



FilmDis White Paper on Disability Representation on Television: Examining 250 TV Shows

**The Pandemic Years
– June 1, 2020 to May 31, 2022 –**

White Paper by:
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FilmDis is a media monitoring organization that studies representation, consults in Hollywood, and creates its own media. You can check out our work here:

<https://www.filmdis.com/>

Our study and white paper were completed through the work of Ashtyn Law and Dom Evans, with support from Beth Haller, and William, CJ, & Jay Neeley.

Ashtyn Law & Dom Evans personally watch every single episode of every show featured in this study on their own. All data was hand compiled by them.

William Neeley is responsible for all data tabulation. He was the sole data analyst.

If you would like to support the work of any of the individuals listed above look to the end of this document for ways to do so.

Image descriptions are embedded in alt tags for screen readers. If you need Image Descriptions and do not have screen reader access [you can access a full list of descriptions for this document here](#).

Jay Neeley is responsible for writing image descriptions for us.

This work could not have been completed without the support of our sponsor, the [Global Alliance for Disability in Media & Entertainment](#).

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Introduction

This is the third study we have released through [FilmDis](#). As we learn how to better integrate our ideas into our ongoing studies we've found better ways to represent and incorporate the data.

We felt very strongly about combining the two years when the world was stuck at home for the most part, and Hollywood attempted to continue to make media while working towards keeping everyone safe.

As such, we were curious about how this life-changing, world-spanning event impacted television and further disability representation. As such, we present to you the culmination of our research in the form of [The FilmDis Study into Disability Representation: The Pandemic Years](#).

Note: *we very strongly want to stress that we do not believe the pandemic is over. We merely considered the pandemic years for this purpose to be the years most of us spent in isolation. It was this isolation period we've been particularly interested in studying, and while we plan to go back to business as usual with our next study (which means we will go back to yearly tabulations) we recognize that the ongoing pandemic will continue to impact representation in ways that we cannot predict for some time to come.*

Our study includes 250 randomly selected shows airing between June 1, 2020, and May 31, 2022.

Parameters for shows included – we had to have access to them so they had to air in the US, and they had to be primarily English language/speaking.

The more we learn about representation through the data in these studies, the more questions we have about what Hollywood really thinks about disability.

We've seen strides with networks, studios, and organizations creating programs that are meant to encourage casting and inclusion, but in practice we have a lot of questions about whether the networks are actually devoted to inclusion or whether they are actually devoted to checking a box on a tally sheet, to make themselves appear more diverse.

As we begin to recognize patterns in representation between studies, many of our questions have led us to hypothesize and in some cases verify where we think the problems are when it comes to disability representation.

At this point, we are convinced that many disabled people struggle to identify what is actually good disability representation because none of us have seen what good representation could actually be. Or we've only seen fleeting moments of good representation.

We are reminded that when you're given crumbs continuously and that's all you are given, you graciously learn to accept those crumbs because at least you are getting something.

If Hollywood is just feeding the disabled community crumbs, and the community has experienced what it's like to receive less than crumbs, of course we are going to cling to whatever representation we get.

One thing that is important to stress is that you can both like things that are harmful and recognize the harm they cause. That is what the disabled community must start doing if they want to see change in Hollywood.

At this point, if we want to actually have decent, accurate, and inclusive representation, we believe that not only disabled people, but our nondisabled family, allies, and supporters must stop consuming media that degrades and harms disabled communities and individuals.

As we have begun to understand how representation of disability manifests in Hollywood, we have developed plans for future studies that will provide even more information such as character motivation, character archetype, and tropes. We've already started implementing some of those ideas and changes as we work on our 2022/2023 study.

We have come a long way from [our first study](#), which covered television airing between 2018 and 2019, and was released in spring 2019. We had no idea where the data would take us, but it's been quite a ride.

In 2020, we were interested in figuring out how marginalized, intersectional representation is broken down when it comes to disability. That was the main question we hoped to answer from this study.

We believe that we have answered some of the most pressing questions about this and we have come to some intriguing conclusions, which we hope to extrapolate on in the following sections of this paper.

Before we get into the nitty-gritty of each section of data, here is a reminder of how far we've come from our first study:

Years	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2022
Characters	708	1198	1342
Shows	151	218	216
Shows Watched	180	250	250

It's interesting to note that during a year when television was restricted due to pandemic filming restrictions, cancellations, and illness there were fewer shows featuring disability, but more disabled characters.

It will be interesting to see in our next study what kind of motivation these characters have.

It also will be important to pay attention to how further illness and pandemic restrictions loosening will impact television, and by association this study and disability representation, in coming years.

We look forward to seeing where the data goes, and what we can further discover about disability representation in future studies.

About this Study

The data compiled for this study was completed by Dom Evans and Ashtyn Law. Dom & Ash watch every single episode of every single show. This year, this meant both of them watched 125 shows apiece.

They personally document every single disabled character listed themselves, compiling every detail you can imagine and researching the actors behind the roles.

The data is compiled initially by hand, and later by spreadsheet. This year, data analyst William Neeley did wizardry with all of the data. He compiled it into multiple forms ensuring Dom had everything needed to write the main part of this paper.

Both Dom and Ash edited this document multiple times, and Ashtyn helped with providing all examples of representation, and data editing for this document.

We offer all of their studies in three formats – a short fact sheet, a long intensive paper, and an easy language guide.

This study they will also be releasing all versions in an alternate form of PDF.

All shows featured in this study are live action narrative television – primarily 30 minutes or hour long. None of the shows are documentary or reality-based.

We have broken this year's study down into the following categories:

Disability Type, Race/Ethnicity, Gender/Gender Identity, Nationality, Age, Role Type, and Network

We also list whether we know if the actor is engaging in **disabled mimicry** or not.

We have also tried to find more ways to identify intersectional representations.

While we did watch two seasons of many shows, we only counted characters one time.

So if a character appeared in two seasons they are not counted as two separate characters. They are counted as one character that appears on two different seasons of the same show.

Also, while we did list how many shows have extras, we don't count towards any of the other data in this study. Extras are not counted in the amount of characters, racial breakdown, LGBTQIA breakdown, etc.

Note: TNT is featured for two shows both of which have been canceled so they lost all of their disability representation after this study.

One of the shows, *Snowpiercer*, has been canceled in its final season after filming. So, all of that show's disabled characters will not be counted in our 2022-2023 study unless a new network picks the show up. As of the final edit of this paper 10/Feb/23 no network has picked it up.

As mentioned in last year's study, FilmDis remains heavily committed to examining disability representation through an intersectional lens.

FilmDis works hard to limit our own biases and prejudices, while recognizing our privileges.

Check out FilmDis' previous studies in multiple formats at the following link: [Click Here](#)

Categorizing Disability & Disabled Characters

We changed the category labeled Alcoholism/Addiction to just Addiction and made Alcoholism a subcategory of Addiction.

We changed the overall mental health category to Neurodivergent. We've also renamed and rearranged the subcategories under this new designation.

The subcategories are now:

Neurodivergent – Mental Health (Psychosocial)

This will be for disabilities like anxiety, bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia, etc.

Also included is a separate, smaller assessment of PTSD representation.

Neurodivergent – Autistic/ADHD

We have combined the subcategories of Autistic + ADHD merely because at this point there are not enough characters with ADHD to warrant its own category

Neurodivergent – NOS

In our first paper we wrote about the propensity some shows and representations have where the character is just listed as basically having some kind of mental health based disability but they never specify exactly what it is.

So as a result, we are calling these roles not otherwise specified or NOS.

Deaf is now Deaf/HOH. Blind is now Blind/Low Vision.

Though we don't really have any other Intellectual Disabilities other than NOS, we are referring to the category with Down Syndrome as Intellectual Disability.

We recognize that some categories may overlap and some disabilities may fall into multiple categories, so don't take these classifications as immutable. Through our labeling we try to do the best we can to show the problems each community faces when it comes to representation.

We try to avoid assigning disabilities to characters we feel may be coded. However, not every disability is verbalized with a diagnosis, so we have to have some kind of criteria to determine what is a disability.

Diagnosis is the most obvious criteria. Whether the person lists their diagnosis or they receive one from a doctor during the show, both are the easiest ways to determine whether a character is disabled.

If disabilities present in visible ways that is taken into account. You can see some disabilities just by looking at a person. For example, wheelchair users, amputees, and Little People are often considered visibly disabled so there is no need for a diagnosis to tell the character is disabled.

We also look at symptoms or other signifiers of specific disabilities that are understood as such within disabled communities. Diagnosis is not always attainable, so each individual character must be assessed on an individual basis. The decision is not always easy.

For race, we have separated Indian from Asian, as opposed to making it a specific subgroup of Asian. Characters listed as Asian refer to Asians not from India.

Note from last year's study that remains relevant to this study: *While the creation of our categories reflect how the disabled community tends to talk about disability, within that, we include information about how Hollywood chooses to identify disability. **As such, you may encounter outdated and harmful descriptors of disability the majority of the community tends to reject.** To better ensure those reading this who lack understanding of what the disability community prefers when it comes to language, outdated terms will be highlighted with quotation marks around them.*

If you have any suggestions for categories or how we break things down, please [email us](#).

We welcome any and all suggestions.

Initial Data

What's interesting to note from this year's study is that the number of shows that feature disabled characters doesn't necessarily align with the number of networks that have the most amount of disabled characters.

Last year we found a total of 1,198 disabled characters across 218 shows.

This year we found 1,342 disabled characters across 216 shows.

So there is disability represented on less shows, but more disabled people, by a significant amount, appear on what shows do offer representation.

This study, 86% of the shows we watched have at least one disabled character on them.

That's down 1% from our 2019-2020 study, and up 2% from our 2018-2019 study.

Because we always have a few characters played by multiple actors at various stages of their lives (particularly flashbacks with child versions of characters), the number of actors rarely matches the number of characters.

Our data shows that 1,348 actors portray 1,342 characters.

Because this study covers two years of television, we watched two seasons of television for some of the shows included. In all, we watched 282 seasons of television.

The 250 shows air across 6 local networks, 10 cable channels, and 11 streaming services.

The network with the most disabled characters by number of characters is NBC with 300 disabled characters.

The second network has nearly 100 less characters. It is ABC with 206 disabled characters. The third network is CBS with 177 characters.

By number of shows, CBS leads the pack with 25 shows featuring disabled characters.

The top three is rounded out by CW with 23 shows, and NBC with 22.

Representation by Disability

Once again, disabled characters are split up into 16 major categories based on disability. There are also various subcategories that make up each section.

The paper is broken down so you can use the sidebar to guide your way through each individual section. Each disabled community has a breakdown of where representation is, as well as how representation for the community has evolved throughout our studies.

You can also find various links throughout this document that will allow you to look back at previous studies to see how disabled representation has changed or stayed the same throughout the years.

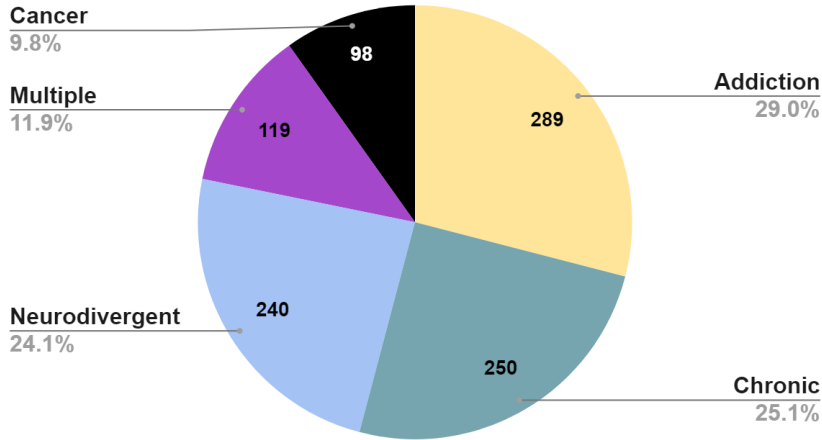
Once again, the top five categories and bottom five categories for disabled representation stayed the same between studies.

After Addiction, the order in the next four communities is a little different than the previous study for the top five represented disabled communities.

However, it's a bit telling that these communities continue to remain the most represented over and over as we do these studies.

The most represented community is Addiction with 289 characters.

Most Represented Disabilities



The next four categories are:

- ★ Chronic (250)
- ★ Neurodivergent (240)
- ★ Multiple (119)
- ★ Cancer (98)

The least represented disabilities by category are also the same as last year, however the order has also changed.

Deaf/HOH and Blind/Low Vision representation switched places this year. There was more Deaf/HOH representation prior to 2020 because Deaf showrunners were in charge of the show *This Close*.

We were already anticipating that representation would go down, but not that it would take such a deep dive from one show being canceled.

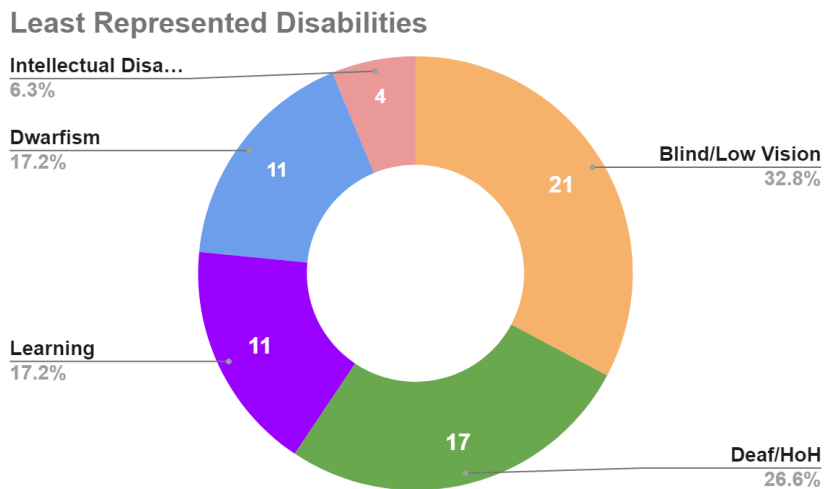
Part of our work in this study is to help anyone reading this paper understand how great the impact of losing just one show can have on disability representation, particularly for marginalized or the least represented communities. This right here is one of the results of such an impact.

The most represented of the least represented categories is Blind/Low Vision.

There are only 21 characters. This is 8 more characters than our first study and 6 less than our last study.

The back-and-forth of numbers for the least represented disabled communities really shows how little representation some disabled communities have from year-to-year.

The number of Deaf/HOH disabled characters also went down significantly. There are only 17 characters in this category. This is a significant drop from the previous year, and we've already outlined why.



The middle of the bottom five is rounded out by Dwarfism, the only category to increase representation.

We have been worried about this category because the number of characters decreased between FilmDis' first and second studies (not great because there were only 10 characters to begin with in our first study).

Rebounding to 11 characters this study means that this is the most the Dwarfism category has had. All we can say is, how sad is that?

Learning Disabilities and Intellectual Disabilities are in the bottom two spaces. The most distressing is Intellectual Disability, which is the lowest it's been since FilmDis started recording data in 2018.

Learning Disabilities account for 11 disabled characters and Intellectual Disabilities account for 4.

We've been worried about the Intellectual Disability representation for a while, but for it to go down is just unacceptable.

We can write an entire book about the harm this causes to keep these five disability communities as the least represented, but we've been ranting about this since we started writing these papers and doing these studies!

You know what we're going to say – the studios need to offer better and greater representation. Blah blah blah.

How did the pandemic truly affect disabled representation? How much more have we discovered about the patterns we see in disability representation and what surprises do we have to offer within the data after three intensive studies into disability representation on television?

Buckle up, because you're about to find out!

Addiction

I've heard disabled people in other communities argue that those who deal with addiction are not actually disabled. But research time and again shows that addiction can often accompany other disabilities.

Not only is addiction one of the most common ways people experience disability, but it's prevalent in not only most countries but most families, making it a disability with which most people have some experience.

Self-medication for other disabilities is a common way that people can end up dealing with addiction.

It is not lost on us that this is not only the most popular category of disabled representation for the third year in a row, but that there are also numerous comorbid addiction stories in our multiple disabled section.

This year, we've changed the label from Alcoholism & Addiction to just Addiction. Now, we have split alcoholism up with other forms of addiction, which makes the category a little more streamlined.

We found 289 characters with some form of addiction.

When you look at addiction representation broken down by race, the majority are cisgender white disabled characters.

Cisgender white disabled males experience addiction on television more than cisgender white females. There are 166 cisgender male disabled characters with addiction and 120 cisgender female (including 1 GNC – gender nonconforming) disabled characters.

In this and previous papers we've made the correlation that self-medicating for other disabilities can take form through addiction. We expect multiply-marginalized communities will have higher levels of addiction as a result, but that's not what we see in portrayals.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Black	Cisgender Female	20
	Cisgender Male	19
Black Total		39
IPOC	Cisgender Female	17
	Cisgender Male	20
IPOC Total		37
White	Cisgender Female	82
	Cisgender Male	127
	GNC Cisgender Female	1
	Non-Binary Male	1
	Trans Female	2
White Total		213

What we actually see is that the vast minority of disabled characters are gender nonconforming, trans, and non-binary.

It's to the level where sometimes there's only one or two multiply marginalized characters representing the entirety of the addiction experience.

This is also why it is ridiculous that the addiction count is so low for Black and IPOC characters.

Indigenous communities, for example, have been struggling with an epidemic when it comes to substance use and abuse. As such, marginalized representation should be greater.

At the same time, when marginalized communities are represented, addiction stories should not be the only form of representation. We have noticed an overabundance of stories highlighting alcoholism, in particular, in marginalized communities, sometimes as the only form of representation.

One of the most important, often lacking, aspects of portraying addiction is proper nuance. Characters with addiction are often plot devices or worse, personality-free zombies that are unapologetically driven by their worst impulses.

These characters lack any of the balance you might see in other characters and instead, they are “addicts” – a fact that does a grave injustice to both the disabled community and families and friends of those living with addictions.

There is one show, unfortunately now canceled, that offers a look at addiction – both alcohol and drug addiction, through the nuanced-lens that is so oft-forgotten.

In *Trickster*, Indigenous actresses’ and real-life mother/daughter duo, Georgina and Crystal Lightning play Sophia and Maggie.

Sophia is a recovering alcoholic who was sent to a residential school as a child and the levels of trauma led her to self-medicating with alcohol, though she finds that becoming a historian for the elders does more for her healing than alcohol ever could. Her daughter, Maggie is a witch (like her mother) and she self-medicates with drugs and alcohol because it often quiets the voices of the ancestors that never give her any respite.

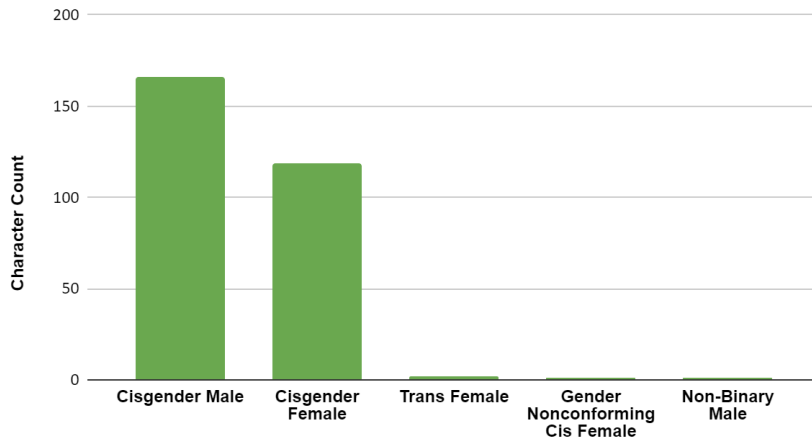
The things that make these characters different is not only that they are Indigenous, complex characters, but also that we see them in different phases of their addiction.

Beyond that, we know why they make the choices they make. It’s not just a one-line excuse to have a disabled character in your show to add a little more diversity.

While it is imperative these types of stories are told, marginalized communities should not be relegated to addiction storylines as their only narrative.

When it comes to gender identity, males are more likely to experience addiction than females, at least if you believe television.

Addiction Character Count by Gender Identity



Cisgender females account for 119 disabled characters. Add that to the 2 Trans females +1 GNC (gender nonconforming) cis female, and that still is less than the amount of cisgender disabled males.

Cisgender males account for 166 disabled characters. There is a non-binary male, as well but males still outnumber female representation without including them.

The breakdown for sexuality has been split up by gender, and here's what we know.

Cisgender Females:

- ★ Heterosexual (92)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (23)
- ★ Queer – Lesbian (2)
- ★ Bisexual/Pansexual (2)
- ★ GNC with Unknown Sexuality (1)

Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (119)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (41)
- ★ Queer – Gay (3)
- ★ 2 Bisexual/Pansexual (2)

Non-Binary

- ★ Male with Unknown Sexuality (1)

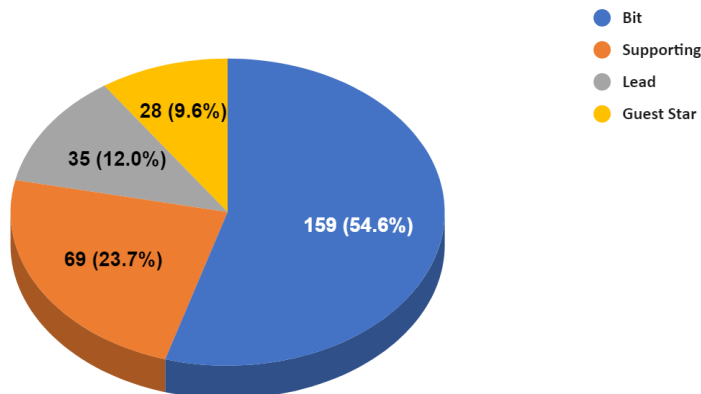
Trans

- ★ Trans Lesbian (1)

No surprise that once again the most represented disabled characters with addiction are bit characters. We found 159 Bit characters.

This is followed by 69 supporting, 35 Lead and 28 Guest Stars.

Addiction by Part Type

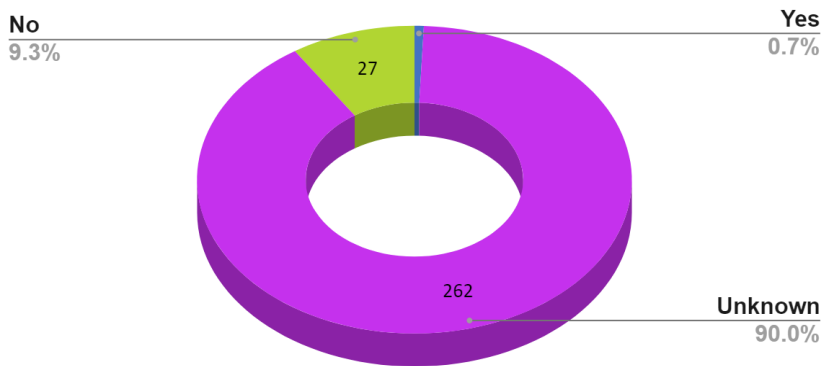


There are 291 actors playing 289 disabled characters dealing with addiction, which is why there's a slight disparity when it comes to age groups, part types, and whether the actors are engaging in disabled mimicry or not.

We don't know if the vast majority of characters dealing with addiction on television have experience dealing with addiction on a personal level. This is one of these categories where we wonder if it's necessary to deal with addiction in order to play a character that has experienced addiction.

We also understand that not a lot of actors would want to reveal whether they've experienced addiction or not. It can be stigmatizing and even career changing to talk about it or admit it.

Addiction + Disabled Mimicry



We know of only 2 actors that have talked about their experiences with addiction who are featured in this study. 262 we just don't know, and 27 do not seem to have any personal experience with addiction.

There are 250 adults representing addiction, 32 Elders, and 9 Teenagers. It makes sense that no children were included in this category.

Representation by type of Addiction:

Drugs	125
Alcohol	96
NOS	32
Multiple	17
Gambling	17
Sex	2

Once again, the biggest addiction people have on television is to some type of drug.

Over 100 instances of drug addiction.

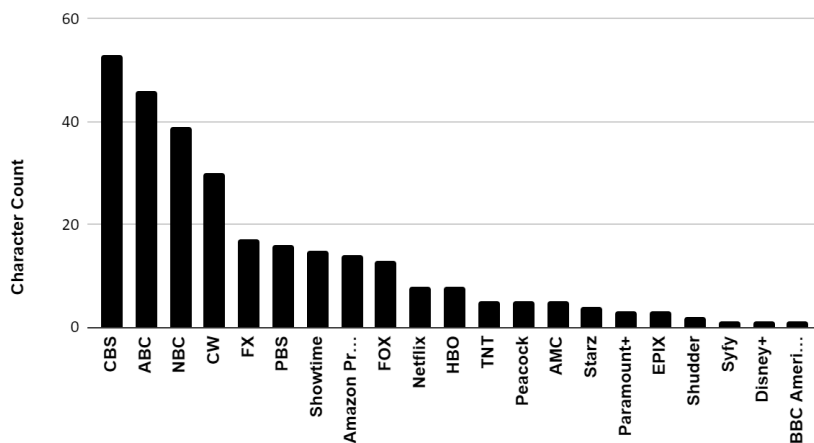
That's followed by alcoholism, which accounts for 96 disabled characters.

Other things people are addicted to include gambling, sex, multiple things at once, and some form of addiction that was not otherwise specified.

Breaking addiction down by network we find addiction features on 6 local networks, 8 cable channels, and 7 streaming services.

For addiction, the top three networks with the most disabled characters are CBS with 53 characters, ABC with 46 characters, and NBC with 39 characters.

Addiction by Network



We are not surprised that local shows have the vast majority of addiction – it's all the copaganda shows and medical dramas!

It will be interesting next year to see what motivates characters with addiction.

What we would like to see are more intentional representations of addiction that are nuanced and not strictly to propel plotlines forward.

It would be great to see much more marginalized representation. There are so many stories that could be told within marginalized communities that have not even been addressed that revolve around addiction.

We assume that next year this will be the most represented community again, but what is that data going to truly tell us? Only time will tell.

Amputee

It's always interesting for us to see how disabilities that you can visibly identify just by looking at a person are portrayed, versus those that are less visible. It's much easier for us to identify disabilities you can see visually.

It also doesn't require a character to say they have the disability. It can often be much easier to *show* disability as opposed to those that are less visible when presenting. In our experience though, this also means the disability is less likely to be represented on television.

There are 45 amputee characters on television from the pandemic years. That is a huge drop taking amputee representation from 5% (56 characters) of disability representation last study to just 3% this year.

