown sexuality, and this could possibly have replaced the Trans Black female representation, as well.

There is one Black Jewish character..

This accounts for 237 Black disabled characters.

This is an increase of over 30 Black disabled characters in this study.

This accounts for about 18% of disabled characters on television.

Indigenous & POC Disabled Representation

Indigenous and other POC (IPOC) characters featured the same number of cisgender male and cisgender female disabled characters in our 2019-2020 study.

Cisgender IPOC male characters account for 104 disabled characters. That’s up from 79 last year.

Cisgender IPOC Males by Sexuality

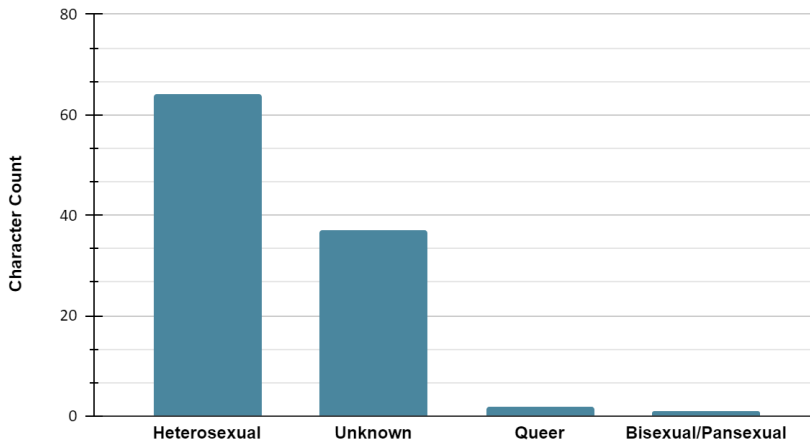


Image 1.8 – Cisgender IPOC disabled males by sexuality

This includes: Latine (55), Asian (21), Indigenous (7), Indian (7), Unknown, (7) Middle Eastern (5), and Biracial (2).

One character is a Latine cisgender non-binary male.

This is also our first study with one IPOC Trans male disabled character. They have unknown sexuality and are Biracial.

IPOC cisgender females also accounted for 79 characters in the last study.

This study, there’s been a boost with 111 cisgender female disabled characters.

The breakdown includes: Latine (47), Asian (32), Indigenous (9), Biracial (6), Indian (6), Middle Eastern (6), and Unknown (5).

Cisgender IPOC Females by Sexuality

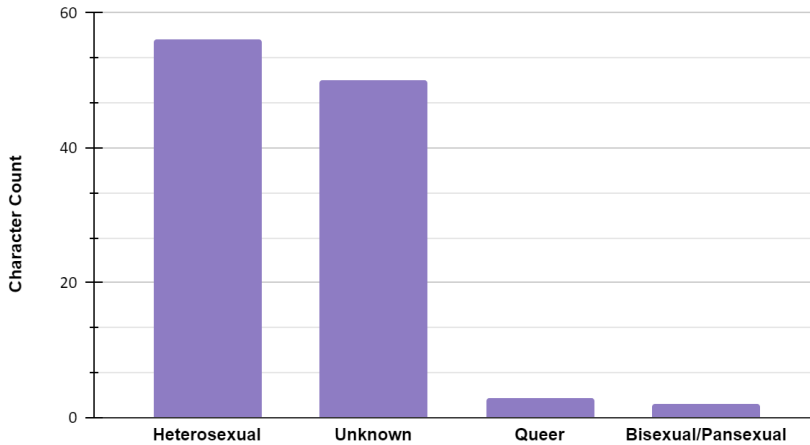


Image 1.9 – Cisgender IPOC disabled females by sexuality

IPOC cisgender female representation of disabled characters counts three lesbians and two bisexual/pansexual characters.

There are no trans IPOC female characters that are disabled this study.

The answer to that is FX’s *Pose* ended. The third season, which aired during the pandemic, was one of the few shows we missed watching this year. We can no longer rely on that representation for future studies, anyway.

It is also imperative that we show how much one show off the air can impact marginalized disabled representation so significantly.

There is 1 Jewish IPOC character.

If you add up all of the IPOC male representation (trans/nb + cis), that equals 107 characters.

That’s just a difference of four characters from IPOC females.

While IPOC rep is not identical this year, the fact that there is only a difference of four characters between males and females provides even further evidence of a pattern with how many IPOC characters are written to be disabled.

There are a total of 217 IPOC characters. This accounts for 16% of disabled characters on television

LGBTQIA Disabled Representation

The number of LGBTQIA characters increased this study.

This year there are 82 LGBTQIA characters up from 71 for the 2019-2020 television year. This is about 6% of disabled representation.

This is only a slight percentage boost over the amount of LGBTQIA characters in our last study.

LGBTQIA representation includes two cisgender gender nonconforming disabled characters – one male, one female.

75 characters are queer, bisexual, pansexual, or asexual.

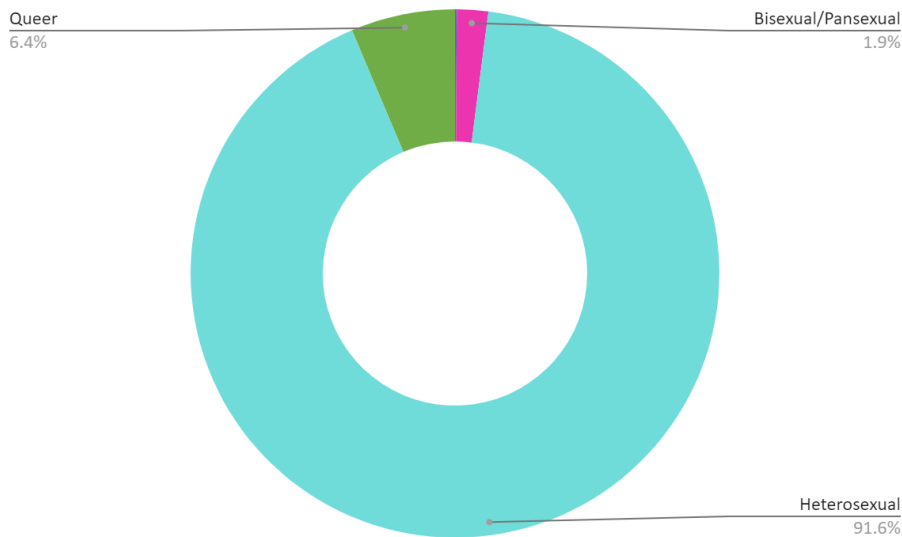


Image 1.10 – Sexuality breakdown for Disabled Characters

There are six trans characters and two non-binary.

Three trans females, two trans males, one trans non-binary person, Both of the other non-binary people identify as non-binary males.

These do not include the aforementioned gender nonconforming characters up above. At this point we are labeling characters how they identify/present on each show.

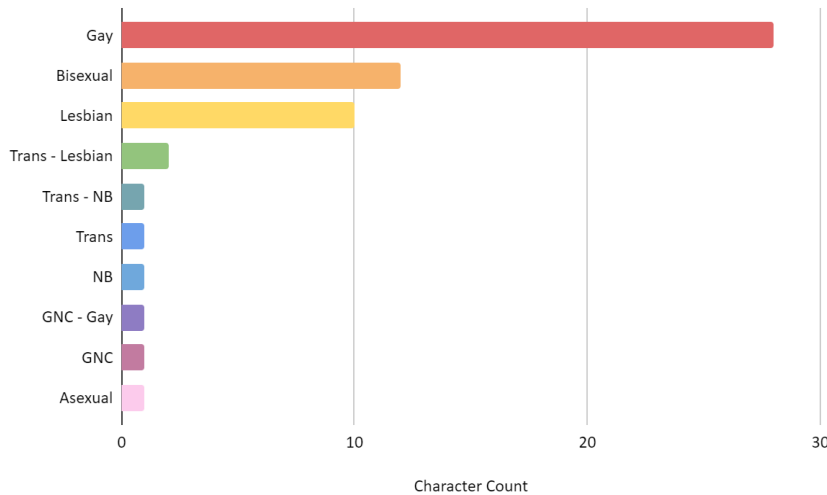


Image 1.11 – LGBTQIA white disabled representation

Race & LGBTQIA Disabled Representation

White disabled people account for 58 LGBTQIA characters.