Cisgender males have dominated this category since we started this study. This year is no different. The ratio of cisgender males to females is 27 to 17.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Black	Cisgender Female	4
	Cisgender Male	2
Black Total		6
IPOC	Cisgender Female	1
	Cisgender Male	3
	Trans Male	1
IPOC Total		5
White	Cisgender Female	12
	Cisgender Male	22
White Total		34

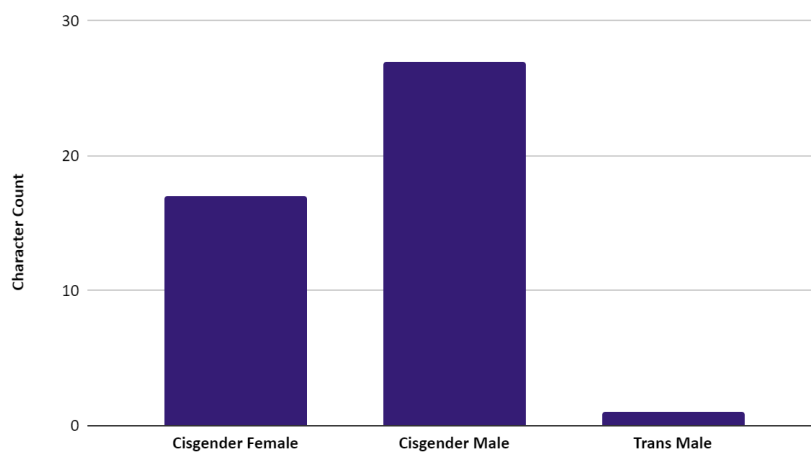
You can see how race contributes to this breakdown with the vast majority – approximately 75% of amputees on television being cisgender and white.

There is just one trans male amputee character. Lex Mayson as Saff on the Peacock miniseries *Joe versus Carole*.

Though based on a real person, Lex is not actually portrayed by an actor who is actually an amputee.

Otherwise the portrayal of disability is fine as far as disability representation goes. The injury is acknowledged, but he is not defined by it nor is it or he shown in a horrible way.

Amputees Character Count by Gender Identity



It's interesting to think that males are more likely to be amputees, especially since amputees are more likely to be seen as physical compared to disabled people from other communities.

The representation often differs wildly when looking from male to female characters, as well.

Often, male characters are represented as valiant soldiers that lose a limb as a means of their heroism or service.

You see this in representations of characters that include Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill on *The Book of Boba Fett*), Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan in *The Falcon & The Winter Soldier*), and Cpl. Eric Jackson (Sommer Carbuccia in *Riverdale*).

How they behave after the loss of their limbs will vary, but how they became amputees ties them together.

One thing that these characters also share is that none of them are played by actual amputees.

Meanwhile women are often amputees as a result of comedic intervention or nonsensical impossible scenarios.

For example, in *AP Bio*, Paula Pell plays Helen Demarcus. Helen is at the forefront of disability for humor's sake, when she explains that she had a bad cornea, so they replaced her eye with her father's when he died.

Going to the nonsensical representation, there is Fiona Dourif who plays Nica Pierce in *Chucky*. Pierce is physically disabled, but is possessed by Chucky, a murderous doll.

When Chucky is controlling Nica, she can move freely. This is a problem for Chucky's partner, Tiffany, who decides that she likes Nica a bit more than Chucky. In order to make sure that Chucky can't take control of Nica any longer, Tiffany removes her arms and legs.

All the above examples, and many others, are crafted for and played by nondisabled actors.

In the case of Nica Pierce, she was established as physically disabled in a movie, prior to the TV series, which is counted here.

Her performance from an acting standpoint is phenomenal. As the actress, Fiona Dourif, is the daughter of the actor who portrays Chucky (Brad Dourif), so she is uniquely suited for the challenge of becoming one of the most iconic serial killers in the annals of film and TV.

While fascinating to watch, the disability representation is so fantastical (it could never happen in real life), it's somehow easier to forgive than some disabled mimicry that we see. That said, was it necessary to make her a double amputee in order to progress her story? That remains to be seen.

Often, when a character is played by a disabled actor, the representation improves significantly.

In *La Brea*, Zyra Gorecki plays Izzy Harris. Harris is an amputee when the series begins and explains that she lost her leg in an accident. The character is a teenager and a fully formed character with desires, dislikes, and plenty of ability – making her one of the best representations where amputees are concerned in this study.

Our thoughts stray to the idea that perhaps there is a bit of misogyny in writing and casting amputees although further research may have to explore this hypothesis.

Amputee representation is broken down by sexuality in the following ways.

Cisgender Females

- ★ Heterosexual (8)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (7)
- ★ Queer – Lesbian (1)
- ★ Bisexual/Pansexual (1)

Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (17)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (8)
- ★ Queer (2)

Trans Male

- ★ Unknown Sexuality (1)

There is just 1 Trans disabled character, and 45 cisgender disabled characters who are amputees. It's hard to find nuance in amputee Trans disabled representation when there is only one.

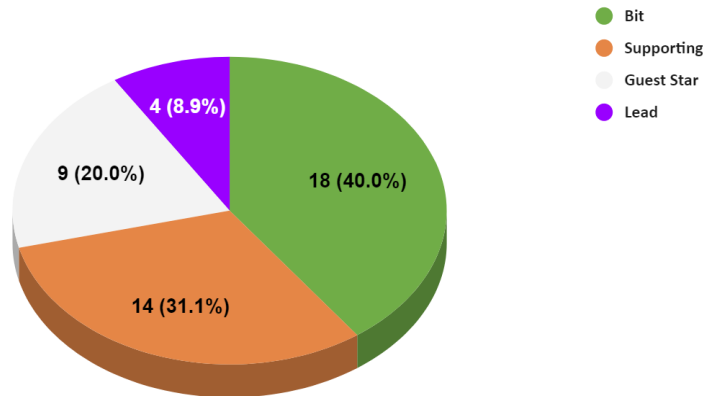
The breakdown of amputees by parts is a bit more divided than other sections. Still, Bit parts make up almost half of the representation on their own.

Bit roles represent 18 disabled characters.

Supporting characters feature 14 representations.

Meanwhile, Guest Stars beat out Lead characters by over double – 9 to 4.

Amputee by Part Type



Since we started this category, nondisabled people have always outnumbered the amount of disabled people that have been allowed to play amputees.

It's sad to imagine that Hollywood is willing to invest a lot more money to erase a body part and create prosthetics along with a missing limb, as opposed to being willing to accommodate actual amputee actors,

That's exactly what has been happening with this category of disability when it comes to television representation.

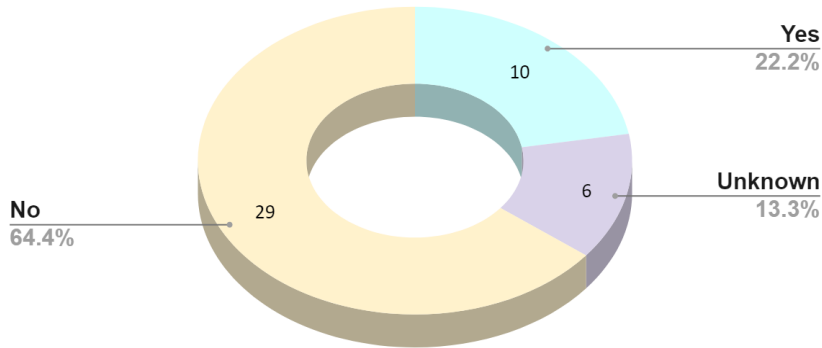
Part of it is that most people will keep watching these portrayals so Hollywood has no need or desire to rectify casting when people keep watching without actual amputees cast.

A great example is the fact that so many people celebrate portrayals in film and television of amputees like *Mad Max: Fury Road*. While one of the better representations featuring nondisabled actors, what that role could have done for an amputee actor could have changed the face of the industry for disabled actors.

Much like that film, the vast majority of actors playing amputees are not amputees themselves.

In fact, 29 of 45 characters are played by actors engaging in disabled mimicry.

Amputees + Disabled Mimicry



Only 10 actors who are amputees play roles on television for this study. The remaining 6 characters we just don't know.

There are 45 actors playing 45 characters that are amputees.

Part of the problem with the above example is that amputees are not even able to audition for roles specifically written for amputees – our argument has always been if disabled people can't even play themselves, who does Hollywood think they can play?

The answer we've been finding through these studies is... not very many characters.

This is another reason why it's so frustrating that representation for amputees is so sparse.

There is such a wide variety of how amputations can manifest, and so many different ways you can become an amputee – from genetics to injuries to illness, there's no shortage of ways to need something amputated.

We believe a large part of this is lack of imagination and creativity in Hollywood particularly concerning disability and how disabled characters could contribute to the narrative.

There are 37 adult Amputee characters.

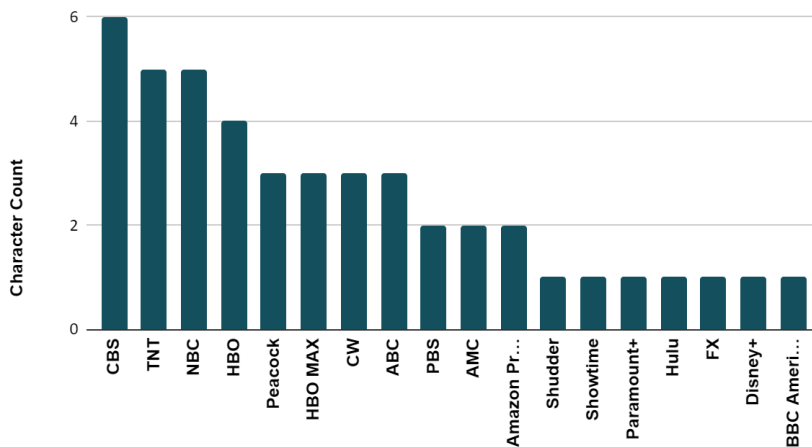
This is followed by 4 teenagers, 3 Elders, and 1 child.
Here is a look at how the amputee category is broken up by disability.

Arm	8
Leg	8
Hand	5
Eye	4
Two Fingers	4
Finger	3
NOS	3
Double Leg	3
Toe	2
Thumb	1
Foot	1
Finger & Leg	1
Tongue	1
Both Arms - from the Elbow	1

When we break Amputee representation down across networks, there is disabled character representation on 5 local networks, 6 cable channels, and 7 streaming services.

CBS once again has the most characters although this time it's only 6. TNT and NBC tie for second with 5, and HBO follows with 4.

Amputees by Network



It doesn't take much to lead the pack in a category this small.

The potential for amputee representation given the parameters of genres like sci-fi, technology, and fantasy makes amputee representation ripe for the picking.

Unfortunately Hollywood doesn't understand this potential.

As long as nondisabled people control Hollywood narratives, we believe creators will continue to lack imagination when it comes to all the amazing roles amputee characters can play.

We hope that our 2023 study will shine further light on amputee representation, and we have better ideas about how Hollywood can more greatly include dynamic amputee characters.

Blind/Low Vision

It feels weird to talk about representation getting worse. Especially when we know it's the result of one show.

In our last paper, we wrote about how the television show *See* was responsible for almost all of the Blind/Low Vision representation.

We often cannot watch every single show because there's only two of us doing this research. So, sometimes we unintentionally don't watch shows that provide a bit of representation.

The benefit of not watching this one show is that those reading can see how not having *See* affects representation. As you can surmise, losing one show is devastating. Especially for categories that don't have a whole lot of disability representation.

There's a good chance we will add *See* back to our lineup for our next study as another season falls within our 2022-2023 show watching window, but right now take a look at what not having the show did to Blind/Low Vision representation.

Last study, we reported 27 Blind/Low Vision characters, double from our first study.

This study's representation has fallen back to 21 characters. That's despite watching two seasons of television.

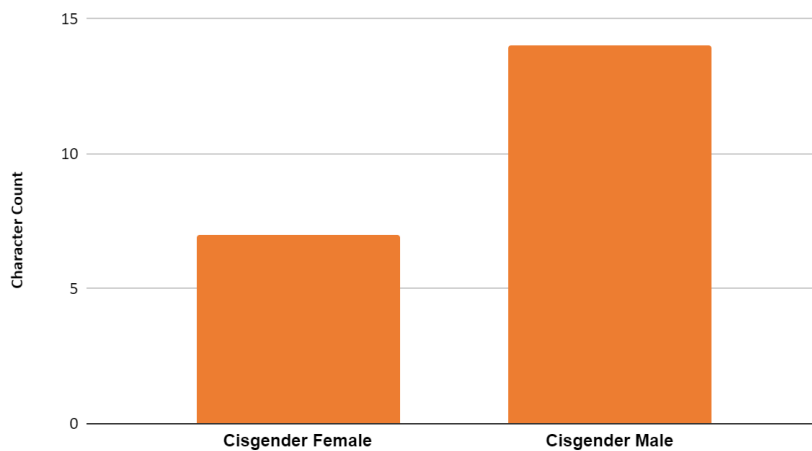
Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Black	Cisgender Female	1
	Cisgender Male	2
Black Total		3
IPOC	Cisgender Female	1
	Cisgender Male	2
IPOC Total		3
White	Cisgender Female	5
	Cisgender Male	10
White Total		15

Like the majority of the more visible disabilities included in this study, cisgender male representation outweighs cisgender female representation.

There are twice as many cisgender males as there are cisgender females.

With only 21 characters total, the breakdown is 14 males to 7 females.

Blind/Low Vision Character Count by Gender Identity



Sexuality wise, Blind/Low Vision characters are not allowed to be LGBTQ+. This is despite the fact that such individuals exist in the real world.

We provide a gender breakdown below.

Cisgender Females

- ★ Heterosexual (3)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (4)

Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (6)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (8)

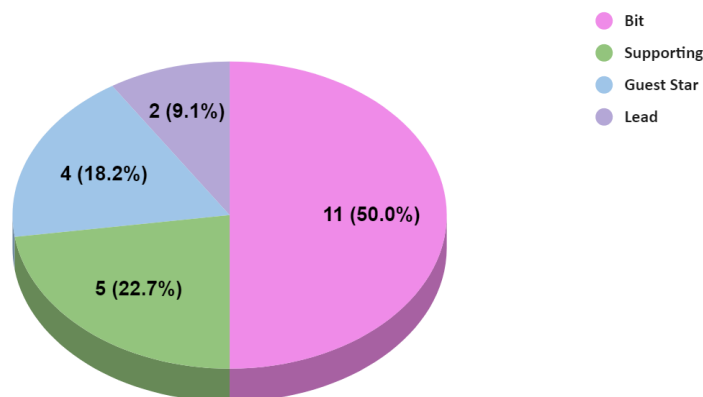
There are 14 Adult Blind/Low Vision characters on television. This is followed by 4 Elders, 2 Children, and 1 Teenager.

This is the only category with Baby representation. There is 1 Baby disabled character who is Blind/Low Vision.

When Blind/Low Vision people are on television they are relegated to playing mostly bit characters. In fact, over half – 11 disabled characters – are Blind/Low Vision.

This means that most Blind/Low Vision characters on television don't have enough time to develop into dynamic characters. They are mostly relegated to plot devices or one line representations.

Blind/Low Vision by Part Type



More robust representation comes in the form of Supporting (5), Guest Star (4), and Lead (2).

There are 22 actors playing 21 Blind/Low Vision roles.

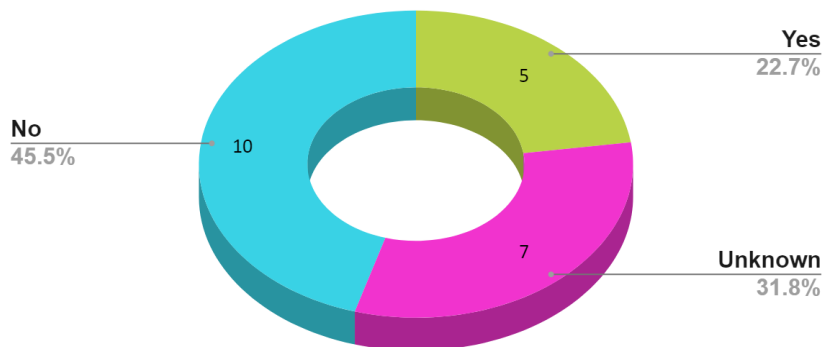
One of the better options where Blind/Low Vision representation is concerned comes from *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*. Disabled actor, Bruce Horak, plays the Andorian character Hemmer. He works on the bridge of a spaceship and is blind.

His disability is rarely brought up except for when an Earth officer attempts to help him do something only for him to explain that he is not helpless and is capable of doing things for himself. He even goes on to say that what some see as a lack of ability is not the same thing to him. Representation would improve vastly if more characters were included in this manner.

We have not made any secret that we've been working on pilots, and we believe we can start working towards changing the landscape for Blind/Low Vision representation ourselves, but as of now Hollywood has not yet returned our calls.

Surprisingly, while the majority of actors playing Blind/Low Vision disabled characters are not disabled, the surprising part of that is that it's not too far off from how many are played by actual disabled actors.

Blind/Low Vision + Disabled Mimicry



That's the result of having a small category though.

The number of actors engaging in disabled mimicry is 10.

We don't know about 7 of the characters, and 5 Blind/Low Vision characters are played by actual Blind/Low Vision actors.

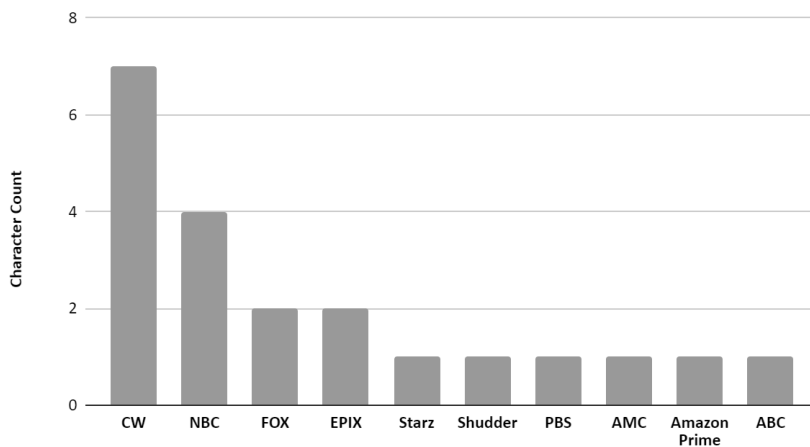
Representation by network is actually really interesting for this category because it's such a small category that either one network is going to dominate or all of the networks have very close representation.

In this case, both are true.

CW dominates with 7 characters. Of course, NBC is not that far behind with 4 characters, and FOX and EPIX tie with two Characters a piece.

Representation is spread across 5 local channels, 2 cable networks, and 3 streaming services.

Blind/Low Vision by Network



There is not much more we can say that we haven't been saying in our last two papers.

Blind/Low Vision communities deserve to be represented because at this point are they really being represented at all?

Not very much, and not in a way that allows people to better understand that Blind/Low Vision people have similar lives to nondisabled people.

If there was a lot more representation we would begin to see greater acceptance of Blind/Low Vision people.

As we continue to do this research though, all we continue to discover is how detrimental the lack of disabled representation is for communities like Blind/Low Vision.

Body & Facial Differences

We have a lot of clarity when it comes to the Body & Facial Difference category, after three studies examining disability representation

Our first study, we only had 10 characters in this category, but the last two years' representation has exploded. We have only one additional character from last year, so 88 disabled characters with Body & Facial Differences.

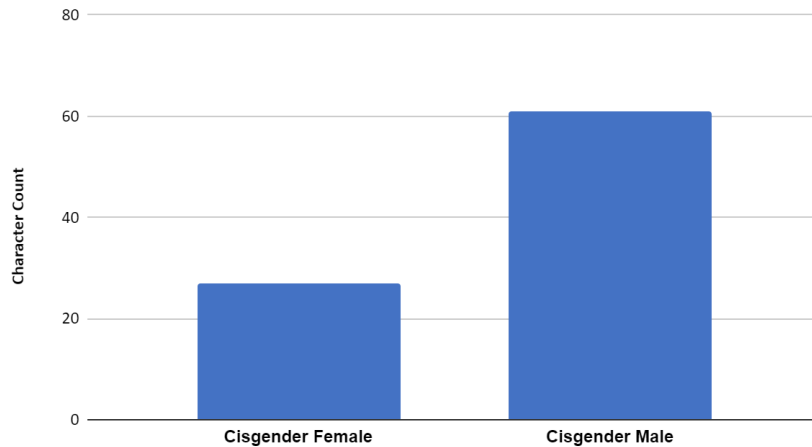
Once again, scars lead the representation for this category. We spoke about how diverse this category could be and the problem is again a lack of imagination on the part of screenwriters.

There are multiple disabilities that can cause Body & Facial Differences. However, it seems like none of those disabilities are ever really represented.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Black	Cisgender Female	5
	Cisgender Male	17
Black Total		22
IPOC	Cisgender Female	10
	Cisgender Male	12
IPOC Total		22
White	Cisgender Female	12
	Cisgender Male	32
White Total		44

Cisgender people are the only ones allowed to have Body & Facial Differences according to Hollywood. Males especially. They outnumber females significantly. There are 27 cisgender females with B & F Differences, and 61 cisgender males.

B & F Differences Character Count by Gender Identity



Again, we wonder if sexism plays any role in the fact that males dominate this category.

There is something inherently masculine about scars and burns, which make up the majority of this category.

Scars especially are supposed to make you feel and look tough and toughness is often associated as a masculine trait, not a feminine one.

Here is more about the breakdown between males and females for this category.

Cisgender Females

- ★ Unknown Sexuality (13)
- ★ Heterosexual (12)
- ★ Queer – Lesbian (1)
- ★ Bisexual/Pansexual (1)

Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (42)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (14)
- ★ Queer (3)
- ★ Bisexual/Pansexual (2)

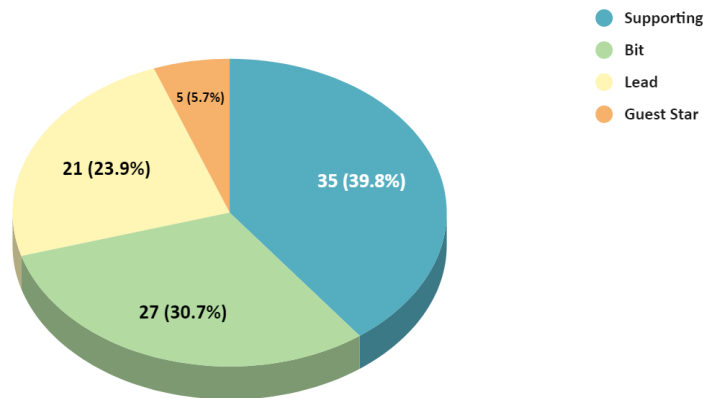
There really is little to say about how much cisgender male representation we are already seeing in this study.

There are 73 adult characters with B & F Differences. This is followed by 9 Elders, 5 Teenagers, and 1 child.

A bit unpredictably, the majority of characters with B & F Differences are actually supporting characters.

In fact, there are 35 portrayals in this category that are supporting roles.

B & F Difference by Part Type



Bit characters come in second with 27, followed by Lead (21), and Guest Star (5).

There are 88 actors playing 88 characters who have a Body or Facial Difference.

It's great to see more supporting roles, for any category. The more balance we see between the types of roles disabled characters get to play, the greater options we will hopefully see in disabled representation.

Having more lead characters especially is one of the major things that needs to change for all disability representation. It's no different for this category.

As for disabled mimicry, it is incredibly common to see that within this category because one of the most common ways to give someone B & F Differences is to throw on a scar – and this has been happening on television repeatedly during the last two studies.

The reason why characters are given scars is plentiful.

There are a lot of scars that are given for comedic effect. This is especially true on shows that involve pirates and comedy.

There are lots of scars that are given to make people appear more dangerous or sexy.

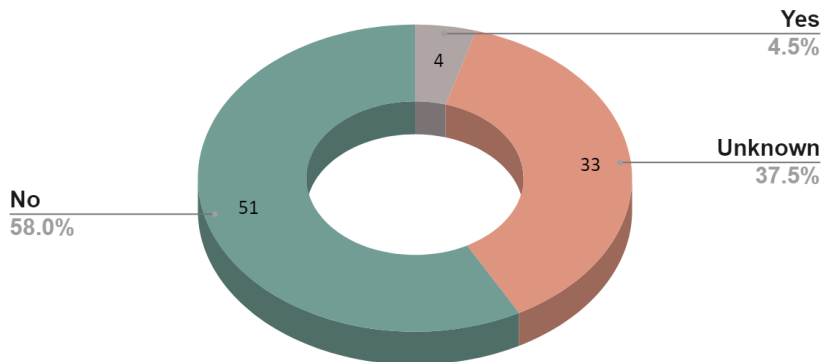
Scars are also shown a lot when people are explaining about medical history. This is really common with one sentence or one episode disabilities where someone shows somebody their scar that they got from surgery or an accident.

Sometimes the scar is the disability and sometimes the scar accompanies another disability.

Keeping all this in mind, it's not surprising that most actors are engaging in disabled mimicry when they are representing characters with B & F Differences.

The majority, 51 characters, are engaging in disabled mimicry.

B & F Differences + Disabled Mimicry



We don't know whether 33 of the actors are pretending to be disabled or not, but we are certain 4 of these characters are rocking their own Body & Facial Differences! That number needs to be higher.

B & F Differences is an often misunderstood category. People can have this type of disability for a variety of reasons including genetics. People can get injured, or illness can contribute.

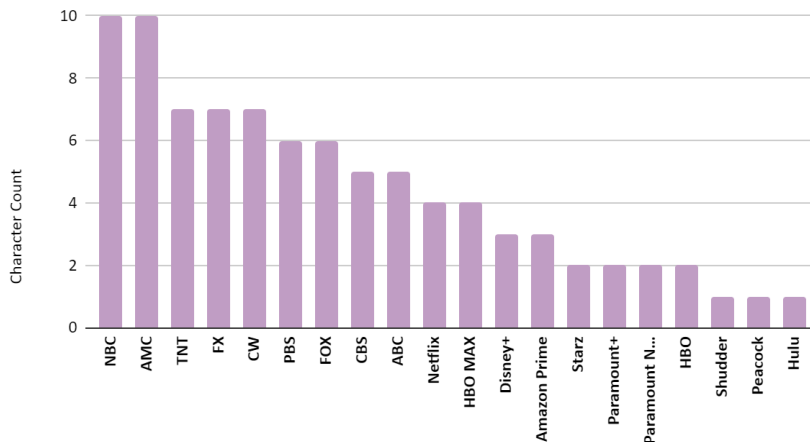
Those who have Body & Facial Differences are often highly stigmatized and would benefit greatly from visual representation in particular.

Unfortunately, when it comes to people with B & F Differences, Hollywood would rather keep characters like these out of sight, out of mind. As long as this continues to happen, disabled folks with B & F Differences will continue to be mistreated and many will fight to keep such individuals from full participation within society.

The network breakdown for this category shows the top two networks have the same amount of characters – NBC and AMC both come away with 10 characters with B & F Differences.

Representation is spread across 6 local networks, 6 cable channels, and 8 streaming services.

B & F Differences by Network



The next three networks all have 7 characters – TNT, FX, and CW.

What’s interesting to note is that there’s a lot of networks that have many shows that are full of action, danger, and violence.

It makes sense why there would be a lot of characters getting injured with scars and burns.

The third-highest value is 6 characters, and PBS and FOX make up all of these characters.

As mentioned above, scars are the most popular form of B & F Differences on television. Burns are next, but as the table below shows, there are significantly less burns than scars.

The amount of representation that could be in this category, and is not is frustrating, especially when so much of the representation is done for just a moment of dialogue.