This includes

- ★ Gay (28)
- ★ Bisexual (12)
- ★ Lesbian (10)
- ★ Trans Lesbian Females (2)
- ★ One of each of the following: Asexual, GNC, Non-Binary, GNC & Gay, Trans Male, Trans & Non-Binary

White disabled people make up about 71% of LGBTQIA disabled representation.

Black disabled people account for 14 LGBTQIA characters.

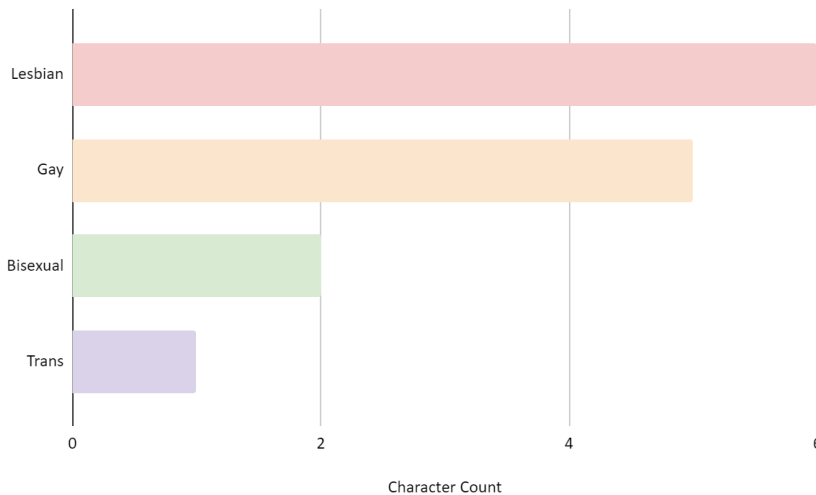


Image 1.12 – LGBTQIA Black disabled representation

Here's how the data breaks down:

- ★ Lesbian (6)
- ★ Gay (5)
- ★ Bisexual (2)
- ★ One of the following: Trans

Black disabled people make up around 17% of LGBTQIA disabled representation.

IPOC LGBTQIA disabled representation is the lowest LGBTQIA disabled representation.

There are only 10 IPOC LGBTQIA disabled characters that we found.

The lowdown for representation includes:

- ★ Bisexual (3)
- ★ Lesbian (3)
- ★ Gay (2)
- ★ one of each of the following: Trans, Non-Binary

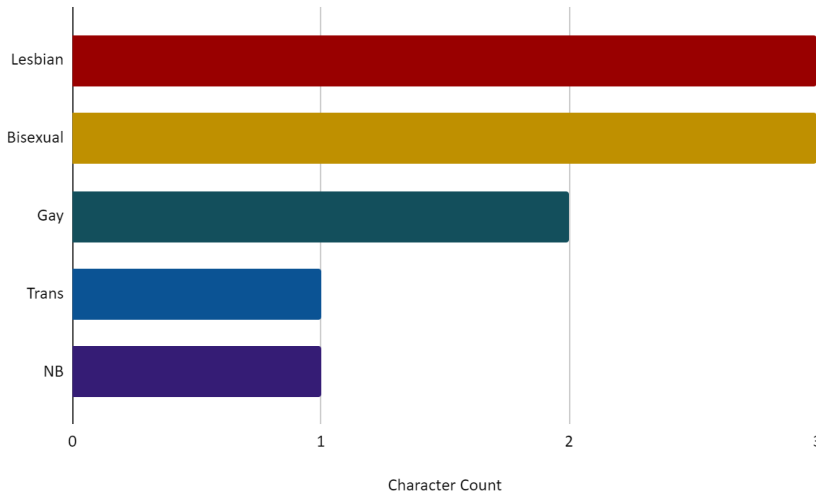


Image 1.13 – LGBTQIA IPOC disabled representation

This provides about 12% of LGBTQIA disabled representation.