Scar(s)	67
Burns	10
NOS	8
Ptosis	1
Leprosy	1
Cleidocranial Dysplasia (Facial & Bone Differences)	1

We believe a lot of the representation for the B & F Differences category is done for comedic effect. That's one of the things we are looking for specifically in our next study, when we break things down by trope and motivation. It'll be interesting to see how much is done for laughs and how much is legitimate representations.

When we think about the last semi-positive representation being the movie *Mask* (the writing of the character was good but the prosthetics and the fact that Rocky was played by a nondisabled actor was the not great parts), which was from the 1980s, lack of representation for those within B&FD communities seems quite significant.

We find the most interesting characters to be played by actors who have B & F Differences.

Sometimes the representation is there because you can see their B & F Difference. That's the type of representation this category needs.

Cancer

Cancer has been on our mind as we reflect on the passing of actress Annie Wersching, a television actress that has been on multiple shows we've covered for this study.

We don't remember listing her as a disabled part, but she's definitely been on shows that have had disabled characters such as Marvel's *Runaways* and Star Trek *Picard*.

Annie is a really great reminder of how and why actors don't disclose when they are disabled. Diagnosed with cancer in 2020, when we were watching her on *Picard* in 2021 we didn't have any idea that she had cancer.

It reminds us of Chadwick Boseman, another actor who felt compelled not to speak out about his diagnosis. In both cases, we only found out about their cancer when these actors passed away.

It says a lot when so many actors are afraid to disclose they are disabled, and instead keep working without accommodation or worry about what could happen. These actors should be allowed to work if they can but also deserve to be accommodated if they need such things.

Cancer has always been a popular disability to portray on television. Part of that is because it's a disability most creators either have experience with through their families or through themselves.

It's often a relatable storyline, and is often one that can be used to provoke a wide variety of emotions as a result.

As far as representation, cancer is most likely to have the most varied types of portrayals of any of our categories.

All of these things are part of why cancer has been a part of our most represented disability list since we started doing this study, over five years ago.

This year, there are 98 disabled characters with cancer – a wide range of different types of cancer played by a wide range of actors in a variety of roles.

This is actually down from our last study where we had 100 characters with cancer.

We predicted that as more creators that have personal experience with cancer have access to create film and television, we will see more authenticity – and that is what we are seeing with some portrayals.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Black	Cisgender Female	9
	Cisgender Male	20
	Trans Male	1
Black Total		30
IPOC	Cisgender Female	10
	Cisgender Male	8
IPOC Total		18
White	Cisgender Female	22
	Cisgender Male	28
White Total		50

The breakdown of cancer by race makes a really important point that we didn't have enough data to really even consider before this study.

We are not surprised to notice that the only Trans character is a Black trans male. The character is actually from *New Amsterdam* and the story is about a Trans Male with breast cancer.

New Amsterdam is known for being one of the more authentic shows offering marginalized representation.

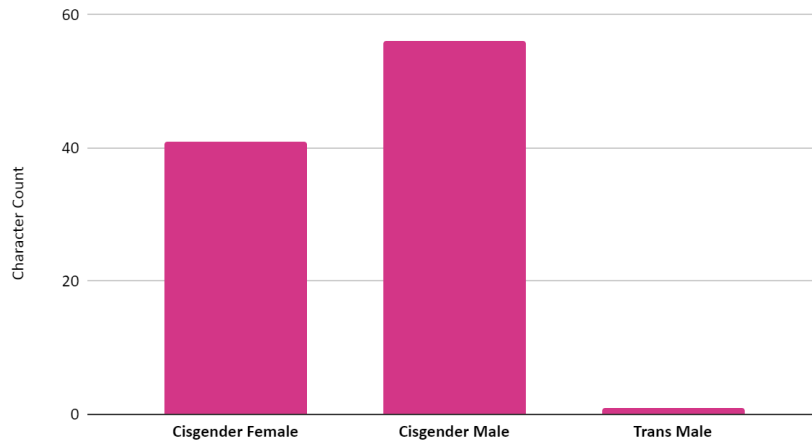
Other than this one Trans portrayal, all other representations of cancer are by cisgender people.

The significant part of this is that this is our first time having trans male representation, and its Black representation (there is also IPOC trans male representation in another category).

What is intriguing about this is that our first examples of trans female representation in our previous studies were also not white characters or portrayals.

Black and IPOC communities are leading the narrative on trans disabled representation and we are here for it.

Cancer Character Count by Gender Identity



Cisgender females make up 41 characters, with cisgender males making up 56.

Once again, male roles dominate over female roles, which is how white cisgender males continue to make up the majority of disability representation year after year.

Further breakdown by gender tells us the following.

Cisgender Females

- ★ Heterosexual (25)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (16)

Cisgender Males

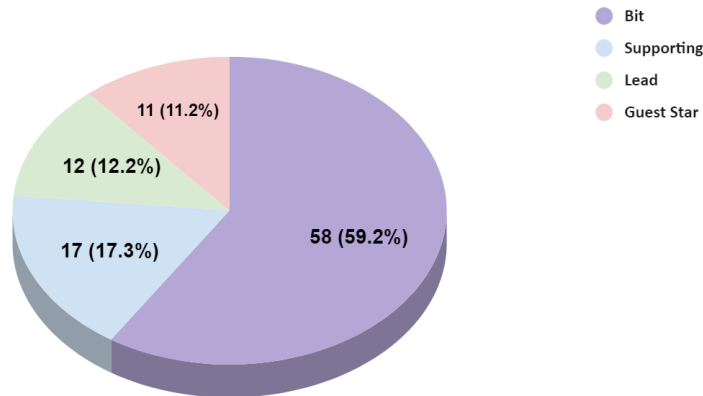
- ★ Heterosexual (41)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (10)
- ★ Queer – Gay (4)
- ★ Bisexual/Pansexual (1)

Trans Male

- ★ Unknown Sexuality

Even with a category like cancer, where creators have a lot of personal experience, the vast majority of characters are still Bit characters. In fact over 50% of characters or 58 characters are Bit characters.

Cancer by Part Type



It's kind of ridiculous that the next most popular category is supporting, because by contrast there are only 17 disabled characters in this category.

Lead characters make up just 12 portrayals, and Guest Stars are nearly as many, with 11.

There are 98 actors portraying 98 characters.

It can be hard to get a true sense of authentic representation when over half of your representation is not nearly long enough to make any major impact on your show.

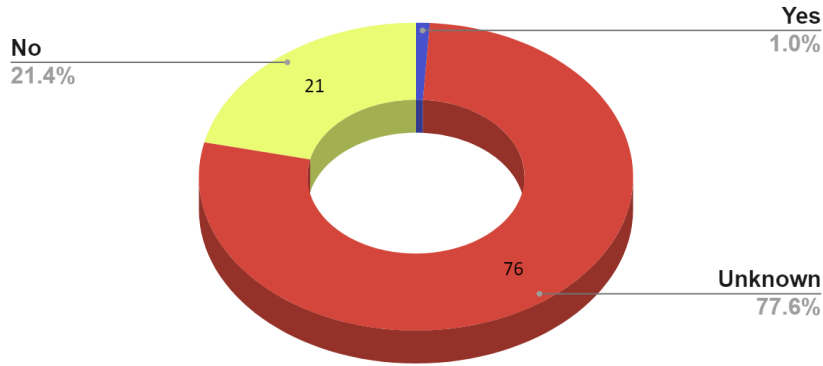
This is the most difficult category for disabled mimicry, because do we really want a bunch of people that have cancer to have to relive those experiences?

Honestly, nobody wants anybody to have cancer. It's one of those disabilities that nobody wants, so we are not super upset about the results of how many actors have or had cancer, versus how many we don't know.

There are 76 actors we don't know whether they've had cancer or not. We are certain 21 of the actors have not had cancer. We usually verify that because they've spoken

about the role they've played and mentioned that they don't have cancer or never had cancer.

Cancer + Disabled Mimicry

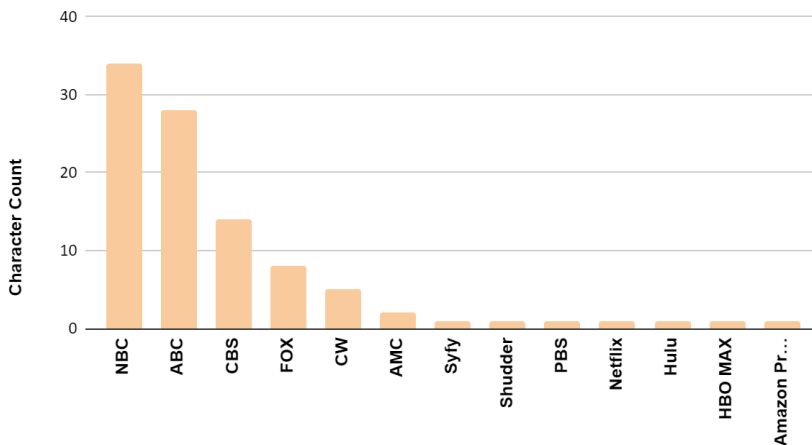


There is just 1 character played by an actor that we know has had cancer.

Not shocking, NBC had the most amount of characters with cancer. We suspect the medical dramas, *New Amsterdam* and *Chicago Med* contributed to this.

It'll be interesting to see how the numbers change in the coming years since the next study will be the last time *New Amsterdam* is featured with the show just ending.

Cancer by Network



This study, characters with cancer appear on shows airing across 6 local networks, 2 cable channels, and 5 streaming services.

There are 34 characters on NBC, 28 on ABC, and 14 on CBS.

There are 61 Adult disabled characters with cancer. Elders account for 26 characters, while Teenagers (5), and Children (2) round out this category.

There are over 30 different types of cancer. There are also 30 individuals who say they have cancer but did not specify what type of cancer they had.

NOS	30
Brain	9
Breast	7
Leukemia	7
Pancreatic	5
Lung	4
Stomach	3
Squamous Cell Carcinoma	3
Thyroid	3
Metastatic cancer	3
Multiple	3
Prostate	2
Stage 4	2
Testicular	1
Terminal Brain Tumor	1
Terminal (Unknown)	1
Terminal (Colon)	1
Soft Tissue	1
Osteosarcoma	1
Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma	1
Malignant Melanoma - Stage 4	1
Lymphoma	1
Kidney	1
Esophageal	1
Cervical	1
Central Nervous System Lymphoma	1
Bone	1
Blood	1
Bladder	1
Astrocytoma	1

This is especially common for bit characters who might just be mentioning they have cancer in passing without really specifying any details about it.

We believe that the overall portrayal of cancer is not always bad, but that's because cancer is not often considered a disability. It's treated as an illness.

If more disabilities were seen as being an everyday part of people's lives, which is what many disabilities are – in fact most families may not even recognize that there are disabled people in their families even with family members who have visible, unmistakable disabilities – we believe disabled people would be much more included within society.

Still, representation remains fairly static with mostly cisgender white people in such roles. As more diverse shows are available, it will be interesting to see if and how the numbers change.

We already know that a lot of our more diverse representations of disability come from shows that feature Black and Brown showrunners, because they are already including marginalized communities.

So if they happen to add disabled characters to their shows those characters are most likely going to be multiply-marginalized.

We would like to see a more nuanced representation of cancer because it feels like the representation we get is either one-off portrayals or they are existing characters, but you never really see them experiencing what it's like to have cancer.

One of the brighter spots is *A Million Little Things*, especially where cancer based disability representation is concerned.

Two of the main cast, Gary Mendez and Maggie Bloom (played by James Roday and Allison Miller), have had cancer throughout the series. Both characters have breast cancer.

You see them going to annual appointments and the fear of having to go through with the process again.

In Maggie's case, when in remission you see her struggle with the idea of who she is without cancer, as most of her adult life has been about beating cancer and not finding herself.

These are the types of depictions that we need.

On the flip side, there is no shortage of bit characters that push a narrative that is as harmful as it is outdated.

In *911*, there is a bit character named Ellen Saxton (played by Jonelle Allen). She is an older woman and she calls 911 because she has multiple forms of cancer, and she is overdosing on medication in an attempt to die.

She explains that she is ready to die because her cancer has spread, and she doesn't want to be a burden to her daughter. She calls 911 to ensure that her daughter won't be alone when she dies.

Considering how much the "burden" narrative is pushed, it is disheartening to continue to see stories like this one. Hopefully in the future we have more positive and neutral stories to go with the overabundance of negative ones so often seen.

Chronic Health

The representation of chronic disabilities contributes to one of the highest numbers towards disability representation this year. It's always one of our biggest categories because there are so many different types of chronic disabilities.

Honestly, some of our other categories have a lot of crossover with chronic, and those disabilities could also be considered chronic, but we tried to stick with chronic disabilities that just don't really fit anywhere else for this study.

In our last study, we mentioned that there were 161 chronic disabled characters and that that was one of the biggest categories of the study.

This study, the number increased by over 100. There are 250 disabled characters with a wide variety of chronic disabilities.

As more understanding about chronic disabilities is happening, shows are starting to become self-aware.

We are starting to notice examples where shows are addressing issues people face when getting diagnosed with chronic disabilities – such as lack of support from medical professionals, or even downright gaslighting.

We are also becoming aware of more and more disabled creators who have chronic disabilities.

We've included Ava Duvernay's *Queen Sugar* in multiple studies – and written about how her own experiences with lupus informed the development of the character, Aunt Vi.

It's incredibly disappointing that for a category as big as this one the only representation is for cisgender characters.

We know the LGBTQIA community, including trans people, are more susceptible to disabilities particularly chronic disabilities and mental health based disabilities – all marginalized communities are more susceptible to both of these types of disabilities because oppression can lead to physical, mental, and emotional stress.

We are going to have to talk about how LGBTQIA and disabled representation, particularly disabilities in this category, should vastly overlap if creators want to have any type of authenticity in their work.

We feel like we have written this nearly every category, but cisgender males make up more characters than cisgender females. Are we surprised by this, at this point?

There are 140 cisgender males and 110 cisgender females.

We know that females are more likely to have disabilities, particularly chronic disabilities than males, so the fact that cisgender males have more roles is already disturbing, but something to note from the table below.

If you look at the IPOC breakdown, cisgender females are leading. In our breakdown of Black representation, males are only winning by two characters.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Black	Cisgender Female	19
	Cisgender Male	21
Black Total		40
IPOC	Cisgender Female	25
	Cisgender Male	23
IPOC Total		48
White	Cisgender Female	66
	Cisgender Male	96
White Total		162

The number of cisgender males and cisgender females for Black and Brown characters together is identical with 44 characters a piece.

The reason why there are more males with chronic disabilities on television is because of cisgender white males. FULL STOP.

Let us repeat that. cisgender white male representation dominated all other representation in the chronic disabilities category so much it wiped out what Black and IPOC characters contributed to the representation In terms of numbers.

Did we mention that cisgender females and trans/non-binary people should be leading this category?

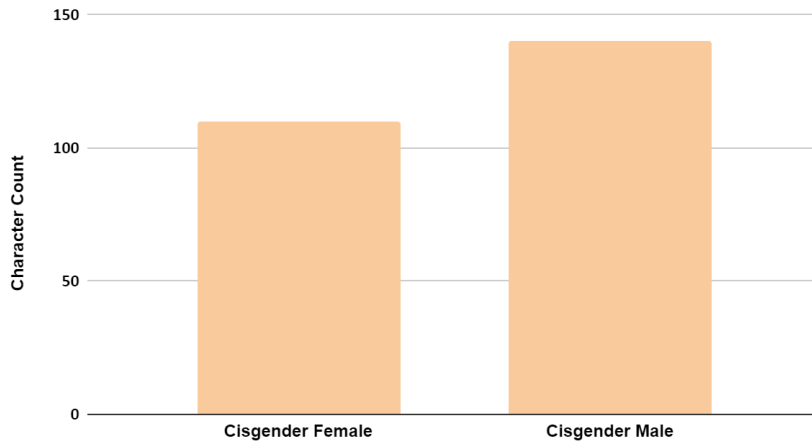
We know that women are both [more likely to have and/or die of chronic conditions](#), so why are women not overwhelming this category?

Why are trans people who have more mental and physical stress on their bodies not more plentiful in this category?

Why are the most authentically represented people in the world who have these types of disabilities less likely to have them in television portrayals?

Instead, we get this gender breakdown.

Chronic Disability Character Count by Gender Identity



It's embarrassing. Hollywood should be embarrassed by this.

To add insult to injury, 143 of the characters are Heterosexual.

In case you were wondering, the 1 Lesbian, and 1 Bisexual/Pansexual female barely contribute enough to give us any type of data that's helpful for LGBTQIA disabled representation.

We guess cisgender males should be grateful for their 12 gay characters?

Some more tidbits about chronic disabilities and sexuality.

Cisgender Female

- ★ Heterosexual (69)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (39)
- ★ Lesbian (1)
- ★ Bisexual/Pansexual (1)

Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (74)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (54)
- ★ Gay (12)

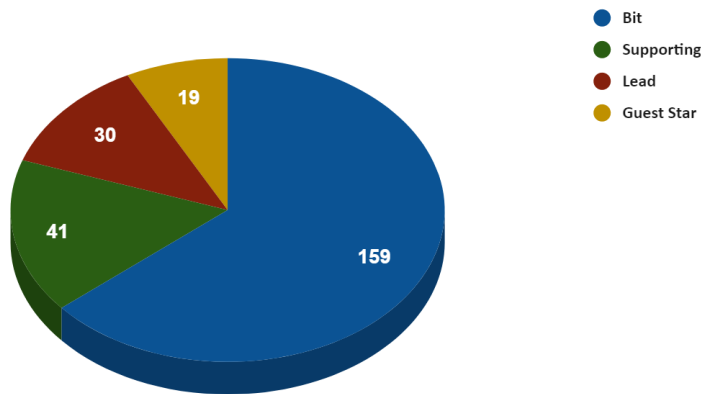
At least there's a female Bisexual/Pansexual.

Biphobia continues to contribute to the lack of Bisexual/Pansexual male characters on television, and by extension, disabled representation.

Parts other than Bit parts don't even stand a chance when it comes to chronic disability representation.

There are 159 Bit characters with chronic disabilities.

Chronic Disability by Part Type



Supporting roles only account for 41 characters by comparison. Lead characters are not that far behind with 30 disabled characters, and Guest Stars make up 19 roles.

There are 249 actors playing 250 characters with chronic disabilities.

This is actually a first for our study, where we have less actors than we have characters. This is due to one actor playing twins on one episode of the CBC/CW show, *Coroner*.

So, essentially most portrayals of chronic disability are one-offs or quick blips of representation. It can be hard to find authenticity within such roles.

It can take a lot to stand out in this field because most of the characters tend to be forgettable.

Obvious chronic disabilities rank the highest in our research – things like lung, heart, kidney, elder issues, and allergies round out the top 5 chronic disabilities.

This is significant because it's often a one-off mention or it's diagnosed/mentioned for comedic relief.

You can see this in characters like Oliver Otto (Daniel DiMaggio) or Franklin (Peyton Meyer) on *American Housewife*, or Nicole (Laura Bell Bundy) on *Call Me Kat*, who all have some type of food allergy that leads to comedic scenarios.

Another food allergy that plays as a one-off, but with a more interesting story comes from the AppleTV+ show *Severance*. Hellie is “severed” which means that she doesn't remember anything about her home life at work and vice versa. Sometimes at work they will give you a tidbit about your personal life to feel more connected. They tell Hellie that she is allergic to almonds.

Of course, you never see it and there is no way to know if they are even telling the truth.

One of our favorite villains, Zhilan (Yvonne Chapman) from *Kung Fu*, also has chronic disabilities.

Her main chronic issue is pain. She had health issues from her mother being poisoned while pregnant.

Despite her chronic pain, in the seasons watched for this study, she never shows it.

She's an expert martial artist and is on a quest for revenge that never includes her acknowledging her pain. Instead, she acts as if that pain is weakness, and it further fuels her quest for revenge.

While the disability component of Zhilan should be considered poor representation, she is still very enjoyable to watch. It's also sometimes easier to separate the disability from the character in cases like this, because you don't see the disability, as they don't tend to show it.

One of the more interesting child portrayals is Yazmin (Ariana Elavia) on *NCIS*.

Despite being a bit character, Yazmin is kidnapped with a bus full of other girls. Yazmin is eventually let go, because the kidnappers did not think they could fetch a good price for her, as she has epilepsy, and is disabled.

Despite Yazmin not being important in terms of the longevity of the show, it is nice to see that the writers chose to be honest about the actual perception of disability that many people still have, at least in part due to poor representation.

The only issue we see is that stories like these must have a counter narrative, to explain why such portrayals are inappropriate and sadly many shows like this don't have that narrative.

A compelling guest star character from *New Amsterdam* is Jeanie Bloom (Gina Gershon).

You primarily see Jeanie as an alcoholic. Her daughter attributes some of her addiction issues to her mother and upbringing, as a result. She is treated as a drug seeker at the hospital by her daughter and other doctors, until a doctor takes her seriously and determines that she has endometriosis, which causes her chronic pain.

It puts her addiction in a different light because if doctors would have listened, she might have been less likely to self-medicate in the only way that seemed to help her. We also questioned whether she should be counted in the multiple category, since it was the doctors who labeled her drug seeking – when she really needed pain medication.

As such we decided to keep her in the chronic category.

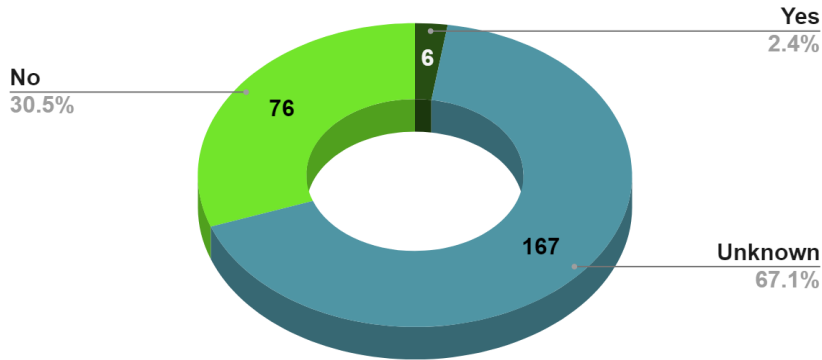
As doctors are notorious for not listening to their disabled, female, and marginalized patients, stories like this are an important part of our present, and need to be more common where chronic representation is concerned.

More honest and authentic representations could help these issues become less common in our society.

This is another category where it can be hard to figure out whether actors are really disabled or not.

This is why 167 characters we just don't know whether their actors are engaging in disabled mimicry or not.

Chronic Disability + Disabled Mimicry



We know for a fact that 76 of the actors are engaging in disabled mimicry, and just 6 of the actors are known to have the disabilities they are portraying.

Most instances of chronic disability on television are played by adults. In fact, there are 137 instances of chronic disability representation by adult characters.

Chronic is one of the top categories for all age ranges though, which is not typical for most categories.

There are 73 Elder characters, 24 Teenagers, and 15 children. This makes chronic disabilities the most diverse disabled representation by age range.

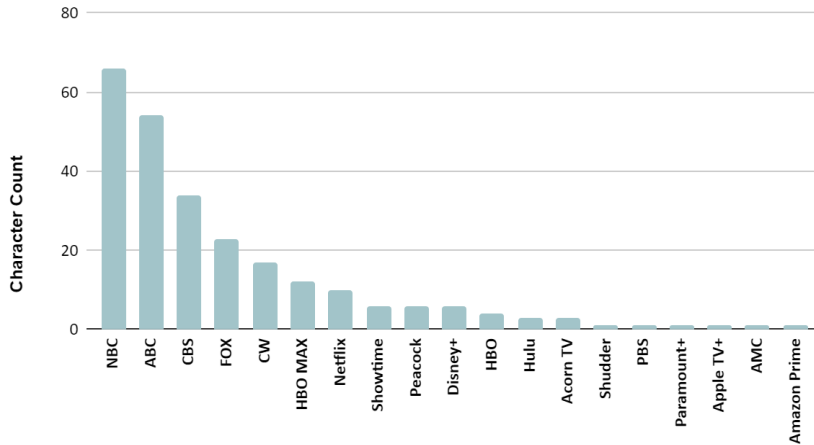
There are shows with chronic disabled characters airing on 6 local networks, 3 cable channels, and 9 streaming services.

No surprise that the breakdown by network is by local channels.

NBC is the top network no doubt thanks to *New Amsterdam* and *Chicago Med* again.

NBC features 66 disabled characters, with ABC coming in second with 54.

Chronic Disability by Network



CBS closes out the top three with 34 characters.

To check out a list of the Chronic Disabilities represented, [Click Here](#).

Chronic disabilities span a wide variety and spectrum of disabilities. This makes them one of the easiest groups of disabilities to portray. There are so many different types of disabilities that could be considered chronic, so the fact that portrayals are not better is extremely disheartening.

The interesting thing is that a lot more creators are talking about their chronic disabilities and as lived experience becomes reflected on screen, we believe that this genre will have a much better opportunity to be showcased authentically compared to other genres.

However, we believe that part of the issue is that even within disabled circles, those with chronic disabilities are not always welcome or considered disabled.

Just because a disability may not be as visibly present for others to see doesn't mean it can't greatly impact the disabled person's life. Many also argue that visibility of disability is subjective, and we agree with that.

As greater understanding of disability, and chronic disability specifically develops, our hope is that this category becomes a shining example of how disability should be represented correctly.

Unfortunately, when doctors don't even want to admit that chronic disabilities are disabilities, we still have got a ways to go.

Coma

We always feel weird about including this category, because invariably it's always going to be done by nondisabled actors, and doesn't necessarily reflect the experience of coma for those who are considered disabled.

When we started doing this category it was because we had a lot of characters that were long-term coma patients. Think of characters on shows like *The Flash*.

However, the more we watch the more we wonder if we should include this as a category. What does this category provide for disability representation?

Typically, someone is in a coma as a part of a plot device. So, we may consider dropping this category from future studies.

We are interested in people's thoughts on this so [feel free to email us](#) if you have guidance about this.

We never have a huge amount of characters that are in comas and we don't really compare it to the initial representation counts in terms of letting the category be in the bottom five, which it would be if we considered it.

This year there are 6 characters that are in comas.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
White	Cisgender Female	2
	Cisgender Male	4
White Total		6

It's interesting to note that we generally consider characters in comas to be, at the very least, bit characters even though technically they should fall under the purview of extras since most of them don't have any speaking lines.

However, as a coma is almost always a significant part of either the primary or secondary storyline on whatever show is featuring said characters, it just seems logical to consider them at least bit characters.

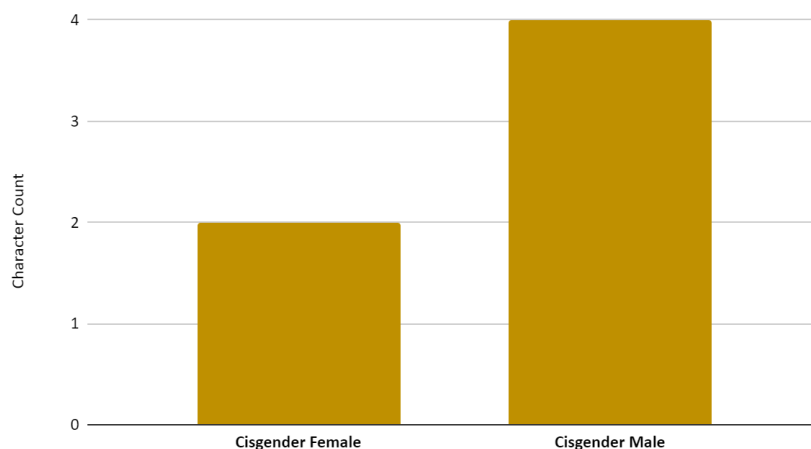
What role they are assigned depends on a few factors. Do they wake up from the coma and become a significant part of the story? They might be a lead or supporting character.

Do they just remain in the coma but are an active part of the story? More likely to list them as a bit of a character.

We have similar criteria for deciding roles for characters that do not speak verbally. If the character contributes significantly to the storyline without verbal communication we are not going to consider them an Extra just because they don't communicate verbally.

Trans people don't experience comas, if you are to believe television.

Coma Character Count by Gender Identity



Cisgender males outnumber cisgender females 4 to 2, when it comes to coma representation.

Breakdown by sexuality is not very diverse, either.

What this category is really good at is highlighting basically what happens with men versus women. For every two cisgender males there is a cisgender female.

Cisgender Female

- ★ Heterosexual (1)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (1)

Cisgender Males

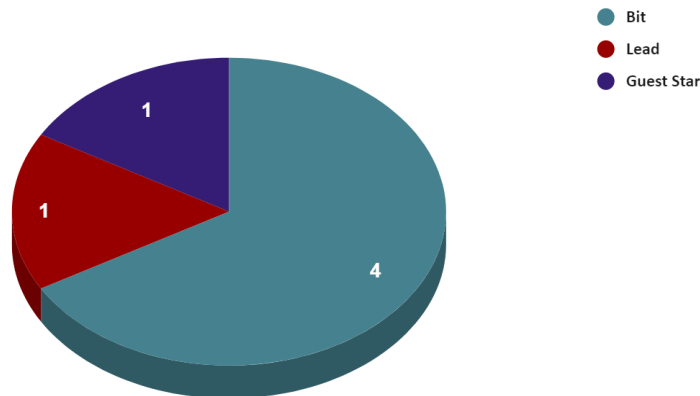
- ★ Heterosexual (2)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (2)

In many categories, males nearly double females and this category is small enough to really highlight that very well.

There are 6 actors playing 6 characters.

Despite being a significant part of most plot lines, coma patients are mostly bit characters. There are no supporting characters.

Coma by Part Type

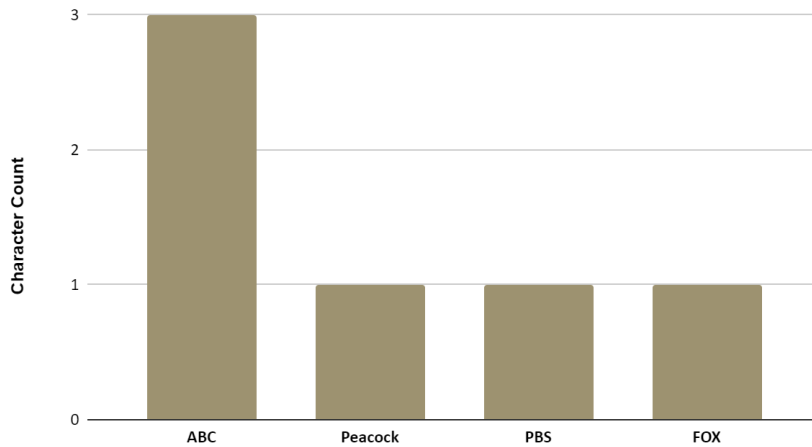


There are 4 Bit characters, 1 Lead character and 1 Guest Star.

Coma representation is found on three local networks and one streaming service.

The leading network is ABC with three characters followed by a tie between all other networks with one character..

Coma by Network



All 6 characters that are in comas are adult characters.

The category is always very small, and the representation doesn't really tell us much about disability or disabled representation on television.

So should we keep including characters in comas? We don't know the answer. Feel free to message us with your thoughts on this.

Deaf/HOH

Going into this study we were worried about Deaf/HOH representation. We knew that we lost a major show run by Deaf creators/show runners.

This Close, which ended right before we began our pandemic study, contributed the most characters in this category in our last study.

We were right to be worried. Everything we've been saying about disability representation is coming true – how one show or one representation cannot and should not represent an entire community because if you lose that representation that community has nothing.

Deaf/HOH representation took a huge hit this year at least as far as numbers go.

Deaf/HOH representation lost nearly half the numbers it had in our last study.

This study, there are 17 Deaf/HOH characters. That is down from 31.

I just can't emphasize how significant the loss of these characters is and what it says about how certain kinds of disabled communities and certain kinds of representations are treated by Hollywood.

The gender breakdown for this category is not great. It's gendered in a binary way because Hollywood doesn't think that trans people can be Deaf/HOH.

We know this is not true on a personal level because Dom is HOH, the child of a deaf parent from whom they inherited hearing loss. As a Trans HOH individual it's devastating to realize that you don't even matter in Hollywood – that your representation doesn't count. It doesn't seem viable so therefore you don't get represented.

Once again, cisgender male representation has the highest number.

There are 14 cisgender male characters that are Deaf/HOH, and only 3 cisgender females.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Black	Cisgender Female	1
	Cisgender Male	4
Black Total		5
IPOC	Cisgender Female	1
	Cisgender Male	2
IPOC Total		3
White	Cisgender Female	1
	Cisgender Male	8
White Total		9

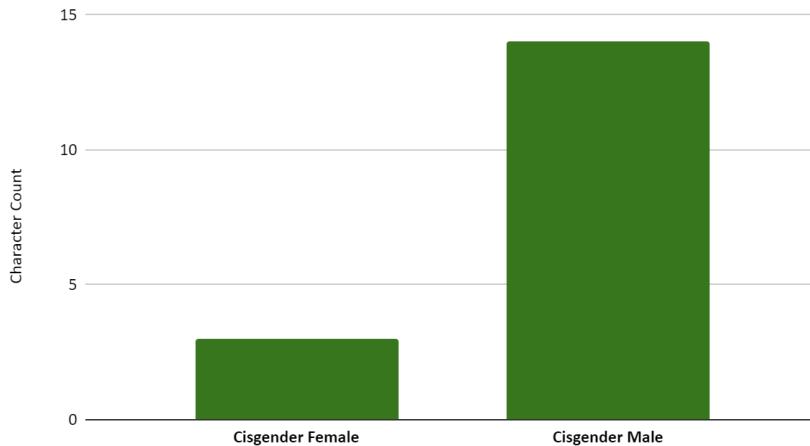
The fact that there is only 1 character per racial group for cisgender females is just ridiculous. One person cannot reflect an entire lived experience by a diverse community.

This is not at all reflective of what actual Deaf/HOH people are like. We cannot stress how imperative it is to add many more Deaf/HOH characters. It's the only solution to start making representation of this community better.

This also means that roles need to be diversified for Deaf/HOH characters.

Representation is not that great to begin with, so if it's skewed towards cisgender males it's going to create even more problems for everyone who's not a cisgender male, which is over half of the Deaf/HOH community.

Deaf/HoH Character Count by Gender Identity



It's 2023. There is no excuse for why Deaf/HOH actors are not getting more roles. We know that there are many talented actors and they have the potential to play a wide variety of characters – but this is not being reflected in Hollywood.

The thing is that as creators we have multiple pilots we have been working on that include major Deaf/HOH representation.

We know how to lead the way for representation but, like many disabled creators, having the funding to make this a reality is a huge barrier.

Back to the representation, there is no diversity when it comes to sexuality either, with the only Deaf/HOH representation being Unknown and Heterosexual excluding 1 Lesbian.

Cisgender Female

- ★ Unknown Sexuality (2)
- ★ Lesbian (1)

Cisgender Males

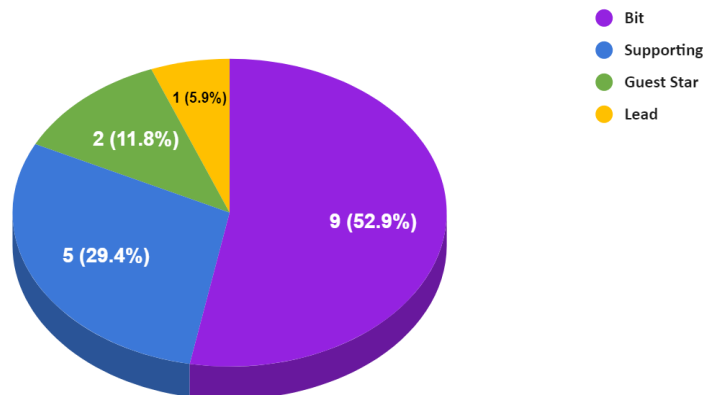
- ★ Heterosexual (6)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (8)

Back in film school, we remember talking about how one person can't represent an entire community..

That one lesbian can only represent one Deaf/HOH experience. It's unfair to expect them to represent the entire community of Deaf/HOH lesbians, but here we are.

Over half of the representation is Bit characters. There are 9 Bt characters.

Deaf/HoH by Part Type



There are 5 supporting characters, 2 Guest Stars, and only 1 Lead.

It's significant to note that this is the first category where there are the least amount of Lead characters but that's also very telling considering what else the representation has to say about how this community is allowed to be represented.

What is even more intriguing is that this is the first category where the majority of the characters are played by actually disabled people.

This is an economical thing – as it becomes more important to show authenticity, it's much cheaper to hire people that know how to communicate in ASL (most depictions almost always include ASL because it's a really easy way to show disability visibly to a nondisabled audience).

We also believe films like those in the current Marvel lineup, and shows like *New Amsterdam* and *The Walking Dead* contributed to this.

Regardless, this is also making it clear to audiences that Deaf/HOH performers are capable of playing Deaf/HOH roles, and that authentic representation is now becoming the expectation – this is what we want to see with the vast majority of disabled categories when it comes to disabled representation.

When it comes to Deaf/HOH representation, especially in a sparsely represented season, like this, one of two things tends to happen. Either a character offers a compelling story, or they don't.

We recognize that sounds like a simplified – this or that – but that's exactly how it is. A character is fully formed and has things that you feel in their portrayal, or they are an easy way to add diversity to your script without making that diverse individual a person.

NCIS: Los Angeles, wrapped a case around the idea that Deaf people are not allowed to serve in the military. The character, Sienna Marchione is played by Deaf actress, Raquel McPeck Rodriguez. Despite the character being a highly skilled engineer who wanted to be in the military, she was unable to enlist because she is Deaf.

This type of explanatory storytelling allows others around the character to discuss or learn about the issue the character faces. It's sometimes called a "teachable moment," but in this case, it included a dynamic character that offered more good than harm.

The best Deaf character of the study though comes from *New Amsterdam*. Dr. Elizabeth Wilder is beautifully portrayed by Sandra Mae Frank. She's an oncologist and ends up heading the New Amsterdam cancer unit.

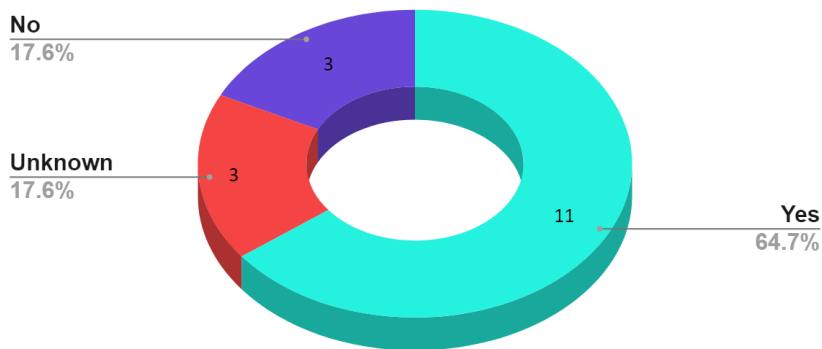
She travels with an interpreter, and they show her using adaptive equipment during surgery so she can communicate her needs to her nurses while operating.

Another, nice but subtle thing she does, is when she is talking to someone using ASL – her primary means of communication – she tells people to look at her, not her interpreter. She is a dynamic and sometimes complex character that is a wonderful addition to disability representation, especially in an often ignored community.

It will be sad to see her go when the study covers the final year of *New Amsterdam* next year.

There are 17 actors portraying 17 Deaf/HOH characters.

Deaf/HoH + Disabled Mimicry



Out of 17 characters, 11 are played by actual Deaf/HOH actors. A further 3 characters we just don't know if they are engaging in disabled mimicry or not.

We know for a fact that 3 characters are played by actors that we are certain are not Deaf/HOH. This is still unacceptable. We will not be happy until that number is zero.

Hopefully that time comes sooner rather than later.

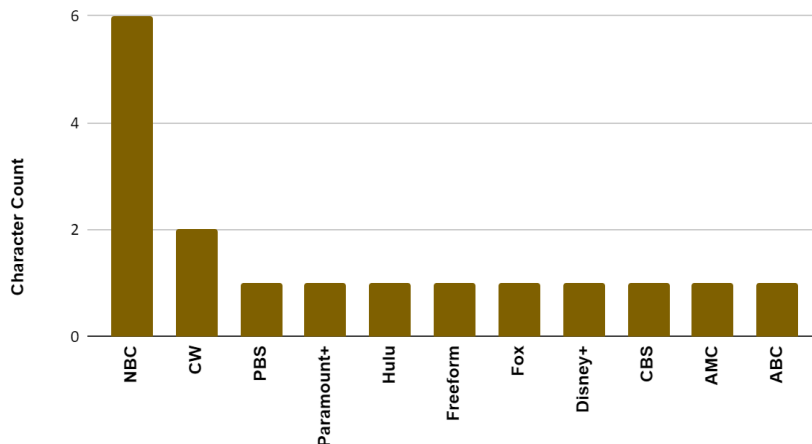
The vast majority of Deaf/HOH representation is portrayed by adults. There are 13 Adult characters, 2 Elders, 1 Teenager, and 1 Child.

We would like to see more Deaf/HOH teenagers and children, in particular.

The networks with the most representation are all local networks.

NBC is first with 6 characters followed by CW with 2 characters. All other networks have 1 Deaf/HOH character.

Deaf/HoH by Network



The breakdown for Deaf vs HOH is 16 to 1. With so few characters it's hard to say that this should be diversified more.

There definitely needs to be more diversity, but we definitely need more Deaf characters as well.

The one HOH character is a Black Lesbian named Kelly on *The Walking Dead*. Angel Theory plays Kelly who has found a home with other survivors of the zombie apocalypse.

Her story is interesting because they take the time to show her experiencing her hearing loss, which is degenerative and will continue to progress.

Kelly worries not about the idea of being Deaf, but of not being able to help her sister, who is Deaf. In turn her sister attempts to support her and show her that losing her hearing doesn't mean that she can't protect herself.

Deaf actors are starting to appear in major blockbusters and we believe that is helping with getting greater representation in all forms of media, but it's still happening too slowly right now. We must demand inclusion for Deaf/HOH characters if we want to see anything change for this community.

We knew that our research would highlight all of the things we have been saying, but nothing highlights what needs to be done to fix representation quite like this community in this study.

All disabled representation needs to be more diverse, but it also needs to include more of us in the industry – making media, creating media, and fixing media so that representation bolsters disabled communities like the Deaf/HOH one, not harms them.

Dwarfism

This is another category that we find depressing not because of the community but because of how little access this community gets in terms of authentic representation.

Every study we've done the dwarfism community is near the bottom of not only good representation, but any representation.

We could delve into the long and storied relationship Little People have had with Hollywood, but that's a bit complex and can only explain part of where representation has gone.

In truth, Hollywood knows that dwarf performers exist, that they are often highly capable performers, and that inclusion and authenticity are important to this community.

Of course, knowing that and doing right by the community have long been a struggle for the industry.

There are 11 characters with Dwarfism in this study. That's just one more character than last study when we only covered one year of television.

Again, how can you represent an entire community with so few characters?

Meanwhile, as the table shows below, the only representation available to Little People is white representation and IPOC. Black dwarfs don't get to be represented according to Hollywood.

Race	Gender identity	Disabled Characters
IPOC	Cisgender Female	1
	Cisgender Male	2
IPOC Total		3
White	Cisgender Female	4
	Cisgender Male	4
White Total		8

There are 6 cisgender male characters and 5 cisgender female characters. Most of the female representation is white representation.

There's not much diversity even when it comes to sexuality.

Like many of the other smaller categories of disabled representation these disabled characters only get to be heterosexual or they don't get to have a sexuality at all.

We know why disabled characters often don't get to have sexualities.

The major reason as we have outlined in every single study we've done is that they are bit characters and really not there long enough to establish what kind of sexuality or history they have.

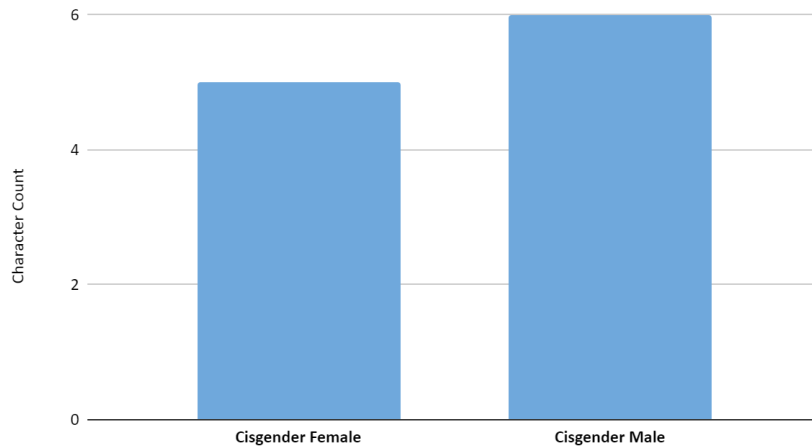
We also know that part of this answer is also discrimination. This is especially true for disabilities that you don't have to mention to know someone has – so the disabilities you can tell are disabilities just by looking at people.

Dwarfism is one of those disabilities, where the assumption is often that these characters should be non-sexual – not at all realistic with the real world.

There is this idea that disabled people cannot be sexual and that extends to not giving disabled characters love interests, sexual interests, or dating interests.

Desexualizing dwarf characters has been a part of Hollywood since the beginning of the industry.

Dwarfism Character Count by Gender Identity



Thus, we can't help but believe that some of the reason why so many characters have unknown sexuality is intentional.

Cisgender Female

- ★ Heterosexual (3)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (2)

Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (2)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (4)

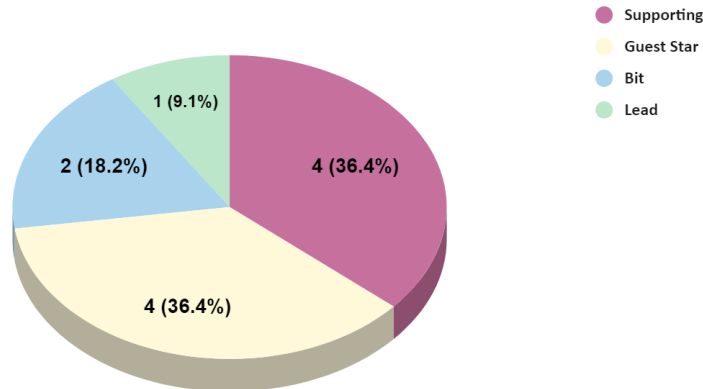
Dwarf representation is a bit more divided when it comes to parts, than other disabled communities.

In fact, this is the first category we've written about that doesn't have the majority of the characters as Bit characters.

The majority of dwarf characters are actually Supporting or Guest Stars, both of which have 4 characters represented.

There are only 2 Bit characters and again there is 1 Lead character.

Dwarfism by Part Type



We are starting to wonder if this is going to be a thing with all of the smaller categories, where even less Lead representation is going to be present than in other categories.

It's great that when Little People are represented they are being represented as at least supporting characters in most instances, but there are still so few instances that can we really count this as a victory.

All of our other studies were more about gathering data to figure out what exactly is going on in terms of representation, at all. A few years into this work, we are weary of just what we have discovered and this is one of the things that we are weary about.

Dwarf representation has been a part of Hollywood since the silent film era. Little People have been entertainers since before we've had written records to discuss this. It seems counterintuitive to keep a community Hollywood knows is capable of acting and portraying characters out – but that's what they do with dwarf representation.

This community is often the butt of jokes. This community is often seen as fantastical, othered, made into creatures.

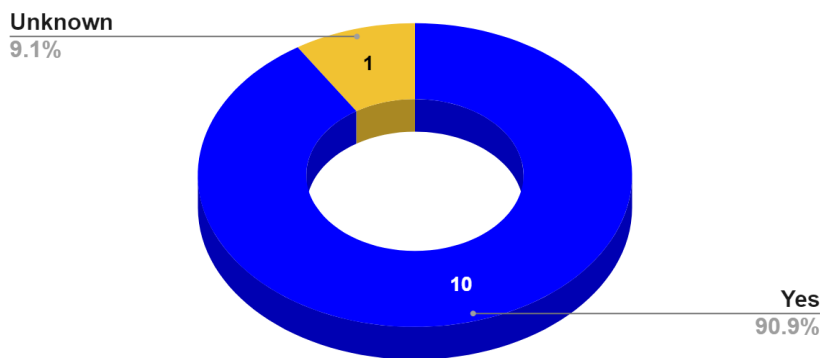
Why has this continued to go on when Little People have made it clear they don't like this kind of representation?

It often feels like Little People who are actors are forced into whatever roles they can get – and if actors choose not to take harmful roles, they end up not getting enough access to parts or auditions.

There is a very clear separation between how actors in the top five represented disabled communities are treated versus the bottom five represented disabled communities. That much has emerged from these studies, and we will continue to point these things out as we write and discuss dwarf representation, in particular.

As for when it comes to disabled mimicry, this is another category where it's not seen as acceptable to cast anybody but dwarf actors.

Dwarfism + Disabled Mimicry



This is why we're not surprised that the vast majority of actors are dwarfs themselves.

Only one actor is unknown, and that's just because they are such a small part of the story and representation that we could not figure out if they are a Little Person or not.

So, there are 10 actors that are actually Little People that are featured in this study.

There are 11 actors portraying 11 disabled characters.

To our knowledge, no one is attempting disabled mimicry when it comes to dwarfism. This is exactly what we like to see from the vast majority of our categories.

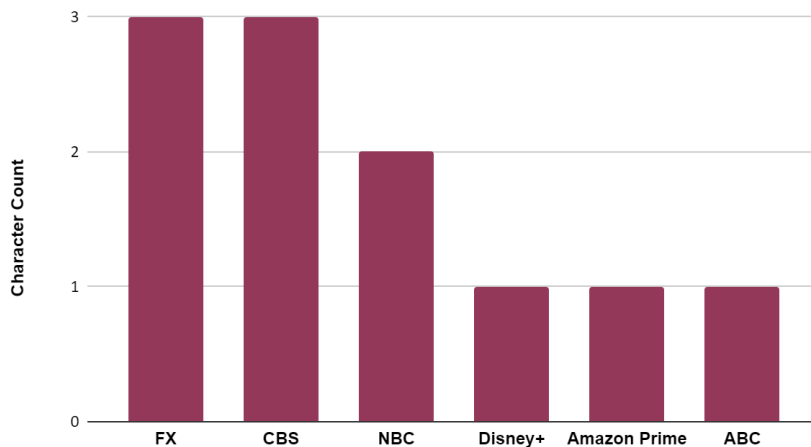
Almost every character in this category is an adult. There is only 1 Elder. There are no dwarf children or teenagers represented at all. We consider this to be a huge miss by Hollywood.

Breakdown by networks has the most characters for the first time not on a local network.

Well, technically a local network ties, but to have any other type of network, let alone a cable network, feature the most disabled representation is unprecedented for this study.

FX and CBS tie with 3 characters and NBC has 2. All other networks have 1 character.

Dwarfism by Network



Dwarf representation airs on 3 local networks, 1 cable channel, and 2 streaming services.

There's really not much that can be said about this community and how it's represented that we haven't already said. Hollywood has failed Little People when it comes to representation. There's just no other way to put it.

The representation that is there is not diverse, it's not very inclusive, it's not very nuanced. Dwarf characters are not around that much and when they are it's just occasional and does little to make the community better.

If Hollywood wants to fix the continued harmful representation of the dwarf community, they need to start hiring more actors not just for the disabled roles but for any roles.

Hollywood needs to hire Little People as actors. Hollywood needs to let more Little People audition. They need to hire more dwarfs as crew and in writing rooms, as well.

Dwarf representation could be so much better but Hollywood chooses to make it this bad. This is a choice.

If there were more Dwarf characters on TV, it wouldn't be so problematic if you had bit or background characters.

For example, on the shows *Loki* and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, there are characters that are Little People that work somewhere that the main characters frequent.

For *Loki*, Scanner Clerk (they really could have given him a name) works for the time bureau and scans people when they are brought into the building. He's played by Aaron Beelner.

On *Mrs. Maisel*, Russell (played by Matthew Jeffers) is sort of a jack-of-all-trades including handling the schedules and general needs of a strip club. These characters would be fine additions if the majority of the representation didn't look and feel like these background characters.

As so many characters are background characters, even if a character has a supporting role, it really stands out when they allow a character to really be integrated into the show and have a real personality.

In *New Amsterdam*, one of the ER doctors, Mark Walsh (again played by Matthew Jeffers) is a dwarf. He's overworked and presumably underpaid. He lives on coffee and he's always running on empty. He's also fully integrated into the staff and treated like he's an invaluable part of the team, for the most part.

Walsh was originally a bit character in the beginning of the series, but got more screen time throughout seasons. Unfortunately, next year will be the last season for *New Amsterdam*, which means that representation across the board is going to take a hit.

What should be taken away from this category most importantly is that despite having almost the entire category played by actual disabled characters there are still problems Hollywood needs to address when it comes to dwarfism.

We look forward to sharing our results of our 2022-2023 study, which we are working on concurrently with this study. We hope to show how portrayals of disability also greatly impact disability representation and disabled people.

That study should shed further light on this particularly for the dwarfism category.

The other issue is needing more dwarfism representation, in general. The industry is already doing mostly the right thing with casting this community, but those two things would vastly improve representation

Intellectual Disability

If any category's representation makes us sad it's the Intellectual Disability category.

Intellectual disability can cover a wide variety of disabilities – and is sometimes used interchangeably with developmental disability.

A lot of disabilities that are in other categories such as autism and ADHD are often considered developmental disabilities. but we have them classified on their own as a part of psychosocial disabilities – this is the hard part of the study – determining where communities go.

Our most important priority is establishing how Hollywood categorizes disability – through casting and writing. We try to categorize based on that more than anything.

Typically, people think of intellectual disabilities as Down Syndrome. Hollywood reflects that almost always showing Intellectual Disability as Down Syndrome.

According to [The Arc](#),¹ a developmental or intellectual disability is one that can cause people to struggle with problem-solving, learning, reasoning, and independent living.