IPOC disabled folks deserve better and more LGBTQIA representation. Having one person represent an entire community is not okay nor economical.

Nationality & Disabled Characters

The vast majority of shows we watch are set in the US, with shows from the UK, Canada, and Australia often making up a small chunk.

Most other representations are small or one-off depending on each show.

US-born characters make up 1,088 of the disabled characters in this study.

British disabled characters make up 80 characters.

Canadian disabled characters make up 40 characters.

Fantasy/mythological disabled characters make up 23 characters.

Australian disabled characters make up 9 characters.

It

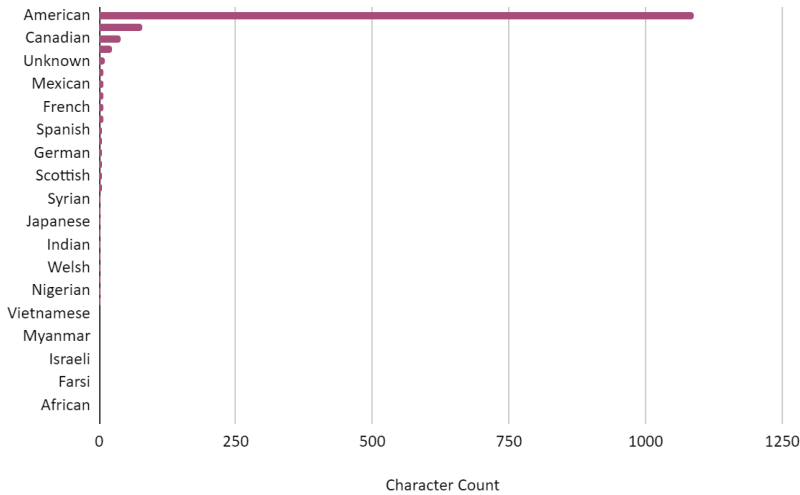


Image 1.14 – Nationality of Disabled Characters

Other nationalities to note: 10 from unknown locations.

Age & Disabled Characters

Once again, the most significant representation for disabled characters is by adults.

There are 937 disabled adult characters.

Disabled Characters by Age Group

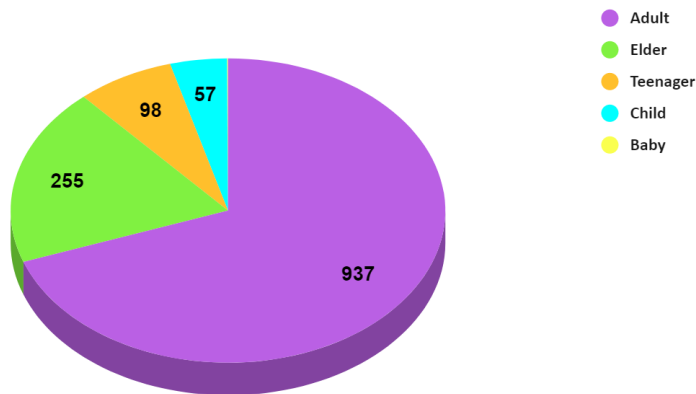


Image 1.15 – Disabled characters by age

Disabled children account for 57 characters. This is a significant decrease from last year by nearly 20 characters.

This study, there is only 1 baby character that is disabled. We are disturbed about the lack of disabled babies and children represented.

Teenage disabled representation did increase though with 98 characters.

The second most represented are disabled elders with 255 disabled characters.

Types of Roles & Disabled Representation

Like last year, the highest number of disabled characters are Bit characters. There are 678 of them.

Unfortunately, this means most of the disability representation appears as throwaway characters or parts of plot devices for often nondisabled protagonist characters.