Before we get into the assessment we want to express how important it is for Hollywood to show characters with a variety of intellectual and or developmental disabilities. But even with Down Syndrome, representation is sparse and limited.

This is the first year where there are 4 characters with Intellectual Disabilities. That is 2 less characters than last year.

These are not the same characters we are counting every single year.

¹ "What is an intellectual or developmental disability?," "The Arc," February 7, 2023, <https://thearcoflarimercounty.org/about-us/what-is-an-intellectual-or-developmental-disability/>.

Not all the characters have Down Syndrome, although two characters do. The other two are NOS, or not otherwise specified.

One is just listed as random intellectual disability, and one as random developmental disability. But the intention with this category is pretty obvious by this point into the game of our studies.

There are 4 cisgender males. There are zero females with intellectual disabilities represented in this study.

There are a few female characters that have multiple disabilities that include intellectual disabilities, but those are in our multiple section, and they are only a few characters so their inclusion would be negligible.

As you can see, 75% of the representation is by cisgender white male characters.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
IPOC	Cisgender Male	1
IPOC Total		1
White	Cisgender Male	3
White Total		3

Once again, Black disabled folks get zero representation in this category.

White disabled people especially cannot represent nonwhite disabled experiences.

There are entire communities of people with disabilities who have intellectual disabilities who never get to see themselves represented and they are certainly not represented in this study either.

If you are disturbed by any community's representation in this study it should be the Intellectual Disability community.

It is sad to say that none of the characters really stood out in this study in any sort of impactful way – good or bad. That's because there just aren't enough characters out there.

The one interesting character we found actually has multiple disabilities – Down Syndrome and she’s also Autistic. Sophie Wallace on *Professor T* is played by Kathleen Humberstone.

Unfortunately, as a procedural type of investigation drama, Sophie is only on one episode. In the episode Sophie’s mother is planning to institutionalize her but ends up being murdered.

Sophie tells people that she knows who murdered her mom, but no one believes her because she’s disabled. She ends up insisting on speaking with Professor T, who she sees as a kindred spirit because he’s neurodivergent, as well.

He learns that she’s correct and if people would have just listened to her, they could have cracked the case. The only problem with stories like this is that there aren’t enough of them.

Note: The character of Sophie is counted in the Multiple section because she has more than one disability. We chose to talk about her here, because as someone with Down Syndrome, she offered the best option to talk about. That said, her representation is counted as someone who is multiply disabled not as a character with just an Intellectual Disability

Having such a small category like this just emphasizes the disparities.

We were going to include a graph that showed the gender breakdown just to show how ridiculous it looks but we thought you could use your imagination. **Spoilers:** it only includes cisgender males!

Also, not surprising, the majority of disabled characters have unknown sexuality. We expect this from the Intellectual Disability community. There is a huge amount of infantilizing that happens in this community anyway – and that’s definitely extended to television representation.

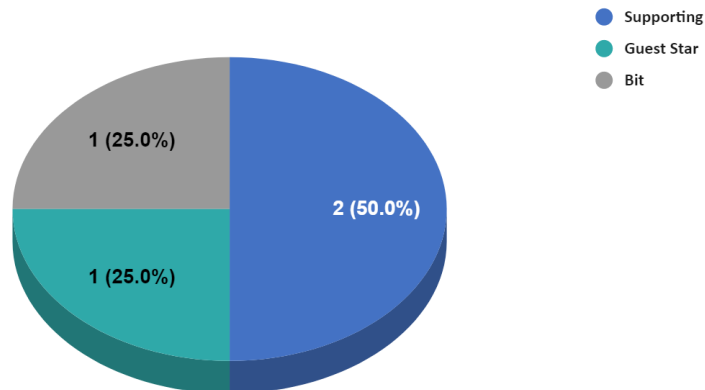
Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (1)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (3)

Intellectually disabled people don't get to be represented as trans, as queer or bisexual, or even as heterosexual very often.

This year they apparently also don't get to be represented as female.

Intellectual Disability by Part Type



Half of the depictions, or 2 characters are Bit characters. That means that 1 character is a supporting character, and 1 character is a Guest Star.

Intellectually disabled characters don't get to be Lead characters. If you're wondering why the answer is discrimination.

Another disturbing aspect of this community's representation is the fact that very rarely are elders with intellectual disabilities ever represented.

What does not seeing elders tell a disabled community? That they don't get old. That they don't have a future.

The majority of representation are adults with 3 characters. The other character is a child.

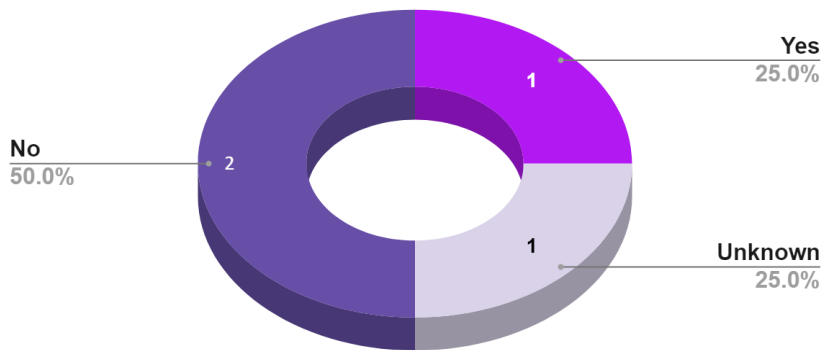
We desperately need to see more children and babies with disabilities, especially intellectual disabilities as that can help with integration and acceptance of people with intellectual disabilities in the real world.

There are 4 actors portraying 4 characters with Intellectual Disabilities.

It's disappointing to note that two of the characters are played by nondisabled actors.

It's disabled mimicry for half of the representation.

Intellectual Disability + Disabled Mimicry



The other half is split between 1 actually disabled actor, and 1 who could be disabled, but we just don't know.

One of our criticisms is that actors with intellectual disabilities/developmental disabilities rarely get to portray themselves.

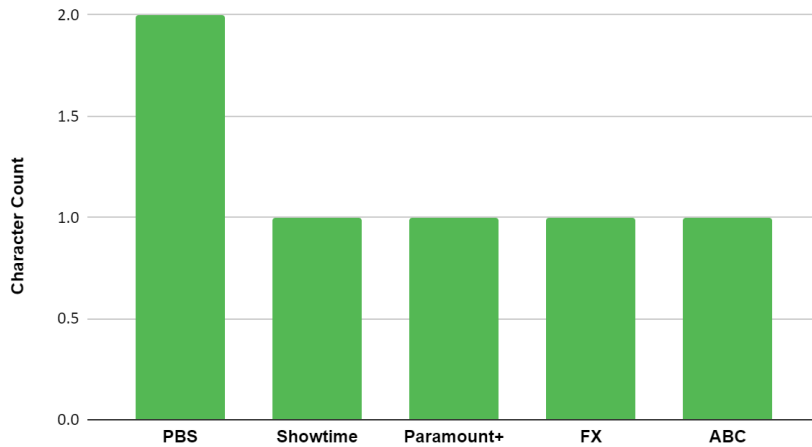
This is something that Hollywood needs to work towards and it has been a problem with the industry since the beginning of film and television.

The network breakdown for this category is kind of sad. Not even the local channels are providing representation of intellectual disability. The top network certainly had zero characters.

Only two Local networks offer such representation. One of them is PBS, which offers the most representation.

We know that British television has been much better about showing people specifically with Down Syndrome and they allow actors that are intellectually disabled to play such roles.

Intellectual Disability by Network



This is especially true for the PBS show *Call the Midwife*, which we've featured in multiple studies across the years.

Representation is also available on 2 Cable networks and 3 streaming services.

If your heart's not broken when reading about this category it should be. Hollywood is crueler to no other category than the representation of intellectual disability.

It's just another way our society can devalue those with intellectual disabilities.

We're going to make this clear. As long as Hollywood refuses to include characters that are intellectually disabled life for intellectually disabled people is not going to get better.

Representation impacts treatment. Representation impacts everything.

We urge authenticity in casting but we also believe that intellectually disabled people should be involved in all aspects of filmmaking.

We know that there are many programs that allow intellectually disabled people to be on crews, and there's no issues with this so why is Hollywood continuing to keep intellectually disabled people out everywhere?

Learning Disability

Learning disabilities are often overlooked by Hollywood. They are not super visible, so a lot of creators may not even know how to depict learning disabilities or even want to consider depicting them.

We think it's really interesting that In previous studies we featured Kenny Johnson's daughter, Scarlett, as a character he helped create.

Kenny plays regular Lead ensemble character Dominique Luca on *SWAT*. He has dyslexia and while his character has multiple disabilities including dyslexia, his daughter who also has dyslexia comes on the show nearly every year. Scarlett plays a character Luca is tutoring and teaching accessibility techniques to help her get through school.

Kenny Johnson did not see representation for himself or his daughter. He used his privilege on a show he is on to make that representation happen. Sadly I think that this community is going to need more people like Kenny Johnson if we want to see more learning disability representation.

We record 11 characters with learning disabilities.

Interesting to note, and keeping in mind that a lot of this representation was probably created as a result of other people with learning disabilities wanting representation, is the fact that white people are the minority of representation.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Black	Cisgender Male	4
Black Total		4
IPOC	Cisgender Female	2
	Cisgender Male	1
IPOC Total		3
White	Cisgender Female	1
	Cisgender Male	3
White Total		4

This is the first category where this has happened in this study. Up until this point in the paper cisgender white males have dominated every single category.

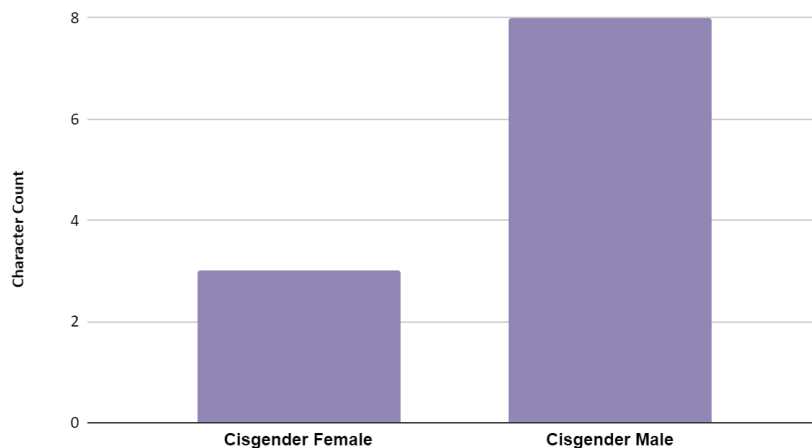
There are only 4 white characters, 3 cisgender males, and 1 cisgender female. That means that 7 characters are not white. The majority of characters for a single racial breakdown are tied between Black and white. There are 4 Black and white characters with learning disabilities.

This is followed by IPOC characters of which there are 3.

Males do make up most of the representation still though with 8 characters being male and 3 being female.

Trans people apparently don't have learning disabilities. Thanks Hollywood!

Learning Disability CharacterCount by Gender Identity



Representation is relegated to mostly Heterosexuals with 7 characters being Heterosexual and 3 having Unknown Sexuality.

The LGBTQIA community is completely removed from representation here.

Cisgender Female

- ★ Heterosexual (3)

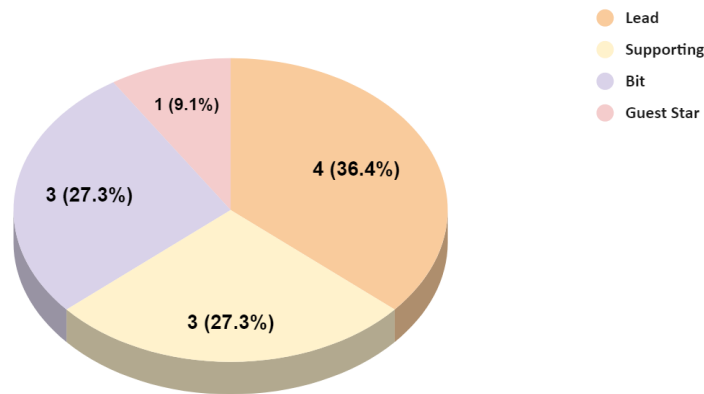
Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (4)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (4)

We are a little surprised to discover that the vast majority of characters that have learning disabilities are actually Lead characters.

This category is not at all like any of the other categories in this study.

Learning Disability by Part Type



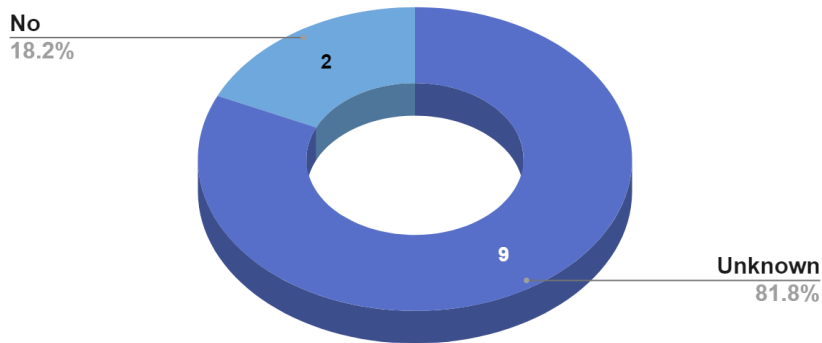
There are 4 Lead characters with learning disabilities. This is followed by 3 Bit characters, 3 Supporting and 1 Guest Star.

If this category had more characters in general we might actually be impressed by this representation.

Disabled mimicry seems to be unknown or all the rage with this category. This year, we don't have any representation by people that actually have learning disabilities that we know of. Previous studies we definitely did.

For the vast majority, we just don't know if they are disabled or not. Only two characters we are certain don't have a disability.

Learning Disability + Disabled Mimicry



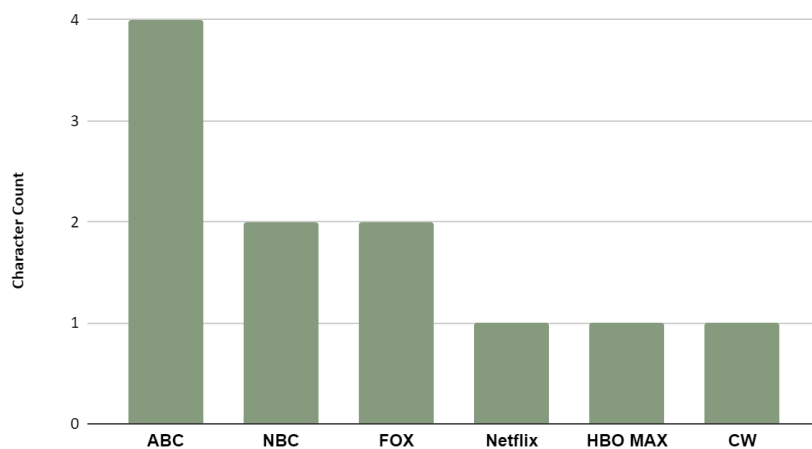
The only characters with learning disabilities are Adults (8) and Teenagers (3).

Sometimes children will have learning disabilities as we've definitely recorded this in previous studies, but you never see Elders with learning disabilities.

As for the network breakdown, learning disabilities appear in characters on five different networks.

There are 11 actors portraying 11 disabled characters.

Learning Disability by Network



Representation appears on 4 local networks and 2 streaming services.

The top three networks are: ABC with 4 characters and NBC and FOX tied with two characters in second place.

CW and Netflix tied for third with one character each.

Here is a breakdown of what representation looks like by disability.

Unspecified/NOS	8
Dyslexia	2
Speech	1

Learning disabilities don't really get a lot of representation in general and there are a wide variety of disabilities although dyslexia seems to be most commonly mentioned if anything is mentioned at all.

While we wish there was more representation, we see representation evolving as a result of people with learning disabilities themselves.

As more people who have learning disabilities get involved in creating media we believe that this category will expand organically. We just hope more creators will want to tell their stories.

Multiple Disabilities

The most important thing to realize about the multiple disabilities category is that all of the categories represented are solitary categories we already have been speaking about in this paper.

The truth about disability is that the older you get the more disabilities you get, and often one disability is accompanied by other disabilities. Comorbidity is common in a lot of different disabilities.

Stress can also lead to further disabilities – common disabilities in those that are already disabled can add on as a result of stress including both psychosocial disabilities and chronic disabilities.

It's not uncommon for disabled people to get depression, anxiety or various other mental illnesses as a result of the mistreatment they are already facing. So we welcome depictions of multiple disabilities because they are realistic to the world.

Watching the impact of multiple disabilities on TV can be an intriguing process because usually it results in either one disability taking center stage and the others being listed for effect or you end up with someone so disabled and so affected by every disability that they have that they cease being a person and instead becoming a walking disability.

One of the more tragic parts of representation in this study, although there were a few, came from *FBI: Most Wanted* season 3. Romeo Brown plays NBA star Sonny Langer.

Langer self-diagnoses himself with Post-Concussion Syndrome and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). He has all of the symptoms including aggression, brain fog, and a host of other issues.

He is led to believe that there is a holistic treatment that would allow him to deal with the issues created by these disabilities, but after becoming violent he takes his own life. His last words are to check for CTE during the autopsy because this is one disability that can only be diagnosed after death.

It's not uncommon for disabled people to be taken advantage of, but it's seen a little less when that person is deemed to be an important and athletic figure. So, this served as a nice change of pace and perhaps offered some potential warning as to what these sports-related disabilities can do to people.

On the unfortunately now canceled, *Gentleman Jack*, Aunt Anne Lister is an excellent form of representation of someone that has multiple disabilities.

Lister is played beautifully by Gemma Jones.

One of the nicest things about Aunt Anne is that no one tells you about her disabilities in the way that other shows might. You see that she has ulcers and that it's a chronic issue

for her. She has people that treat them (and her) with dignity and she has days when she can't get out of bed.

Other times, she has basic elder issues, like someone needs to read to her because her sight "isn't what it once was." Her disabilities are woven into her story, allowing them to take a backseat to her personhood.

While there are numerous characters that stand out for many reasons, the last one we're going to talk about in this section is a bit character that comes from *Station 19*.

Errol appeared in one episode and was played by Cullen Douglas. He starts out the episode as a diabetic, but quickly becomes an amputee. He's checked out and mentions leg pain.

When he takes off his shoe, his toes fall off. Perhaps the most interesting thing about Errol is that when this happens, he is still hesitant to go to the hospital because he doesn't have insurance.

Most people that are or have been uninsured can likely relate to the fear of what might feel like unnecessary hospital bills.

Multiple is almost always one of the most plentiful categories.

It's typically a top-five category for disability representation.

This study is no different. This study multiple disabilities are the fourth highest disability category for representation on television.

We found 119 characters with multiple disabilities.

Cisgender males once again make up more representation than cisgender females.

There's something interesting to note about the racial breakdown.

Look at the Black and IPOC representation.

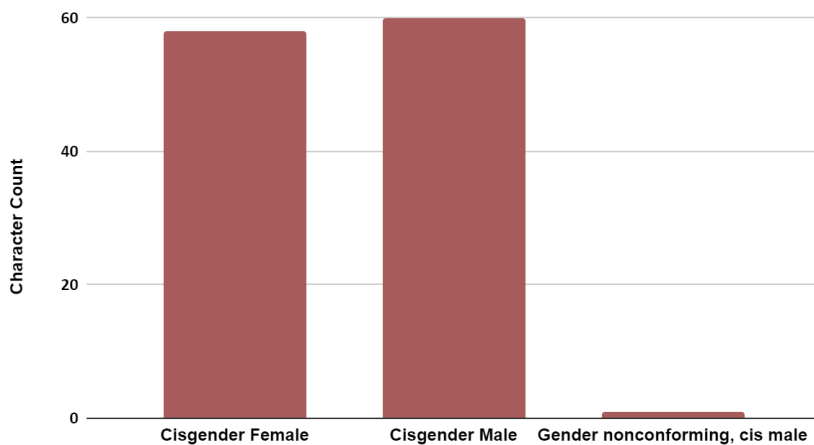
Notice how the numbers are identical for females and males? This is reflective of what we discovered last year with race and disability representation. The representation mirrors each other for males and females in racially marginalized communities.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Black	Cisgender Female	10
	Cisgender Male	10
Black Total		20
IPOC	Cisgender Female	8
	Cisgender Male	8
IPOC Total		16
White	Cisgender Female	40
	Cisgender Male	42
	GNC Cisgender Male	1
White Total		83

Cisgender males once again make up more representation than cisgender females.

There are 61 cisgender males including one who is gender nonconforming and 58 cisgender females.

Multiple Disability Character Count by Gender Identity



Trans and non-binary people are not allowed to have multiple disabilities even though we know that's not true to reality.

When it comes to sexuality, representation is a little more diverse with 8 queer characters, 2 bisexuals/pansexuals and 1 asexual.

Cisgender Females

- ★ Heterosexual (38)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (12)
- ★ Lesbian (4)
- ★ Bisexual/Pansexual (3)
- ★ Asexual (1)

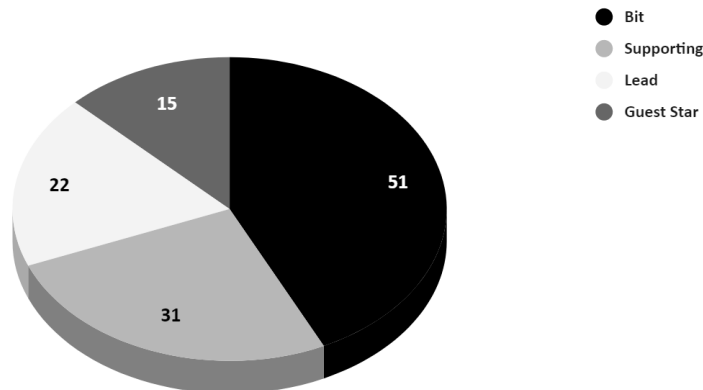
Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (38)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (18)
- ★ Gay (4)
- ★ GNC (1)

We are back to the majority of characters being Bit characters, There are 51 of them total.

Supporting characters come in second with 31 characters.

Multiple Disability by Part Type



Lead characters feature 22 characters, and 15 for Guest stars.

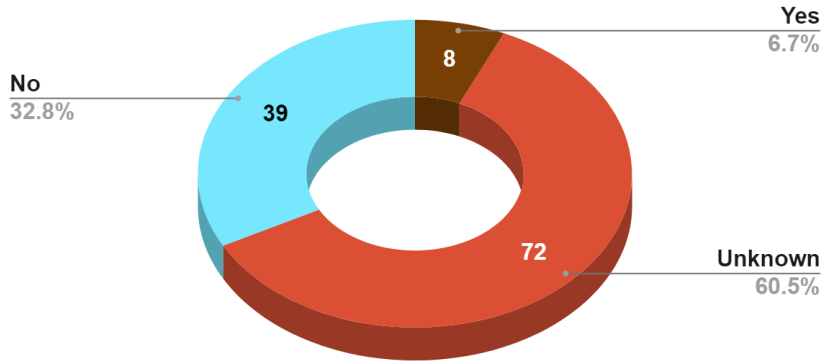
The majority of characters that have multiple disabilities are adults. There are 76 adults.

This is followed by 32 Elders, 8 Teenagers, and 3 children.

There are 119 actors playing 119 characters.

Like most disability communities, we don't know if 72 characters are played by disabled people or not.

Multiple Disability + Disabled Mimicry

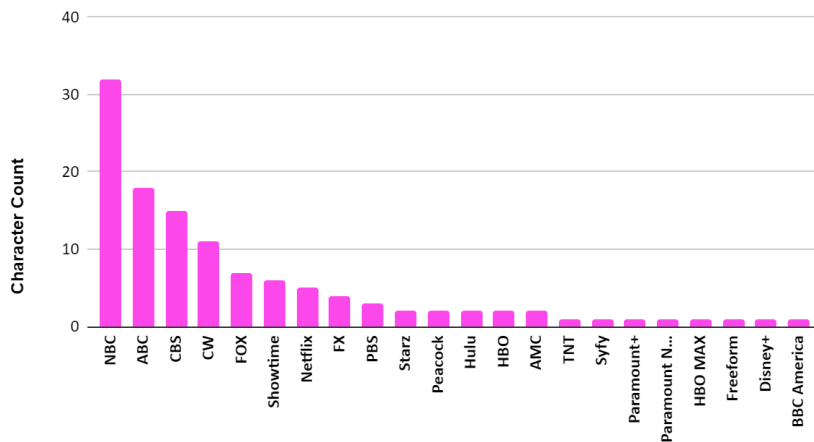


We only know 8 characters are not engaging in disabled mimicry.

The rest, 39 characters, we know for a fact are not disabled, or at least not the disability they are portraying.

Characters with multiple disabilities appeared on 22 different networks.

Multiple Disability by Network



This includes all 6 of the local channels we watch, 10 cable channels, and 6 streaming services.

The top three networks include NBC (32), ABC (18), and CBS (15).

Representation of multiple disabilities should be much more diverse.

This category should have better representation in general. The vast majority of people that have disabilities are multiply disabled. That's the story for both of us who are doing this study and that's the story for most of the disabled people we know.

It would be revolutionary to see this category filled with more actually disabled people, who live lives with multiple disabilities.

Neurodivergent

The neurodivergent category is always fun to figure out how to break down. It feels like every year we switch it up a little bit and this year is no different.

We even switch around the overall label. Last year it was mental health and this year it is Neurodivergent.

We have broken the category into groups like last year although we've mixed up what info we are giving per group.

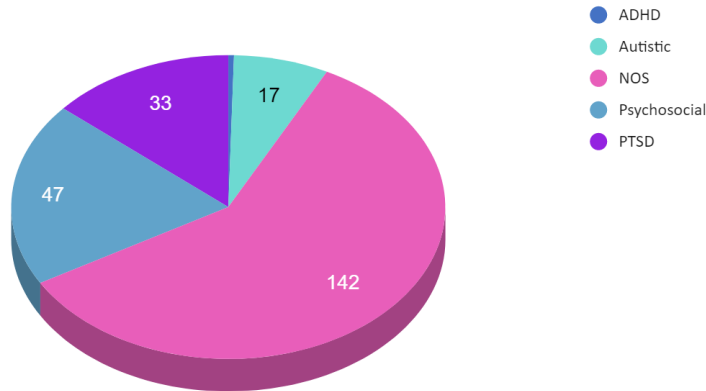
The groups are Neurodivergent – Mental Health (we are using psychosocial interchangeably with mental health this year), Neurodivergent – Autistic/ADHD, and Neurodivergent – NOS.

We decided to combine ADHD with Autistic because there's not enough representation of characters with ADHD to make another subcategory.

There are 240 characters that are Neurodivergent in some way.

The breakdown accounts for 142 NOS, 47 Psychosocial, 33 PTSD, and 17 Autistic/ADHD.

Neurodivergent Breakdown

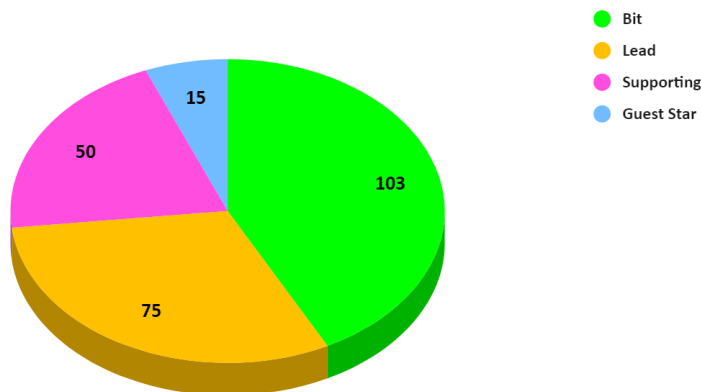


Almost half of the representation are Bit characters. There are 103 characters that are bit parts.

This is followed by 75 lead characters, which is one of the biggest categories for Lead disability representation.

There are 50 supporting characters who are neurodivergent, and 15 characters are Guest Stars.

Neurodivergent by Part Type



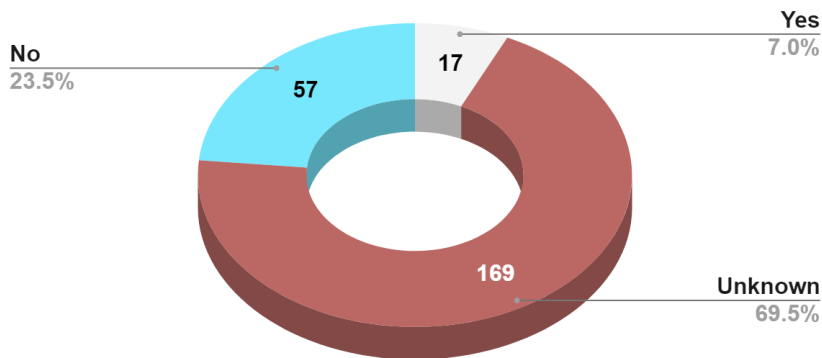
Most of the characters that are neurodivergent are adults. There are 179 adults.

Teenagers make up 33 characters. There are 18 Elder characters, and 13 children.

Like most categories in this study, we don't know whether most of the actors that portray characters that have neurodiverse roles are actually disabled or not.

Of course, when we do know, they are more likely to not be disabled which is disheartening.

Neurodivergent + Disabled Mimicry



There are 243 actors playing 240 disabled characters.

We don't know if 169 characters are disabled or not.

What we do know is that 57 characters are not disabled.

Only 17 of the actors are for sure Disabled.

Especially for a category like this, that number should be higher.

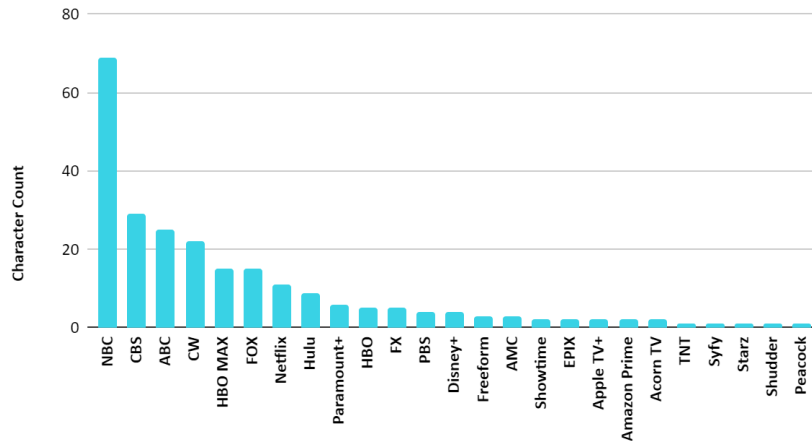
There's no reason that actors with psychosocial disabilities should not be allowed to act in Hollywood.

We know a lot of actors in this category are not disclosing and that's because of stigma and fear of losing roles/auditions.

We considered doing a network breakdown for each individual subcategory but thought it was best to just do it for the overall categories.

Neurologically diverse characters are represented across 6 local networks, 8 cable channels, and 11 streaming services.

Neurodivergent by Network



The top networks for representation are definitely local channels, and we're going to blame that on representation through medical dramas. We have no doubt that medical dramas provided much of the representation for this category.

NBC has the highest number with 69 characters.

Our assumption is that *New Amsterdam* and *Chicago Med* contributed huge amounts.

We have been impressed with *New Amsterdam* in particular.

Not even close is CBS with 29 characters. That's the second highest network for character representation.

What a huge difference between the first two categories.

Rounding out the top three is ABC with 25. The fact that there is that big of a disparity between NBC and all other networks is shocking.

It should be mentioned that the NOS subcategory had the most representation on NBC with 54 characters specifically from that network.

Actors have said that coming out as disabled can be a career killer in Hollywood.

That is why we worry about lack of representation as well. So many disabled people are afraid to speak up and be open about their needs as disabled people on sets and throughout Hollywood.

Here's how representation is specifically broken down.

NOS	142
PTSD	33
Autistic	17
Anxiety	12
Depression	9
Bulimia	3
Social Anxiety	2
Schizophrenia	2
OCD	2
DID (Dissociative Identity Disorder)	2
Agoraphobia	2
Bipolar	2
Selective Mutism	2
Trauma	1
Psychopathy (Callous Unemotion)	1
Postpartum Depression	1
Panic Attacks	1
Narcissistic Personality Disorder	1
Multiple	1
Borderline Personality Disorder	1
Werewolf PTSD	1
Anger	1
ADHD	1

In the following subcategories we break down neurodiverse representation even further.

– *Mental Health*

This subcategory is specifically for mental health representation that includes a specific diagnosis. This means things like depression, schizophrenia, anxiety, and bipolar disorder.

We use the terms mental health and psychosocial interchangeably to represent this category throughout this section.

When we pick character examples for these studies, there are certain categories that have a seemingly never-ending number of examples, usually because terrible representation is rampant. Sadly, this is one of those categories.

As Ashtyn has been watching nearly every medical drama on local TV for these studies, *Chicago Med* continues to be one of the most egregiously discriminatory and unrealistic in the face of disability of any type, especially invisible disabilities including most forms of neurodivergence.

This show is easily guaranteed to get it wrong before getting it right.

The two most horrific examples involve a child with anxiety and an adult that has schizophrenia.

Ryan Miller (played by Gabriel Solis) ends up at the hospital because he hits his brother with the wrong end of a toy gun (not that there's a right side to hit someone with).

Other than determining that Ryan is misdiagnosed with ADHD and actually has anxiety, his part of the episode is entirely about the space he takes up as someone disabled, without being about him at all.

The doctors determine that his brother has Glass Child Syndrome. This is something that siblings of disabled children have as a result of being invisible to their parents. You see, because Ryan had anxiety, his parents were seemingly incapable of paying attention to his brother, Alex.

It is revealed in the episode that Ryan's brother taunted him and created an anxiety-driven outburst to ensure that Ryan would hit Alex, so that his parents would

have to pay attention to him. There is no counter-message and Ryan's feelings as a person are not considered at all.

Apparently, the space that disabled people take up makes nondisabled people uncomfortable and if they need to act out as a result, we should all just accept that.

We wish we could say that nothing topped that on *Chicago Med*, but hold our beer.

Kyle Liddell (played by Stephen Friedrich) is a character with schizophrenia that ends up in the hospital, but the episode is not about Kyle. It is about Dr. Charles (Oliver Platt) teaching another ER doctor what it's like to have schizophrenia.

Like many actual doctors, despite his own issues with PTSD, Dr. Dean Archer (Steven Weber) tends to think many disabilities are made up because he doesn't personally agree with them.

So, Dr. Charles gives him a VR headset that he can put on and experience schizophrenia.

The ensuing scene takes place on a street where Dean sees a typical environment but keeps hearing voices. "You suck." "You're an embarrassment." "That woman is out to get you." And it continues.

Eventually, he starts to see spiders fill the screen. He can't take it anymore and he pulls off the headset, teary-eyed and sympathetic to the plight of people he said were liars just minutes before.

His take away? He doesn't know how anyone could live like this.

It's clear the writers of *Chicago Med* feel similarly because their disability messaging usually defaults to pity, better dead than disabled, or centers so much on the disability that we don't see a person there at all.

This study also includes some statistics on PTSD specifically as that was our leading form of specific psychosocial representation in our last study.

We found 80 disabled characters dealing with a psychosocial mental health diagnosis, 33 with a diagnosis of PTSD.

For the gender breakdown for this specific part of mental health representation we found that the vast majority of representation is actually cisgender females, which differs from the overall numbers for this category.

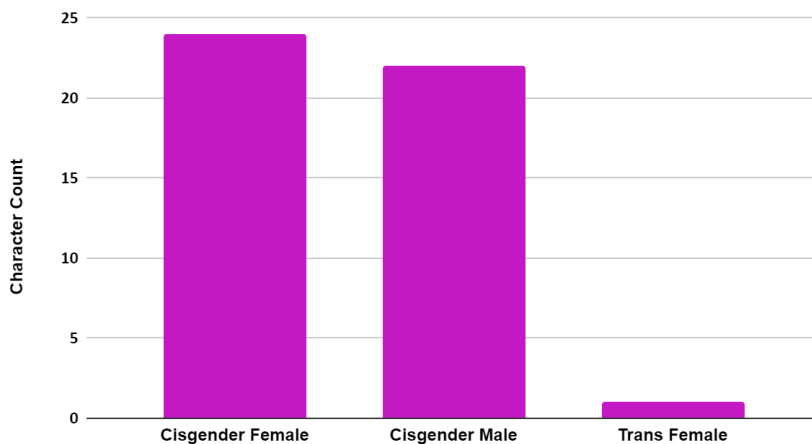
There are 36 cisgender female characters, 42 males, 1 Trans Female, and 1 Trans Non-Binary Person.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Black	Cisgender Female	8
	Cisgender Male	9
Black Total		17
IPOC	Cisgender Female	6
	Cisgender Male	5
IPOC Total		11
White	Cisgender Female	22
	Cisgender Male	28
	Trans Female	1
	Trans Non-Binary	1
White Total		53

**The totals in the table above Include PTSD totals*

Sexuality wise, the majority of characters are Heterosexual. This includes the trans non-binary character.

Psychosocial Character Count by Gender Identity



However there are a few queer characters, including a Trans lesbian.

The Neurodivergent – Mental Health sexuality breakdown works out in the following way.

There are 24 cisgender females with Psychosocial disabilities, and 12 cisgender females with PTSD.

There are 22 cisgender males with Psychosocial disabilities, and 20 cisgender males with PTSD.

The trans female is someone with a psychosocial disability, and the trans non-binary person has PTSD.

Cisgender Female

- ★ Heterosexual (13)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (9)
- ★ Lesbian (2)

Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (13)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (7)
- ★ Gay (2)

Trans Female

- ★ Lesbian (1)

Trans Non-Binary

- ★ Heterosexual (1)

One of the non-binary people is heterosexual and the other is a lesbian.

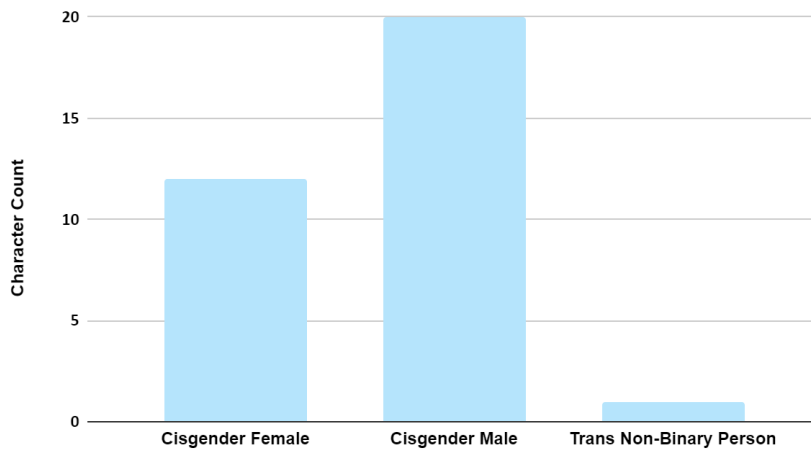
We are actually surprised that they let the trans character be a lesbian even though we know plenty of trans lesbians exist.

We have to question whether networks actually believe that one trans character can represent the experience of all trans people?

If they don't, then why do they keep only casting one trans character at a time?

We digress – looking at the gender breakdown for PTSD shows a huge disparity for cisgender women.

PTSD Character Count by Gender Identity



It is only the shows that feature trans representation prominently that have multiple trans characters, so it seems.

Really, if it was not for shows telling LGBTQIA stories such as *The L Word: Generation Q*, we wonder if there would be any LGBTQIA disabled representation, at all.

Hollywood doesn't exactly love giving characters multiple forms of marginalization.

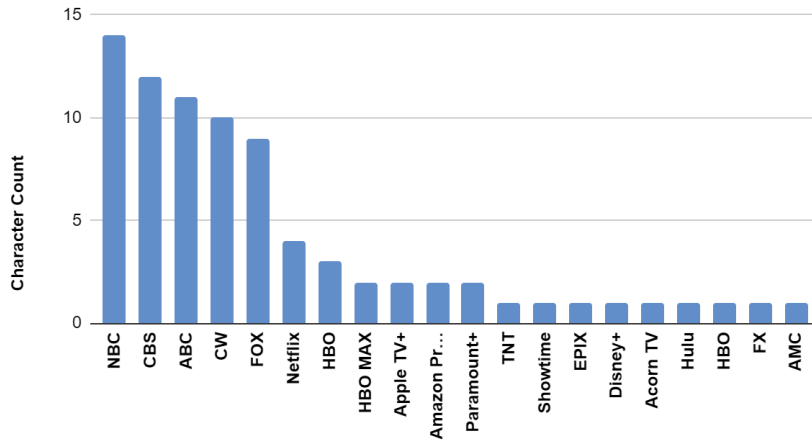
The specific breakdown for PTSD:

- ★ Cisgender Heterosexual Females (12)
- ★ Cisgender Heterosexual Males (16)
- ★ Cisgender Males with Unknown Sexuality (4)
- ★ Trans Non-Binary Heterosexual (1)

When you combine PTSD with psychosocial, the networks with the most characters are NBC with 14, CBS with 12, and ABC with 11.

Representation is split across 5 local networks, 6 cable channels, and 9 streaming services.

Psychosocial + PTSD by Network



The breakdown by age begins with adults. There are 30 adults with psychosocial disabilities, and 29 adults with PTSD. That totals 59 adult characters.

Elders make up 4 psychosocial disabled characters and 1 with PTSD or 5 characters total.

Teenagers account for 12 characters – 9 psychosocial, 3 with PTSD.

Finally, Children make up 5 characters with psychosocial disabilities.

We say this for every category, but elders and children/teenagers deserve more representation.

Psychosocial disabilities are very common in society, even with children, so there's no reason this representation should not be more diverse and inclusive.

– *Autistic/ADHD*

It's kind of disappointing to have to not have a separate ADHD category but we just don't have enough ADHD representation.

In fact, there is only one character with ADHD in this entire study.

Maya Ishii-Peters (Maya Erskine) from *PEN15* is our one character with ADHD. She also has Irlen Syndrome, which affects her visual processing because of her ADHD. She receives medication and special glasses to deal with this.

We decided not to count her as multiple because Irlen Syndrome tends to accompany ADHD and other forms of neurodiversity. In her case, the two go hand-in-hand.

The vast majority of characters are autistic. There are 17 autistic characters by comparison. That's only an increase of two characters from our last study.

As parents of an autistic adult we remember what it was like raising a child before representation was a more common occurrence.

For Ashtyn it went something like:

Ashtyn: "My son is autistic."

Person: "Oh, like *Rain Man*."

Ashtyn: "No, not exactly."

Person: "Yeah, but he has autism too though, right?"

Ashtyn: "Only in the movies."

Unfortunately, where representation is concerned, you can replace Shaun Murphy with *Rain Man* and get a similar result today.

One would hope that things would improve after 30+ years, but at the end of the day you still have nondisabled actors getting famous for stretching their skills by mimicking disabilities they clearly do not seem to understand.

It's fair to say that like most disabilities, not everyone in the community feels the same way.

There are differing opinions and nuances that each person experiences that informs their opinions and beliefs.

There are some people that find Shaun Murphy to be relatable. We are not diminishing their experiences, as we believe that you can relate to something, and that thing can also be harmful to the greater community.

We like plenty of shows that have bad representation, but we recognize that unless the representation improves many of our struggles will persist.

We feel that *The Good Doctor* does not provide adequate disability representation for a few reasons. First, Freddy Highmore is not autistic so there is no way that he can understand the nuance that lives within the performance of someone neurodiverse.

Second, every scenario that happens to Shaun is a direct result of being autistic. His girlfriend often is tasked with cleaning up his social messes by explaining to people that they should know Shaun is autistic and he's incapable of bending or apologizing, so they just need to accept and forgive him.

Additionally, because Highmore is not autistic, he doesn't seem to understand that not every autistic has every single textbook trait of autism.

It can be hard to watch the portrayal because we can see him thinking about every rigid movement or inflection of his voice that is meant to portray one thing or another.

We can state with all certainty that *The Good Doctor* would not be perfect, but certainly would be much improved had the creators had the consideration and forethought to hire someone that was actually autistic.

One show that did just that is the now canceled, *Everything's Gonna Be Okay*. '

Kayla Cromer is autistic and played the lead, Matilda. During the second season, she marries her girlfriend. She realizes that she isn't bisexual, like she had thought, but that she loves her girlfriend.

Her girlfriend, Drea (Lillian Carrier) is also autistic and as a homoromantic asexual, she cares more about being able to be with Matilda and less about sex. Both characters are dynamic and sure of who they are and what they want. They also aren't afraid to tell

people what that is. Sadly, this is refreshing not just for disabled characters, but for women characters, as well.

Their relationship is about two people that aren't necessarily sexually compatible, but that love each other enough to want to build a life together, and they aren't about to let anyone stop them.

When you are lucky enough to have a portrayal like this, even in a comedic setting, it's unfortunate when it gets canceled and the mimicry and bad portrayals are allowed to continue elsewhere.

The breakdown below contains just autistic characters. We will talk about the ADHD character without use of a chart since they are only one character.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Black	Cisgender Male	2
Black Total		2
IPOC	Cisgender Female	4
IPOC Total		4
White	Cisgender Female	1
	Cisgender Male	10
White Total		11

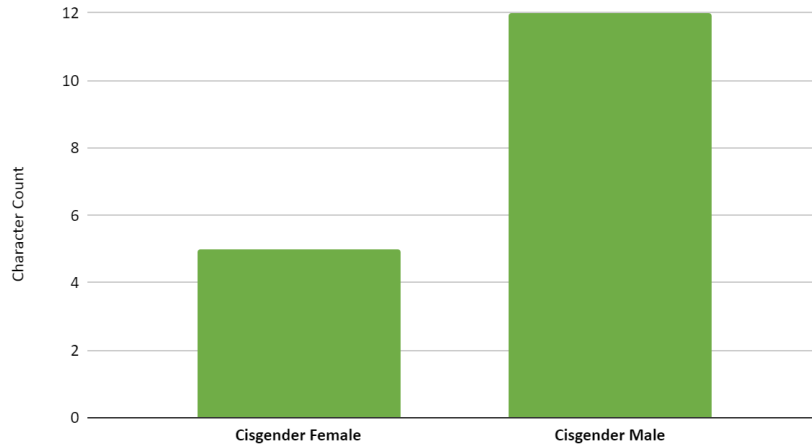
The breakdown by gender is 12 males to 5 females. There's long been criticism that the majority of representation for autistic characters is heavily slanted towards male representation.

Look at the study confirming no lies here.

There is a little bit of diversity when it comes to sexuality but primarily with Autistic females.

There's been huge conversations about Trans and Queer representation being higher in autistic communities but we have yet to see this reflected in TV representation.

Autistic Character Count by Gender Identity



In fact, there is nothing denoting any type of Trans representation for this subcategory at all.

Note: everything listed below is for autistics, unless labeled specifically someone with ADHD.

Cisgender Female

- ★ Heterosexual (2) – 1 with ADHD
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (2)
- ★ Lesbian (1)
- ★ Bisexual/Pansexual (1)

Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (7)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (4)
- ★ Gay (1)

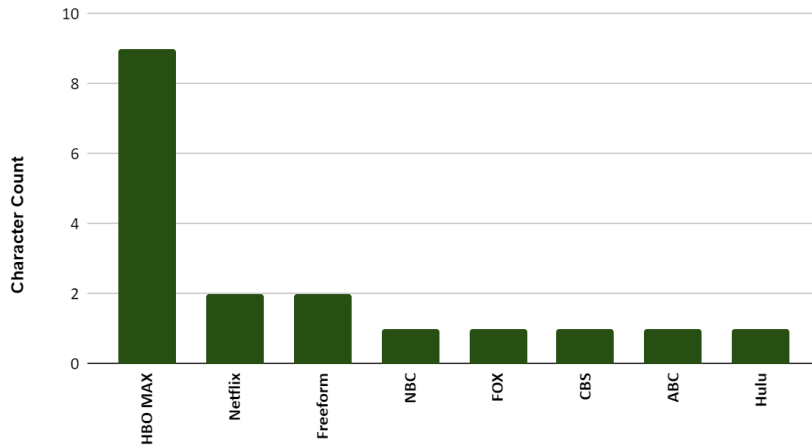
Even so, LGBTQIA representation by sexuality is limited to one character each – 1 lesbian, 1 gay male, 1 bisexual.

Autistic representation is spread across seven networks including 4 local channels, 1 cable channel, and 2 streaming services.

For the first time, HBO MAX is the leading network with 9 autistic characters. Netflix and Freeform are next with 2 characters apiece.

ADHD is featured on Hulu with one character.

Autistic + ADHD by Network



As for age breakdown, there are 12 Adults that are autistic.

Adult representation makes up most of the representation of this subcategory.

There are zero Elders that are autistic. This is a huge problem with autistic and ADHD representation.

These characters don't get to be seen living into their elder years.

As you can imagine, many autistic individuals and those with ADHD struggle to see themselves having a future – it's literally embedded in the media that they don't.

Rounding out representation is 5 teenagers – 1 with ADHD and 1 child.

ADHD representation needs to be expanded everywhere, but especially with elders and young folks.

These are important demographics that deserve to see themselves represented.

– NOS

We really are not big fans of the NOS category for mental health because essentially this just says to us that networks and creators have so little interest in portraying a disability, so they just kind of slap a label on somebody without really getting into details.

It's a lazy way to create a conclusion and it's often accompanied by a one line disability.

If you don't have the ability to create an actual diagnosis or disability for a character, then you are not really invested in making them a disabled character.

The thing is though, we have a lot of these characters. These are the most represented neurologically diverse characters.

In fact, this year there are 142 characters with the NOS label.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Black	Cisgender Female	12
	Cisgender Male	12
Black Total		24
POC	Cisgender Female	10
	Cisgender Male	7
	Non-Binary Male	1
IPOC Total		18
White	Cisgender Female	43
	Cisgender Male	57
White Total		100

That's just pointless.

Why bother giving somebody a disability if you're not willing to commit to giving them a disability? It doesn't help representation.

It would be one thing if this was a scenario where a character knew they had something but they could not get an accurate diagnosis because the medical system is problematic

and flawed when it comes to diagnosing people – but that is not what this representation is.

It just helps to load the numbers. It helps to make the networks feel like they are including disabled people somehow.

The NOS section is commonly one filled with bit characters, because the idea is that they can show you a few minutes of someone being clearly neurodivergent, without actually putting a disability label on it.

These characters are often used to break up the monotony of a scene or to add a little drama. Of course, they are occasionally used for pity, too. There's no shortage of that.

There isn't a lot to say about these characters, because they exist purely to be disabled in some form or fashion.

On *Chicago Fire*, The Queen (Melody Betts) gets her name because when she's not taking her meds, she believes she's Queen Cleopatra. On *Chicago Med*, Neil Dietrich (Danny Flaherty) needs an operation, but he doesn't want it because he's living in *The Matrix*.

He ends up getting the operation though, because a doctor decides he's not mentally reliable enough to know what's good for him. They don't consider trying to treat him for the NOS disability though. They just patch him up and send him off.

New Amsterdam offers a look, albeit briefly, inside the psychiatric wing of the hospital.

This leads to plenty of NOS characters who are shown seeing doctors or in therapy groups, but that don't come with a specific diagnosis. One of those characters is Carrie Logandorffer (Jazmyn C Dorsey).

Carrie is biracial, but as someone who was adopted by a white family, she deals with and internalizes a lot of racism, which makes her want to have lighter skin to fit in with the appearance of her family.

We don't feel like many of the other medical dramas would've even considered telling this kind of story.

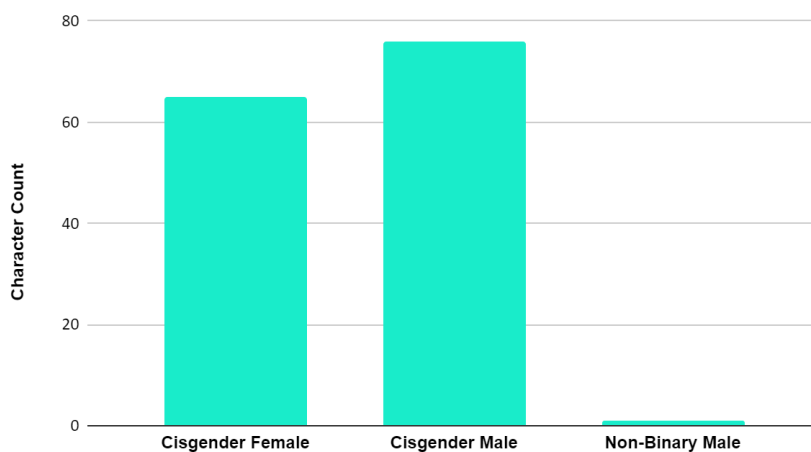
New Amsterdam is the leading show for NOS characters, some with more stories to be heard, than others.

Because of the psychiatric ward we figured this might be the case for the show.

Representation for this category leans more towards cisgender males.

There is also 1 non-binary male character that is disabled.

Neurodivergent NOS Character Count by Gender Identity



There are 77 cisgender males (one non-binary) and 65 cisgender females.

Sexuality wise, again females have higher numbers of inclusion with 4 Lesbians and 3 Bisexuals.

There are only 2 gay males represented..