Disabled actors deserve to audition for any role they can play, and also deserve to play at all levels in Hollywood.

Disabled Characters by Part Type

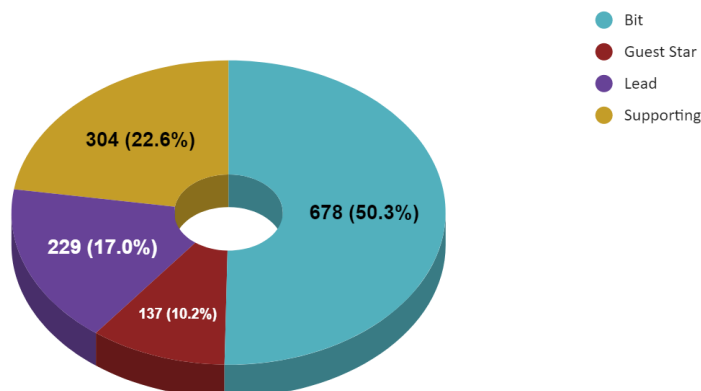


Image 1.16 – Disability representation by role type

Supporting characters remain the second highest category with 304 disabled characters.

There are 229 Lead disabled characters and 137 Guest Stars.

There are 104 instances of Disabled extras on television that we recorded for this study.

We really encourage more instances of disabled extras, as they help to normalize disabled people as a part of the world.

We of course believe there should be way more Disabled Lead and Supporting characters, as well.

Disabled Mimicry + Representation

When we created the term **disabled mimicry** it was because whether nondisabled people realize it or not they cause harm to the disabled community by portraying disabled characters in a variety of ways.

The truth is, what we are seeing with this category is that there may be more disabled representation, but actors are afraid to disclose for many different reasons.

The vast majority of disabled characters, 843 to be specific, are played by actors with whom we have no clue whether they are disabled or not.

Disabled Characters + Disabled Mimicry

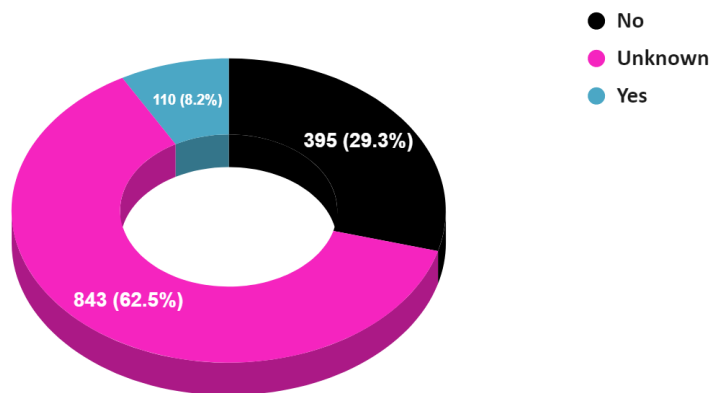


Image 1.17 – Are Actors disabled or not?

A lot of research goes into trying to find out if actors are disabled, but there are a lot of factors that determine whether we find out this information or not.

The biggest one is that the vast majority of Disabled characters are bit characters so we might not even know the name of the actor or might not have a biography or know any info about them.

Other factors include inability/fear to disclose, or the actor might not actually consider themselves disabled even if they have a specific diagnosis. It's complicated.

We know definitively that 110 actors playing disabled characters are in fact disabled themselves. This is actually slightly less than last year, making up about 8% of disabled representation.

Sadly, we know for a fact that over double the amount of disabled characters are not played by disabled actors. There are 395 actors engaging in disabled mimicry.

It should be noted that there are a few instances of known disabled actors playing nondisabled characters that we did not count because we only count characters.

One such example is Jamie-Lynn Sigler who plays Tonya Walsh on *Big Sky*.

We are considering adding a category specifically for disabled actors playing roles not necessarily considered disabled in future studies.

Conclusion

As we become entrenched within the data of multiple years of disability representation on television we are seeing lots of patterns that have been emerging from the last two studies.