Cisgender Female

- ★ Heterosexual (33)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (25)
- ★ Lesbian (4)
- ★ Bisexual/Pansexual (3)

Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (33)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (41)
- ★ Gay (2)
- ★ Non-Binary Male (1)

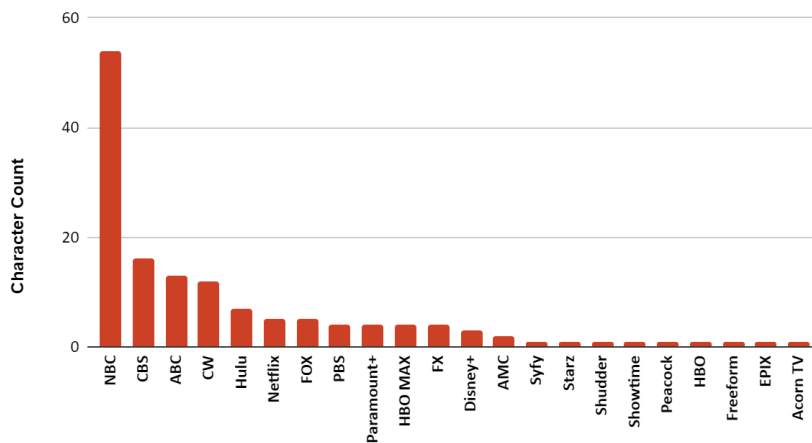
NOS representation is available across 6 local networks, cable channels, and streaming services.

Again, NBC is the most popular network with 54 characters.

So as good as NBC seems to be at creating disabled characters, the fact that a lot of them are NOS representation is not doing much but stuffing the representation a bit.

In fact, 54 characters are on NBC.

Neurodivergent NOS by Network



The reason why that is so significant is because the next highest networks are CBS with 16 characters and ABC with 13. That's a huge difference from NBC.

This is why we felt it was so important to start including information on the type of disability representation.

If NBC is inflating their numbers with a bunch of throwaway bit characters, our next study will uncover that.

Honestly, we don't feel this category should exist. The fact it exists in such large numbers is very frustrating.

We don't see this changing anytime soon – at least until Hollywood gets better about understanding what disability is and how to better represent it.

Neurological Disability

Neurological disabilities often involve disabilities that are in many other disability categories. This includes physical and chronic disabilities that have neurological components to them.

Neurological conditions can also be comorbid with other disabilities which is why there is usually some neurological representation in our multiple category.

Our last study had 53 characters with neurological disabilities. That number has increased slightly to 55 characters.

Perhaps the biggest problem with the neurological section is that the majority of these characters have Dementia or Alzheimer's. These disabilities are devastating, there's no two ways about it. However, the stories are played for comedic effect at times, or they are meant to draw some sort of sympathy. In some cases, just the mention of Alzheimer's is enough to send characters into a worried state.

This is most seen on *Grey's Anatomy*, where Grey's mom, Ellis, had early onset Alzheimer's. Though Ellis is long gone, her memory lives on, and her granddaughter wants to cure Alzheimer's one day so that she never has to worry about losing her own mother to it.

Many characters end up like Herman Donckers (Ben Onwukwe) on *Professor T*.

He is an elderly man being taken care of by his daughter. The only thing you really know about Herman is that he was a cop like his daughter, that he has dementia, and he

doesn't eat much. The rest of his portrayal is more about how his presence affects his daughter.

She isn't able to tell people about her pain, because they couldn't possibly understand.

She also ends up having rather ableist views about witnesses who are disabled and it's directly related to her feelings for her dad.

Apparently, having a parent with dementia means you have clear insight to the reliability of all disabled people.

Perhaps one of the more nuanced performances in the Neurological section comes from two characters that actually did not have Alzheimer's. These characters appeared in one episode of *New Amsterdam*.

Bob Rayburn (John Christopher Jones) has Parkinson's and is brought to the hospital after a fall. His caregiver, Kit Vale (Timothy Omundson) arrived shortly after. He moves a little slower due to his stroke, but he eventually gets there.

The two men are part of a comedy team and take care of each other as best they can, despite both of them being disabled.

When a doctor wants to find assisted living for Bob, he tells them he would rather stay with Kit, in his home.

It is actually very common for disabled people to take care of other disabled people – and it's a huge sign of our broken medical system. This portrayal was actually quite realistic.

When characters are represented, they are always cisgender males and cisgender females.

There is little diversity when it comes to gender.

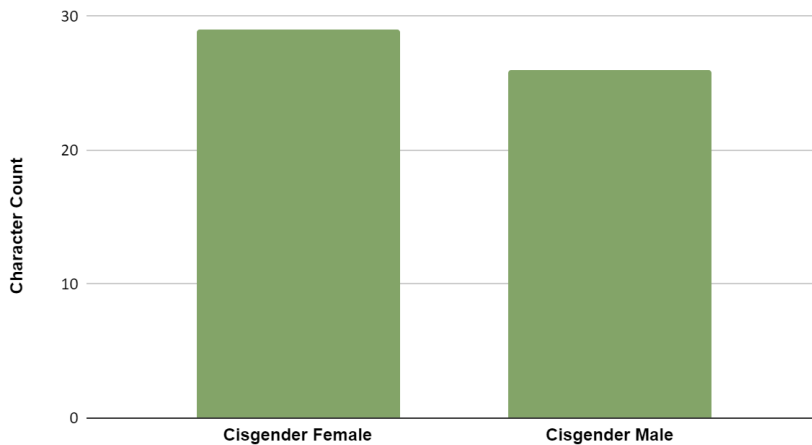
Something we found intriguing is the fact that there's more cisgender female representation than cisgender males.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Black	Cisgender Female	5
	Cisgender Male	8
Black Total		13
POC	Cisgender Female	7
	Cisgender Male	2
POC Total		9
White	Cisgender Female	17
	Cisgender Male	16
White Total		33

We wonder if sexism has anything to do with this because neurological disabilities are often seen as something that happens to Elders.

It's not that we want more cisgender males to be represented, but when you have so many categories where cisgender males dominate over and over and over again, you gotta question why a category doesn't follow that pattern.

Neurological Character Count by Gender Identity



There are 29 cisgender females with neurological disabilities and 26 cisgender males.

Cisgender Female

- ★ Heterosexual (18)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (10)
- ★ Lesbian (1)

Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (21)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (5)

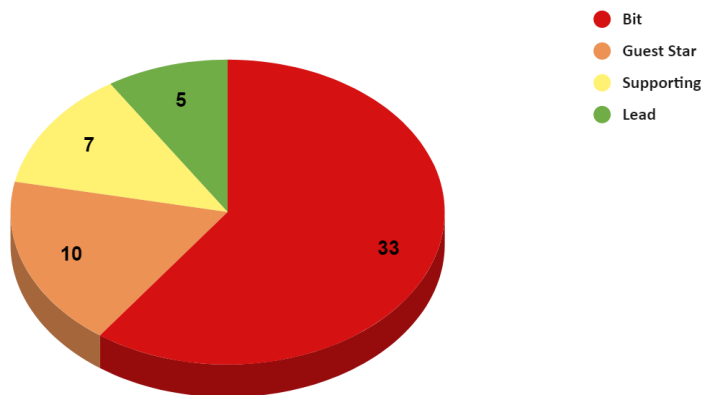
The only LGBTQIA diversity is 1 Lesbian.

We are not surprised that there is just one character that is queer, but this supports our ideas about sexism influencing this category.

When it comes to role types, over half of the roles for neurologically disabled characters are Bit roles.

There are 33 bit characters.

Neurological Disability by Part Type



Guest stars make up the next highest group of representation with 10 characters. This category has all kinds of surprises.

There are 7 Supporting characters and 5 Lead characters.

We expected that the majority of these characters were going to be Elder and that's because of disabilities like Dementia and Alzheimer's.

The category did not disappoint as there are 30 Elders represented.

There are 19 adult characters and 5 children. Only 1 Teenager is represented.

We encourage representation of the younger characters with neurological disabilities.

Neurological disabilities can include things like epilepsy and other seizure disorders, which you can have at any age so limiting representation to certain disabilities and certain age groups is gatekeeping representation for the community.

When it comes to representation and disabled mimicry we have mixed feelings about authentic casting.

Obviously, for disabilities like epilepsy, it would really depend on the actor – there's definitely actors that perform with epilepsy with no problem.

But for something like Alzheimer's and Dementia – maybe an actor with an early diagnosis, but there's definitely a time when actors would not be able to perform or it would be very questionable if a creator expected them to do so.

That being said, there are definitely ways for people with memory issues to remember lines – they have accommodated elder legendary actors who have had trouble memorizing lines as they got older.

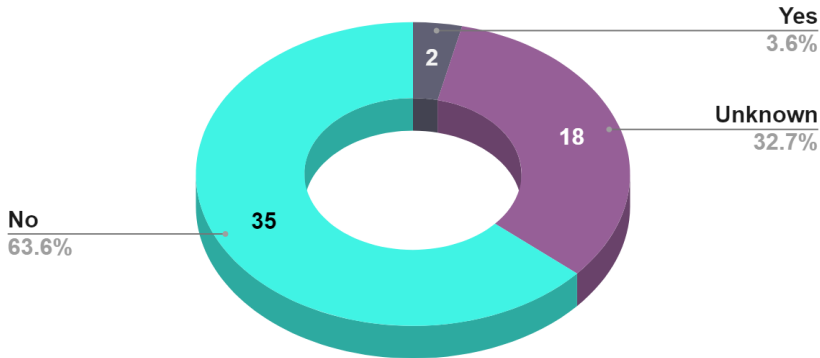
There are ways to accommodate actors with some neurological disabilities.

It's a really complicated issue, but it's not as clear-cut as other communities such as the Deaf community or Dwarfism – there is no reason that actors should be engaging in disabled mimicry, when there are perfectly talented actors that are disabled already.

Ultimately though, we tend to support authenticity and authentic casting over everything else.

It is worth exploring as a concept though as Hollywood has already seemingly made up their mind on this.

Neurological Disability + Disabled Mimicry



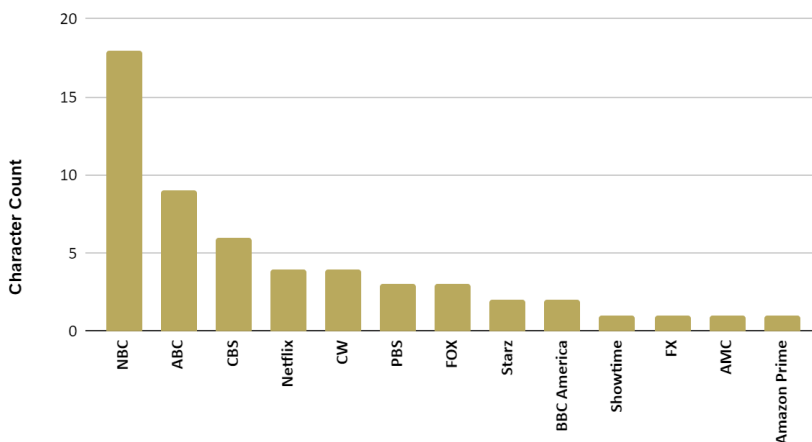
There are 55 actors portraying 55 neurologically disabled characters.

The majority, 35 characters, are played by people we definitely know don't have neurological disabilities.

This is followed by 18 unknowns and just 2 that have a neurological disability.

Neurological disability representation is split across 13 networks – 6 local networks, 5 cable channels, and 2 streaming services.

Neurological Disability by Network



The top three networks with representation are NBC with 18, ABC with 9, and CBS with 6.

The neurological disability category shows some really disturbing things that confirm a lot about the attitudes society has when it comes to not only disability but disability in relation to gender and age.

It's really telling that Elders only dominate representation in categories that people see as weak.

We see the representation of elder characters as similar to teenagers and children – not at all nuanced and need to be available on a greater spectrum.

Elders deserve to see themselves and ageism + ableism in Hollywood has prevented them from seeing what it's like to age authentically.

Narratives involving elders are often imbued in fear of aging, and neurological disabilities are seen as scary – disabilities that take away things from families that we most fear.

This kind of representation was emphasized as we watched the final seasons of *This is Us*. We have known for a while that Mandy Moore's character, Rebecca Pearson, had a neurological disability that was going to kill her.

Having had grandparents that died in similar ways, we understand that this can be devastating and heartbreaking for families. However, there's a lot of nuance that can be written in to make these portrayals less harmful and stigmatizing to people experiencing such disabilities.

There were moments watching Rebecca that were extremely frustrating – and there were moments that were incredibly relatable.

Rebecca's representation went back and forth, but ultimately having a young actress take on this momentous role that an older actress should have been given the opportunity to play made it much harder to watch.

Sometimes it felt like things were just being written for the drama and heart wrenching nature of the experience.

Hollywood could start by offering more representation with a greater variety of neurological disabilities. Start by including characters that are younger, but nuanced representation in elders would also be great.

Physical Disability

The physical disability category is so hard because there are so many different types of physical disabilities. It's hard to say that any community is well represented when you get a couple characters with this disability and a couple characters with that disability.

Not all wheelchair users are created the same – the same is true for people that use walkers and canes and crutches.

A lot of experiences vary vastly but you would not understand that from watching the experiences of those with physical disabilities on television.

The one thing that can be said with certainty is that this category comes with a mix of incredibly promising portrayals and many devastatingly harmful ones.

One of the worst storylines, again, is from *Chicago Med*. There is no character name associated with this portrayal because it concerned an unborn child who would have been counted as an extra, had she been disabled at all.

A surrogate mother went to the hospital, where it's revealed that genetic testing diagnosed the unborn child with SMA (Spinal Muscular Atrophy). At this point, the birth parents wanted to terminate the pregnancy, but the surrogate could not comply with their wishes because she loved the baby.

The parent's give a host of reasons why SMA is a death sentence (that the writer's got from an outdated Google reference, no doubt). When the baby is born and doesn't have SMA, the parents are stunned but thrilled that they can raise their miracle baby.

The surrogate ignores the fact that the parents were more than willing to throw a "defective child" away and instead says they will end up being great parents.

Despite watching more than 125 shows on her own, this was one of the most ableist TV moments that Ashtyn watched in this study.

As someone with SMA, who has lived to be 42, Dom finds this representation to be devastatingly depressing. Is his life not worth living?

This is **the only** representation he's witnessed of SMA on narrative television.

Another horrible one-off is found in one scene of the otherwise well performed *Mayor of Kingstown*.

Hart Van Ackle (Garrett Bales) has CP (Bales does not). Hart is shown sitting in his wheelchair. His overbearing mother becomes upset when Hart throws up on himself and demands that his father clean him up, even though he has to get to work.

Hart hears this and laughs in this offensively guttural way, which is apparently meant to vocally mimic those who make noises without verbalizing otherwise.

The most offensive part is that Hart has nothing to do with the story and it would have been just fine without him.

These kinds of artistic choices show what creators truly think of disabled people and they are the hardest to get over when it's the most common representation you see.

Luckily, there are a few instances of good representation, too.

In *Only Murders in the Building*, Ali Stroker plays Paulette.

Paulette is just a disabled fan girl that loves a murder podcast. She hangs out with other superfans and her disability, while seen, isn't focused on.

Considering so few physically disabled actors get to perform on TV, Stroker's character is unique not only in that Paulette has an authenticity about her thanks to proper casting, but also because she's allowed to just be a character with an interest and not a moving disability.

Likewise, Jillian Mercado plays the character Maribel on *The L Word: Generation Q*. Maribel's part starts out as a background part and quickly becomes a supporting role. She's incredibly dynamic in terms of representation.

Maribel is an immigration attorney who is single and looking to connect with someone, so she dates frequently. She's seen in a variety of scenarios from riding horses to being one of the few physically disabled people to perform in a sex scene on TV.

She is a good portrayal because they allow a disabled person to play themselves and just exist as the person they are meant to be.

In fact, we consider this to be one of the best, **if not the very best portrayals of a disabled character** in this study.

There are 81 characters that have physical disabilities.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Black	Cisgender Female	5
	Cisgender Male	7
Black Total		12
POC	Cisgender Female	6
	Cisgender Male	4
POC Total		10
White	Cisgender Female	28
	Cisgender Male	31
White Total		59

The only type of people that can have physical disabilities if you believe Hollywood are cisgender people.

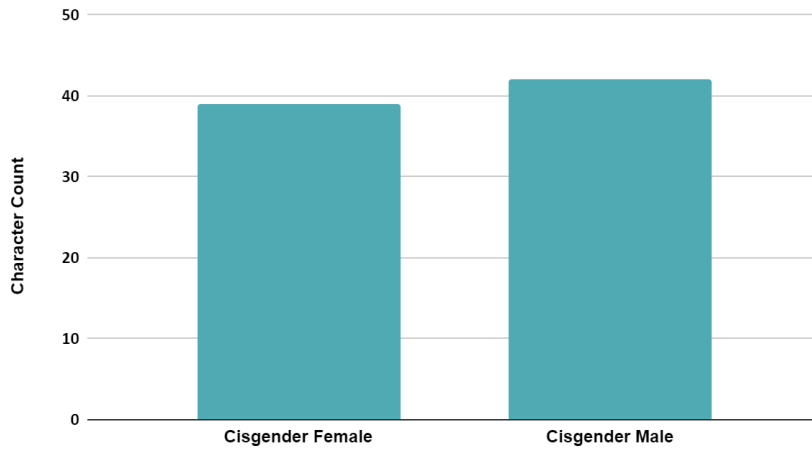
The writers of this paper know that's a lie because one of us has a physical disability and is very trans! Hollywood says this person doesn't exist – and we call BS.

Most physically disabled characters are cisgender males, but not by much.

There are 42 cisgender males and 39 cisgender females.

LGBTQIA diversity results in 2 gay characters and 1 Lesbian.

Physical Disability Character Count by Gender Identity



We guess we should be grateful Hollywood gave us that, since many people assume that physically disabled people are incapable of having sex or even attraction to others.

It's no surprise that Heterosexual representation and Unknown Representation are almost equal.

For many years, physically disabled characters have been desexualized, so while it's great that there are some physically disabled characters with any type of sexuality, the fact that it's almost always heterosexual is inaccurate to the disability community.

Cisgender Female

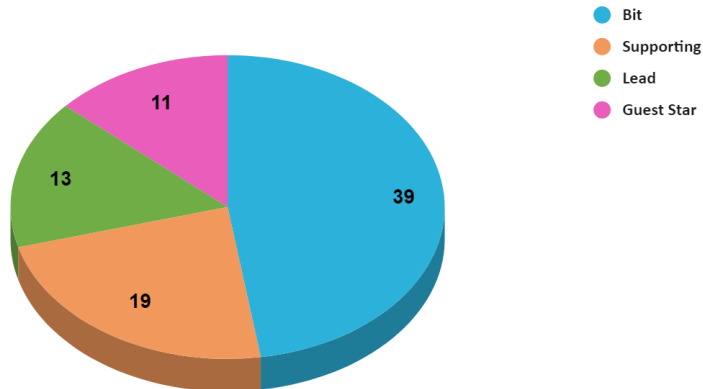
- ★ Heterosexual (18)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (20)
- ★ Lesbian (1)

Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (22)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (18)
- ★ Gay (2)

Most of the physically disabled characters are throwaway characters.

Physical Disability by Part Type



There are 39 Bit characters. You don't see very many characters that are physically disabled that you actually get to know and learn about their lives.

Part of the narrative is that physically disabled people have been told that their lives are not interesting and that people do not want to watch stories about them.

The thing is though, representation is also about allowing people to see themselves. It's about stories that involve all kinds of people.

It gets very boring and stale when the same kinds of people get their stories told over and over and others do not get their stories told at all.

Supporting characters account for 19 roles, with 13 Lead and 11 Guest Star.

It's good to note that Hollywood is starting to allow physically disabled actors to portray themselves.

What is not great is that representation is not getting better.

This supports what FilmDis has been saying for years.

Including disabled actors does not necessarily mean that representation is going to be better.

Physically disabled actors in particular don't often have the agency to speak up. A lot of them are just grateful to get hired.

They get so few auditions compared to nondisabled actors – one physically disabled actor told us she received about one audition per year in the over 30 years since she started acting.

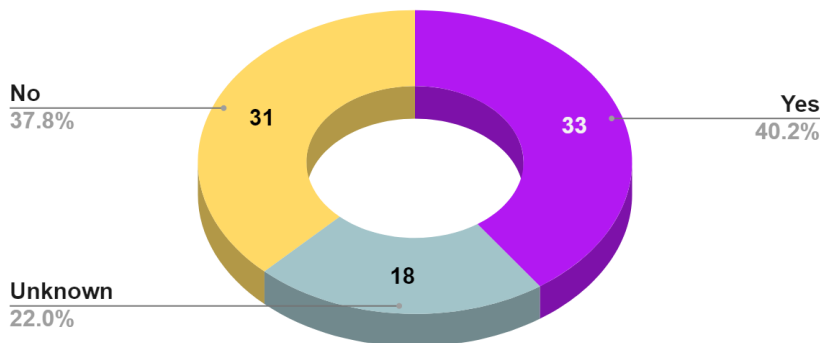
That’s just unacceptable.

The fact that 33 characters are played by actors that we know have disabilities and 31 don’t is actually better than last year. But that number should be zero.

There are 18 Unknown.

More disabled actors is great, but if the storylines are not getting better, it doesn’t help nearly enough.

Physical Disability + Disabled Mimicry



There’s zero excuse for disabled mimicry ever when it comes to physical disability.

There are far too many talented physically disabled actors who can play the roles themselves.

The majority, 49 of the characters, are adults.

There are 24 Elders, 7 Children, and 2 Teenagers.

Children and Teenagers above all else deserve to see themselves represented.

Hollywood, put more physically disabled children on television. **Post haste.**

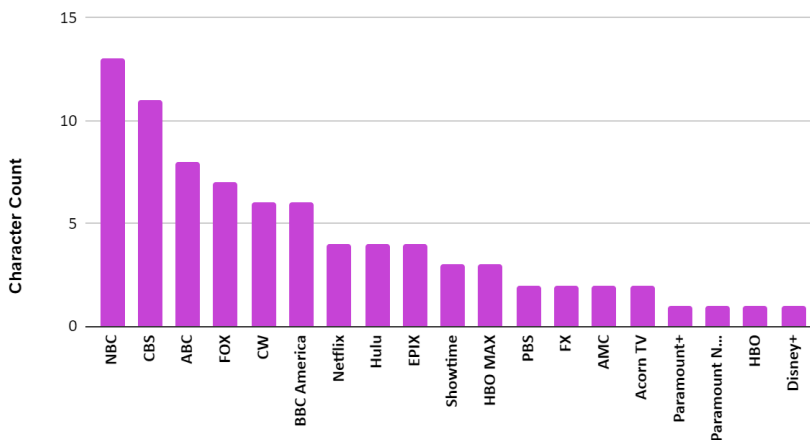
There are 82 actors portraying 81 characters.

Physical disability appears on 6 local channels, 6 cable networks, and 7 streaming services.

The top three networks representation wise are NBC (13), CBS (11), and ABC (8).

We are seeing slightly more physical disability represented, particularly on local shows, but the performances are usually one-off.

Physical Disability by Network



We just need to be blunt and say that the representation of this category is extremely disappointing.

There are many different types of physical disabilities. Everything from cerebral palsy to spina bifida. There is muscular dystrophy, spinal cord injury, degenerative disabilities like ALS and SMA. There's multiple sclerosis.

We would count amputation and dwarfism as physical disabilities if we did not separate them into their own categories.

Many other disability categories also have similar experiences with physical disability including aspects of physical disability.

Using mobility devices, for example, is not just relegated to disabilities included in this category.

This is why physical disability representation is so important. Experiences will be relatable to people with a wide variety of disabilities beyond just physical ones.

However, Hollywood prefers to keep physically disabled people, particularly those with disabilities that are easily visible, out of sight, out of mind.

We demand this change.

Supernatural + Random/Other Disability

Our final category is a random/other category. We started this because we had shows like *The Flash* where they made characters have disabled experiences with supernatural and other unexplainable disabilities.

This year we separated the disabilities that were just kind of weird versus the ones that were supernatural.

When it comes to portrayals, there are always a few in this category that stand out. The first comes from *Warrior Nun*.

Ava (played by Alba Baptista and Isabella Tabares, depending on her age) is a cured quadriplegic turned religious superhero. When she dies, a halo is put into her body, which not only brings her back to life, it cures any former disabilities! What luck!

Ava is shown as disabled, in flashbacks. She gets into a car accident when she is a child and is disabled from that point on. So, the child actress is mimicking disability, while the adult actress gets to be thankful she's not disabled, while kicking ass for Jesus.

It's true that you see a lot of her being thankful that she's not disabled anymore. Though to be fair, she was very sheltered and didn't have a lot of opportunities due to the unfortunate ableism of the sadistic nuns that were tasked with raising her.

And then there's *The Flash*. Every season always has an ableist disability plot line. It often is at the hands of the Big Bad of the season. This study, there is a one episode arc, where the Big Bad is so big and so bad, they don't even cast an actor.

Instead "Psycho Pirate" invades Cecile's (Danielle Nicolet) body and attempts to wreak havoc on Team Flash.

This brings on an onslaught of ableist language, once Cecile's friends and family realize that she's in fact not Cecile, but "Psycho Pirate."

Once the truth is known, they spend a lot of time trying to get her to fight her "psycho self," which is a different version of her that's wearing a straight jacket. This allows them to talk about how "completely insane" the Big Bad "Psycho Pirate" is, but then, at the end of the day he wasn't big enough or bad enough to warrant an actual person to play him, was he?

There are 5 characters with Random/other disabilities and 2 with Supernatural.

Race	Gender Identity	Disabled Characters
Random/Other		
Black	Cisgender Female	1
Black Total		1
IPOC	Cisgender Female	1
	Cisgender Male	5
IPOC Total		1
Supernatural		
White	Cisgender Female	1
	Cisgender Male	1
White Total		2

The characters with Random/Other disabilities are Black and IPOC.

The supernatural characters are all white. That's something to note.

With the categories together, there are still more cisgender males than cisgender females.

Cisgender Female

- ★ Unknown Sexuality (3)

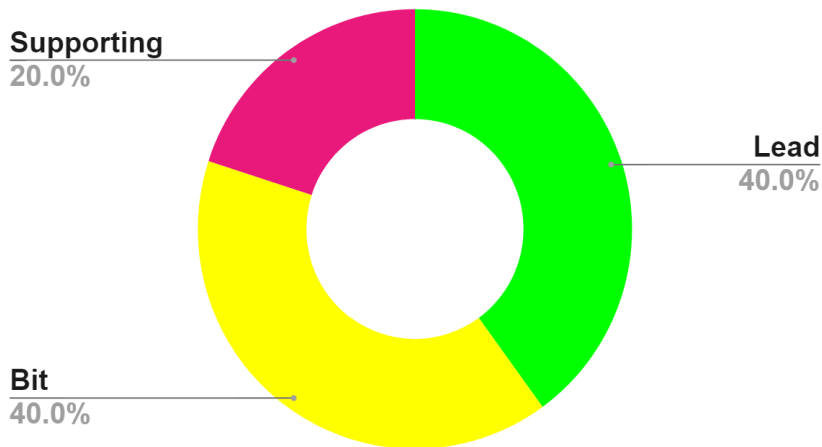
Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (2)
- ★ Unknown Sexuality (2)

So, even with fictional or obscure disabilities, representation is still skewed towards cisgender males. This does unfortunately mirror the authenticity of our patriarchal world. We have to chuckle because this is one of the few categories where Lead characters account for the most representation.

There are 3 Lead characters, 2 Supporting characters, and 2 Bit characters.

Random Disability by Part Type



These characters are more likely to be adults, children or teenagers. There are 2 of each.

There is 1 elder.

There are 7 actors portraying 7 characters.