These patterns are not things that inspire hope in the state of disability representation.

Disability representation on television remains significantly white, significantly cisgender, and significantly male. We look forward to expanding our upcoming 2023 study to include motivation/tropes for disabled characters.



We believe the state of disability representation remains in peril and hope to work as hard as we can to change representation for the better.

As of now (Jan 2023), representation continues to cause harm to the vast majority of disabled communities. We hope that those reading this note the patterns we have outlined in this fact sheet and our study paper.

We have great concerns about the state of representation and we hope that you will fight alongside us to make disability representation better for all of us.

Important Links

Full Paper for the: [FilmDis Disability Representation on Television 2020-2022 – The Pandemic Years Study](#)

Easy Language Guide for the: [FilmDis Disability Representation on Television 2020-2022 – The Pandemic Years Study](#)

Previous Fact Sheets:

[2019-2020](#)

[2018-2019](#)

Previous Studies:

[2019-2020](#)

[2018-2019](#)

Previous Easy Language Versions

[2019-2020](#)

[2018-2019](#)

All research studies plus PDF versions of each can be viewed here: [FilmDis Research Projects](#)

Notes & Acknowledgments

*The number of actors is slightly higher than the number of characters because some characters are played by multiple actors at different ages. This will impact the number of characters in the following categories – Age, Part Type, Disabled Mimicry.

+We did not include the two gender nonconforming characters on these graphs, but they were counted in the overall totals for cisgender white disabled males and females.

Support Us

This fact sheet was compiled by Dom Evans with assistance from Ashtyn Law & William Neely.

Dom & Ash do this work with little money and resources. They watch 250 shows together on their own every year. Most of the expenses come out of pocket although they received a grant from [GADIM](#).

William was paid out of a small prize Dom won for their work for this year.

You can support their work in the following ways:

FilmDis Patreon:

<https://www.patreon.com/FilmDis>

Pay Ashtyn Law:

<paypal.me/FilmDis>

Pay William Neely, Data Analyst:

<paypal.me/neew98>

Buy Dom or Ash something from their Wishlists:

Ash: https://www.amazon.com/hz/wishlist/ls/3GB3BBJ1AZ85Q?ref_=wl_share

Dom: https://www.amazon.com/hz/wishlist/ls/QDMJDRLAYO95?ref_=wl_share

Image Descriptions

*for those who need them who don't use screen readers

ID Logo: Large text: Film (navy blue) Dis (black) is at top. Underneath in black text, "nothing about us without us"

ID – Image 1.1: Pie graph of most represented disabilities on television. Light blue represents Addiction with 289 characters (29%), light yellow Chronic with 260 characters (25.1%), light green Neurodivergent with 240 characters (24.1%), orange Cancer with 119 characters (11.9%), and light purple Multiple Disabilities with 98 characters (9.8%).

ID – Image 1.2: Pie graph of least represented disabilities on television. Hot Fuchsia Blind/Low Vision with 21 characters (31.8%), Neon Green Deaf/HOH with 17 characters (26.6%), Bright Yellow Dwarfism with 11 characters (17.2%), Hot Purple Learning Disabilities with 11 characters (17.2%), and Pretty Blue Down Syndrome/Intellectual Disability 4 characters (6.3%).

ID – Image 1.3: A graph that shows the number of cisgender white disabled males portrayed by their sexuality. The graph features red bars. The bars list the number of disabled characters. Options are: Heterosexual (308), Unknown Sexuality (182), Queer (28), and Bisexual/Pansexual (4).

ID – Image 1.4: A graph that shows the number of cisgender white disabled females portrayed by their sexuality. The graph features orange bars. The bars list the number of disabled characters. Options are: Heterosexual (236), Unknown Sexuality (103), Queer (10), Bisexual/Pansexual (8), and Asexual (1).

ID – Image 1.5: A graph that shows the number of Trans white disabled females portrayed by their sexuality. The graph features yellow bars. The bars list the number of disabled characters. Options are: Unknown Sexuality (1) and Queer (2)

ID – Image 1.6: A graph that shows the number of cisgender Black disabled males portrayed by their sexuality. The graph features green bars. The bars list the number of disabled characters. Options are: Heterosexual (96), Unknown Sexuality (36), and Queer (5)

ID – Image 1.7: A graph that shows the number of cisgender Black disabled females portrayed by their sexuality. The graph features blue bars. The bars list the number of

disabled characters. Options are: Heterosexual (57), Unknown Sexuality (35), Queer (6), and Bisexual/Pansexual (8)

ID – Image 1.8: A graph that shows the number of cisgender IPOC disabled males portrayed by their sexuality. The graph features teal bars. The bars list the number of disabled characters. Options are: Heterosexual (64), Unknown Sexuality (37), Queer (2), and Bisexual/Pansexual (1)

ID – Image 1.9: A graph that shows the number of cisgender IPOC disabled females portrayed by their sexuality. The graph features purple bars. The bars list the number of disabled characters. Options are: Heterosexual (56), Unknown Sexuality (50), Queer (3), and Bisexual/Pansexual (2)

ID – Image 1.10: A graph that shows the number of disabled characters broken down by their sexuality. The graph is a colored ring. It looks like a doughnut with a hole in the center.

The options are Aqua = Heterosexual (91.6%), Green = Queer (6.4%), Hot Pink = Bisexual/Pansexual (1.9%)

ID – Image 1.11: A bar graph in rainbow colors from red to pink that goes through the entire rainbow. It lists the number of LGBTQIA disabled characters broken down by sexuality and/or gender identity.

This includes Gay (28), Bisexual (12), Lesbian (10), Trans Lesbian Females (2)
One of each of the following: Asexual, GNC, Non-Binary, GNC & Gay, Trans Male, Trans & Non-Binary

ID – Image 1.12: A bar graph that shows Black disabled representation broken down by LGBTQIA disabled representation. The bar is in light rainbow colors from red to purple.

Bars represent Lesbian (6), Gay (5), Bisexual (2), and one of each of the following: Queer, Trans

ID – Image 1.13: A bar graph that shows IPOC disabled representation broken down by LGBTQIA disabled representation. The bar is dark rainbow colors from red to purple.

Bars represent Bisexual (3), Lesbian (3). Gay (2), and one of each of the following: Trans, Non-Binary

ID – Image 1.14: A bar graph with rose-colored bars. It lists disabled characters by nationality. It's a horizontal grouse with the character count along the bottom.

The bars show: US-based (1088), British (80), Canadian (40), Fantasy/Fictional (23), Unknown (10), Australian (9),

Seven of the following: Mexican, Irish, French, Dutch

Five of the following: Spanish, New Zealander, German, Chinese

Four of the following: Scottish, Guatemalan

Three of the following: Syrian, Russian, Japanese, Jamaican, Indian, European

Two of the following: Welsh, Norwegian, Nigerian, Italian

One of the following: Vietnamese, Portuguese, Myanmar, Mohawk, is really, Haitian, Farsi, Austrian, African, Afghani

ID – Image 1.15: A pie chart that is slightly tilted and 3D. It represents the number of disabled characters by age group.

Neon Purple = Adults (937)

Neon Green = Elder (255)

Neon Orange = Teenager (98)

Neon Aqua = Child (57)

Neon Yellow = Baby (1)

ID – Image 1.16: A circular pie chart that looks like a doughnut. Features bold rainbow colors. The chart represents the types of roles disabled characters play.

Teal = Bit 678 (50.3%)

Gold = Supporting 304 (22.6%)

Purple = Lead 229 (17.0%)

Maroon = Guest Star 137 (10.2%)

ID – Image 1.17: A pie chart that looks like a doughnut with a hole in the center. It represents whether characters are played by actors that are actually disabled or whether they are engaging in disabled mimicry.

Hot pink = Unknown 843 (62.5%)

Black = No 395 (29.3%)

Aqua = Yes 110 (8.2%)