All of the actors are engaging in disabled mimicry.

We love to list this because it's hilarious because these disabilities don't really exist!

There's no way you could find disabled actors with these disabilities although it would be fun to see actual disabled actors portray characters with supernatural disabilities.

Sadly, none of the actors appear to be disabled or at least open about being disabled.

The reason why we feel it is so important to keep this somewhat silly category is because every single instance that offers random or supernatural disability offers incredibly ableist language, portrayals of the supernatural disability, and is still able to send harmful ideas about disability to the audience.

We feel it's still very important to talk about this representation because of this.

This category would be better if disabled people could play fun and intriguing disabled supernatural beings.

We don't want them playing ableist caricatures, though.

Disability by Gender, Gender Identity, and Sexuality

From our first study, we've known that disabled LGBTQIA representation is not great.

In the real world, LGBTQIA and disabled communities often intersect. Being marginalized can lead to being disabled, so higher numbers of disability are expected in marginalized communities. However that very rarely is reflected in representation.

You would think covering two years of television would mean that LGBTQIA representation increased quite a bit, but you would be wrong.

Year	Disabled Characters
2018-2019	36
2019-2020	71
2020-2022	82

This study, there are 82 LGBTQIA disabled characters.

Between the first study and second study we watched 70 more shows. This study and our middle study we both watched 125 shows apiece (250 total), but we watched 282 seasons of television because we watched two years of television. The increase of a little over 10 is not surprising, but infuriating at the same time.

We echo sentiments from past studies that creators really dislike making characters more than one marginalization and this category emphasizes that quite strongly. It's not at all reflective of what the world is actually like – a messy cacophony of identities and marginalization.

Having 82 characters out of 1,342 maintains that LGBTQIA representation of disabled characters is at 6%. That's ridiculous.

Yet, disabled people are more likely to be LGBTQIA. Studies support this, [including one by The Movement Advancement Project \(MAP\)](#)².

Telling statistics from their study:

- ★ 39% of LGBTQIA folks also say they have a disability
- ★ 1 in 3 Lesbians and 1 in 3 Bisexual females are disabled
- ★ 2 in 5 Trans Adults are disabled
- ★ 46% of Bisexual males are disabled

We've already listed why – but this study confirms what we already know.

Marginalized communities are more likely to have health issues, experience stress that can lead to mental health and chronic health disabilities, and due to discrimination, bullying and limited dating options, can be more open to exploring their sexuality.

That last one is not always true – and can definitely be impacted by how you were raised, your religious and/or cultural beliefs, etc..

² DeVault, Nancy. "Study Affirms LGBTQ People are More Likely to Have a Disability than the General Population." Ameridisability. Retrieved on February 8, 2023.
<https://www.ameridisability.com/study-affirms-lgbtq-people-are-more-likely-to-have-a-disability-than-the-general-population/>.

Regardless, there should be much greater overlap between disabled and LGBTQIA communities when it comes to representation.

This problem is not strictly just for non-LGBTQIA creators.

LGBTQIA creators who are starting to have much more representation and inclusion in the industry (particularly gay males) are also largely responsible for the exclusion of disabled people within LGBTQIA narratives.

Even when narratives are included, the representation is often stigmatizing towards disability.

Unfortunately, when it comes to LGBTQIA representation of disability we still have a long way to go.

Breakdown by Gender:

For the first time, we have more than just Trans Female representation.

There is not much, but a Trans Male and Trans Non-Binary person make their first appearance.

We've broken down the characters so you can see how many Trans, Non-Binary, and Gender Non-Conforming characters there were on television during the 2020-2022 Seasons.

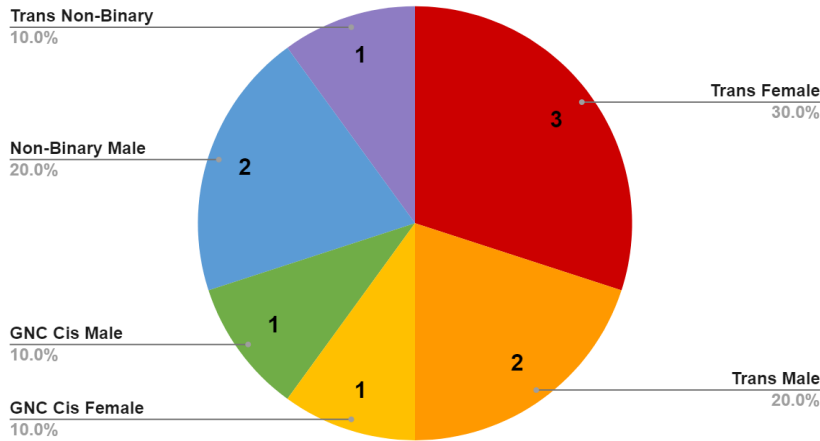
Progress is slow, but relegating gender diverse representation to one character per gender identity does little to help our data – it does little to help gender diverse disabled people.

We watch 250 shows per year – that's not all the shows that air, obviously.

That means that we definitely have had to leave off some shows.

This year, we never got to the last season of *Pose* despite including the show's previous seasons.

Number of Trans/Non-Binary Characters



This was not intentional – we watch things randomly and don’t ever single out shows for inclusion or exclusion with a few exceptions.

For example we try to make sure every network is included with at least a few shows.

So sometimes that means not watching every show on one network which was what happened with *Pose*.

Figuring out we had not watched the show made us curious about how one show could so greatly impact LGBTQIA representation.

For our last study, *Pose* was the only Trans representation we had. It provided diversity to the LGBTQIA representation since most characters on the show were Black or Brown.

Since the show is over anyway, we would’ve lost this representation in our 2022-2023 study. However, we got a sneak peek into what next year may look like without the show.

The one thing that it definitely did was remove all of the Trans Female representation that is not white.

The only representation of Trans females is white females. So, while white females gain some representation, all other Trans females lose their representation.

There are 6 Trans characters total. There are also 2 Non-Binary characters and 2 Gender Nonconforming (GNC) disabled characters.

Of note to us is that the Trans Male disabled representation is Black and Brown representation.

When we started our study this is how it was for Trans Females.

Gender Identity	Race	Sexuality	
Trans Female	White	Queer	2
		Unknown Sexuality	1
Trans Male	Black	Unknown Sexuality	1
	IPOC	Unknown Sexuality	1
Trans Non-Binary	White	Heterosexual	1
Non-Binary Male	IPOC	Unknown	1
	White	Unknown	1
GNC Male	White	Queer	1
GNC Female	White	Unknown	1

What that tells us is that Black and Brown creators are more likely to include diverse disabled representation when representing their communities as opposed to white creators.

One other thing we found striking was when comparing representation of sexuality.

Just looking at the Heterosexuality and Unknown Sexuality representation compared to Queer, Bisexual/Pansexual, and Asexual disability representation is disheartening.

The imbalance is too much, especially for those of us who know how diverse the disabled community actually can be.

That being said, it's also disheartening to see how much representation is featured for those with Unknown Sexuality.

For years, there's been this idea that if you are disabled, particularly if people can tell you are disabled just by looking at you, you are considered not romantic material.

Not only that, but you most likely don't have any type of sexuality, sexual interests, dating interests, or even are capable of having a relationship.

This plays out in the real world with disabled people struggling to date – often battling ableist misconceptions potential dating partners have. These are things they've learned about disability based on the media they consume.

That plus the fact that so many disabled characters on television are small (bit) characters that you don't even get to know are the major reasons why 443 Disabled characters have Unknown Sexuality.

Black Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (96)
- ★ Unknown (36)
- ★ Queer (5)

IPOC Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (64)
- ★ Unknown (37)
- ★ Queer (2)
- ★ Bisexual/Pansexual (1)

White Cisgender Males

- ★ Heterosexual (308)
- ★ Unknown (182)
- ★ Queer (28)
- ★ Bisexual/Pansexual (4)

That means that at least 1/3 of all disabled characters have Unknown Sexuality.

There are some things to note between cisgender female and cisgender male representation.

First, they are the only forms of representation big enough to include full tables like this.

We had to split Gender Identity into its own table.

Second, cisgender females and gender diverse people are more likely to have unknown sexuality than cisgender males.

In fact, there's a significant amount more females with unknown sexuality as opposed to males.

The ratio is 255 cisgender females to 188 cisgender males with unknown sexuality. In fact, there's nearly as many cisgender white females with unknown sexuality as there is cisgender males of all races with unknown sexuality.

Third, LGBTQIA representation goes back-and-forth between genders.

There are more cisgender females that are queer (35 to 19), But there are more cisgender males that are Bisexual/Pansexual (12 to 5).

There is only one asexual character, and this is not just some character with unknown sexuality. We would like to see more characters declaring they are asexual, because that is a legitimate sexuality.

Unfortunately we only see this representation forced on disabled people, not as an identity except in rare circumstances.

One thing that we found significant in terms of sexuality is in many cases, there are shows about gay males that contribute to a high percentage of gay disabled males represented in this study.

This year we were able to watch *Halston* (Netflix) and *It's a Sin* (HBO MAX), both about gay men. These two shows contributed to nearly 40% of the gay male disabled characters we found.

We know that some of this is because of HIV/AIDS representation, which is common in stories about LGBTQIA characters.

When much of the HIV/AIDS representation we see on television is LGBTQIA characters it's not only unfair to the LGBTQIA community, it's also unfair to those with HIV/AIDS who are not part of the LGBTQIA community.

Yes, the LGBTQIA community needs stories about HIV/AIDS, but those cannot be our only stories.

We need more of these stories, but we need much greater diversity for the LGBTQIA community in general.

The same cannot really be said for lesbians. While *The L Word: Generation Q* is a good show, it only accounts for about 16% of disabled lesbian characters, which equates to 3 characters in the seasons we covered.

Bisexuals don't seem to have any shows specifically about them, so they are often erased, despite being a very diverse and interesting group, and asexuals get even less screen time than bisexuals, as we've already mentioned.

Black Cisgender Females

- ★ Heterosexual (57)
- ★ Unknown (35)
- ★ Queer (6)
- ★ Bisexual/Pansexual (2)

IPOC Cisgender Females

- ★ Heterosexual (56)
- ★ Unknown (50)
- ★ Queer (3)
- ★ Bisexual/Pansexual (2)

White Cisgender Females

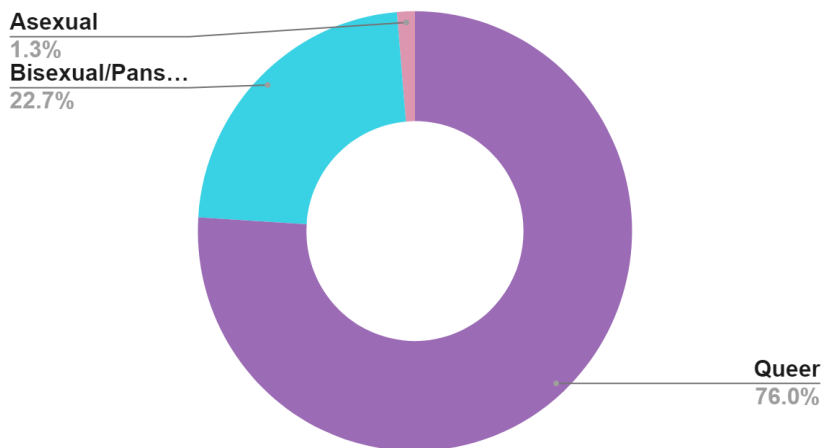
- ★ Heterosexual (236)
- ★ Unknown (103)
- ★ Queer (10)
- ★ Bisexual/Pansexual (8)
- ★ Asexual (1)

Breakdown by Sexuality:

Without counting any of the gender diverse characters, there are 75 disabled characters with diverse sexuality featured in this study.

A few of the gender diverse disabled characters also have diverse sexuality, which is why it's hard to figure out the amount of characters by simply adding together the Trans and Non-Binary characters and the Queer, Bisexual/Pansexual, and Asexual disabled characters.

Disabled Characters by Sexuality



One of the hardest parts of this study is looking at the graphs for some of the disabled character breakdowns.

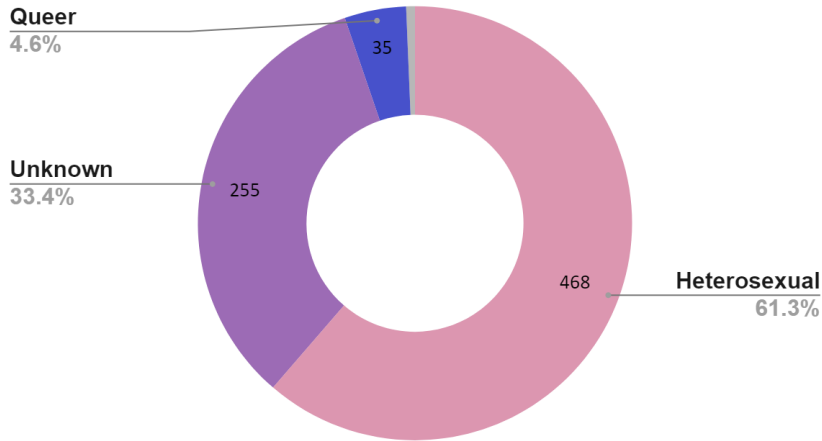
If you just include the LGBTQIA representation it doesn't look as bad as when you include the Heterosexual and Unknown Sexuality representation as well.

Heterosexual characters overwhelm all other disabled characters.

It has long been the standard for characters to be cisgender and heterosexual.

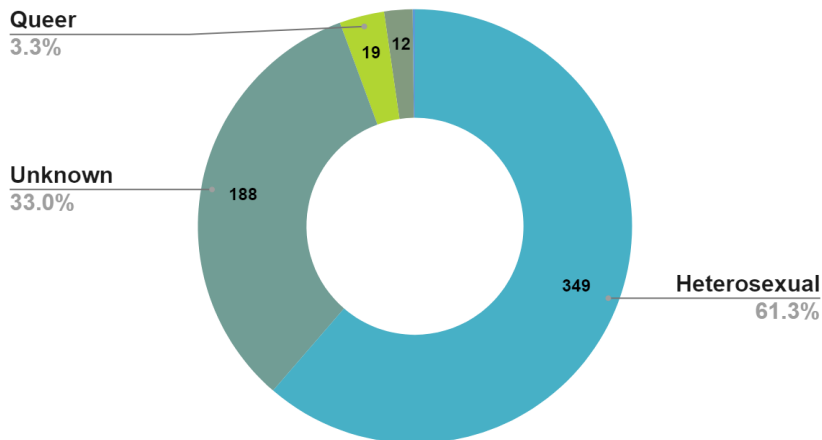
It's hard to feel grateful that disabled characters are given some sexuality when it is almost always heterosexual.

Cisgender Males Sexuality Breakdown



A compelling note – The percentage of heterosexual and unknown sexuality representation is almost identical between cisgender females and cisgender males!

Cisgender Females Sexuality Breakdown



Breakdown by Race:

White disabled characters account for the most representation by an alarmingly large amount over other races/ethnicities.

This has been a problem since the beginning of television.

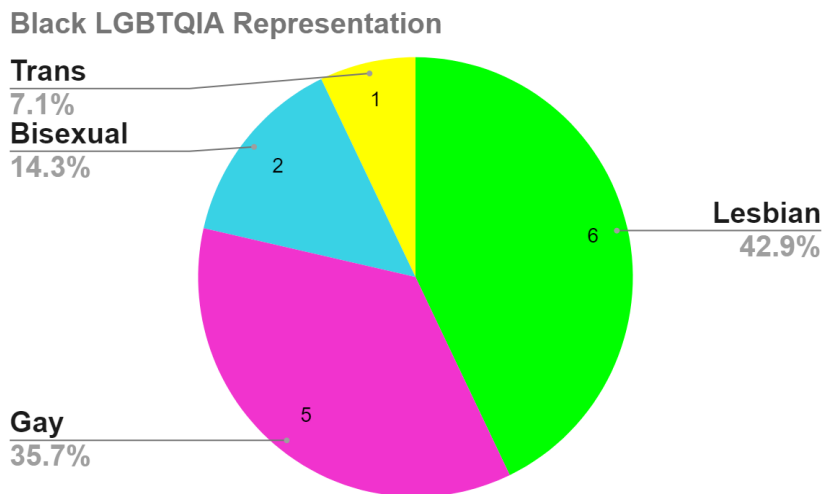
However, when accounting for LGBTQIA representation within that, Black and Brown communities receive even less disability representation.

Looking at the numbers shows a starkly different experience for white disabled characters.

Black Total	14
IPOC Total	10
White Total	58

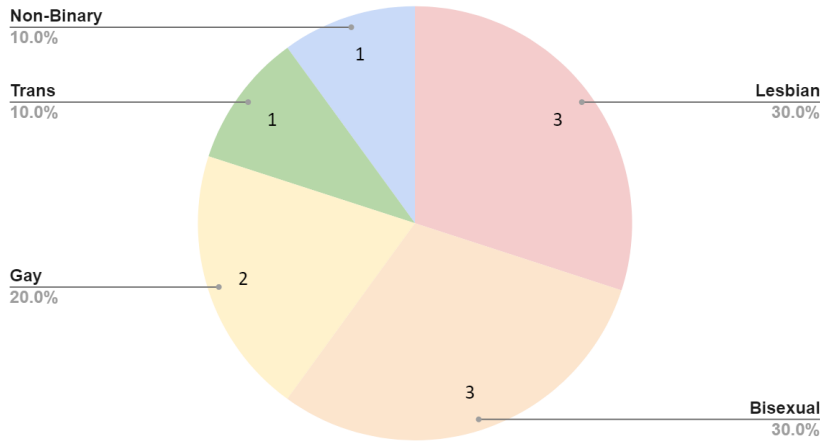
That's because over 70% of the representation of disabled LGBTQIA characters is by white disabled characters.

Comparing the breakdown of LGBTQIA representation of disabled characters on their own charts shows even bigger disparities.



To start, white LGBTQIA representation could not even be put on the same kind of chart, because there were too many options.

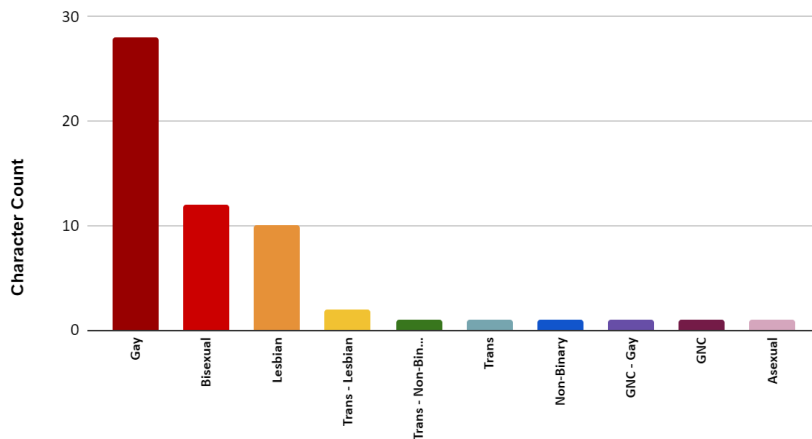
IPOC LGBTQIA Representation



Further, the Gay And Lesbian categories for both Black and IPOC characters have single-digit values.

We can break down the representation with graphs that are pretty, but the data is still going to be the same – there are so few LGBTQIA Black and Brown disabled characters we don't even have enough data to really postulate about the state of the representation itself.

White LGBTQIA Representation



We can get through an entire rainbow of color to depict the amount of white disabled representation though. Even then, representation is limited.

Trans and Non-Binary representation has improved every single year since we started doing studies, but the increases are so small that it's not providing enough benefit to marginalized communities.

The LGBTQIA community deserves so much better.

Disability by Race, Ethnicity, & Culture

We expected that cisgender white characters would be the most represented disabled characters. That's how it's been since our first study.

That's how it's been since disabled characters started appearing in the film and television industry.

The thing is, we keep hearing – *slowly but surely, it's getting better*. Is it though?

We watch more television than anybody we know. We assume at this point we know more about disability representation on television than anyone else simply by the sheer volume of television we watch and analyze specifically for disability.

We are really struggling to believe that it's getting better. Our data is not showing things getting better.

Yeah, sure we have more overall characters and there are little changes such as a few more Trans characters. However when you have thousands of white cisgender characters, and you have zero Black or Brown Trans disabled characters, that shows how little is actually changing.

Are things getting better for cisgender white disabled characters?

That's a bit harder to answer. Yes there are more characters. Yes, diversity amongst these cisgender white disabled characters is even becoming a little bit of a thing since there are a literal handful of characters showing up.

But is it *REALLY* getting better?

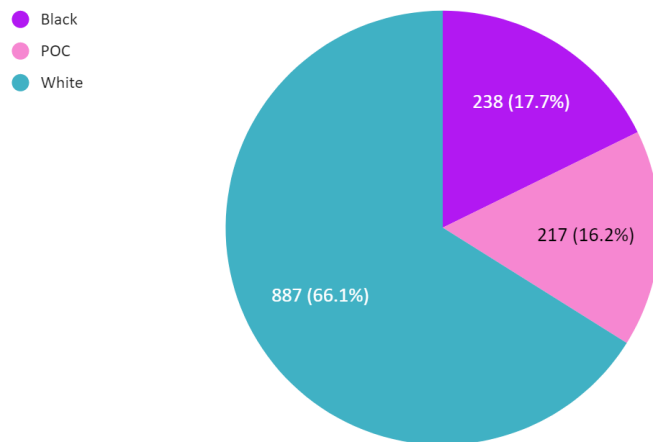
The racial breakdown is a really good indicator of what's actually going on with disability representation.

Last year, white representation made up 70% of disabled character representation.

White disabled representation is slightly less this year, at about 66% of representation, although there are

There are also 50 more white characters than last year.

Disabled Characters by Race



Black representation has increased by over 30 characters.

IPOC stands for Indigenous & people of color, and refers to Non-Black people of color.

IPOC representation has increased by over 50 characters as well, but considering that there are multiple races/ethnicities broken down for one group, we don't find this to be that great compared to white disabled representation.

Another thing that our studies have been showing is that when we lose characters from certain racial demographics, particularly BIPOC characters, these disabled characters are often replaced by disabled characters of another BIPOC demographic.

What Hollywood is not doing is creating further representation.

For all of the gains there are for Black and Brown communities – overall character counts have increased for all communities – the increase for white disabled representation is still greater.

Cisgender white disabled people in particular get the biggest strides in representation.

Asian (except from India)	Cisgender Female	32
	Cisgender Male	21
Biracial	Cisgender Female	6
	Cisgender Male	2
	Trans Male	1
Black	Cisgender Female	100
	Cisgender Male	137
	Trans Male	1
Indian	Cisgender Female	6
	Cisgender Male	7
Indigenous	Cisgender Female	9
	Cisgender Male	7
IPOC – NOS	Cisgender Female	5
	Cisgender Male	7
Latine	Cisgender Female	47
	Cisgender Male	55
	Non-Binary Male	1
Middle Eastern	Cisgender Female	6
	Cisgender Male	5
White	Cisgender Female	358
	Cisgender Male	522
	GNC Cisgender Female	1
	GNC Cisgender Male	1
	Non-Binary Male	1
	Trans Female	3
	Trans Non-Binary Person	1
Total		1342

It seems like Hollywood just shuffles representation amongst BIPOC disabled characters. These communities all have to split the same piece of pie – and they don't split that pie with white disabled people.

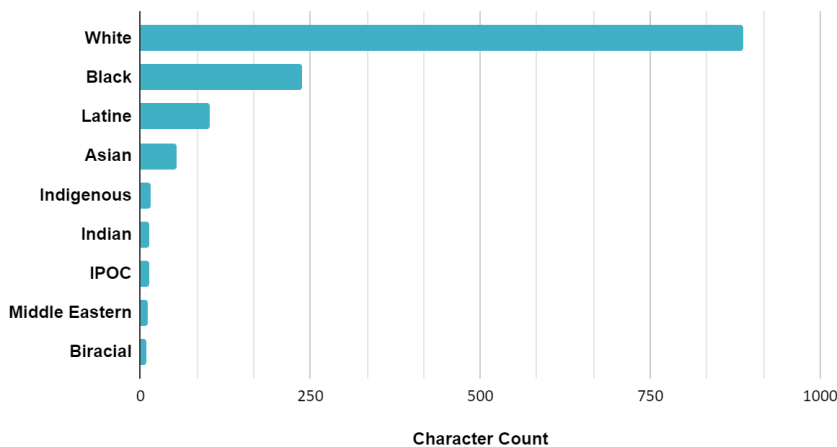
White disabled folks get their own representation and marginalized white disabled people have to fight amongst the tiny crumbs of that pie – their pieces are not that big, as seen by the number of LGBTQIA disabled characters.

So you have two pies – one split up amongst white disabled people which allows cisgender males to dominate the vast majority of that representation and one that is split amongst all Black and Brown communities.

These pies are not equal sizes.

The graph below clearly shows just how different the size of these pies are.

Disabled Characters by Race/Ethnicity



The most marginalized BIPOC disabled people have little hope of seeing themselves represented anytime soon, if ever, as long as the trends we are seeing now continue in Hollywood.

There’s no way for one character to represent entire communities of disabled people but we see this over and over for marginalized disabled communities.

Black Disabled Representation by Gender Identity

Cisgender Female	100
Cisgender Male	137
Trans Male	1

IPOC Disabled Representation by Gender Identity

Cisgender Female	111
Cisgender Male	104
Non-Binary Male	1
Trans Male	1

White Disabled Representation by Gender Identity

Cisgender Female	358
Cisgender Male	522
GNC Cisgender Female	1
GNC Cisgender Male	1
Non-Binary Male	1
Trans Female	3
Trans Non-Binary Person	1

At the end of the day, if Hollywood truly wants to get better they need to create more marginalized disabled characters.

White disabled people are not getting great representation either, but they are getting representation – and some people find it relatable whether it’s good or not.

That’s not happening for the most marginalized white disabled people – particularly LGBTQIA folks, and it’s certainly not happening for Black, Indigenous and POC disabled folks who are marginalized.

Thanks to more shows that feature Black and Brown characters in general – mainly written by Black and Brown writers and run by Black and Brown show creators – Black and IPOC disabled communities are finally starting to see themselves represented.

However it is still not as often as white disabled folks. That needs to change.

If we had to single out one single performer that stands out for us with a glowing rating for representation it would without a doubt be Latine actress, Sammi Haney.

Haney played Esperanza on the now canceled Netflix show, *Raising Dion*. Like the actress, the character has Osteogenesis Imperfecta Type III and uses a power wheelchair.

As a disabled child, Esperanza is a fantastic portrayal because she is allowed to be a child, plain and simple. Her life is not relegated to being a disabled prop.

In fact, much to our pleasure (and likely dozens of disabled little girls), Esperanza will not let your ableism stand. She will tell you you're wrong and remind you how badass she is. We need so many more of these characters in all age groups.

We wish Hollywood would not seem to allow one marginalized community at a time. If there was just more diversity all around it would make representation better for everyone.

Further, it would make the lives of disabled people better – because better disabled representation leads to greater understanding of disability.

Disability by Nationality

We anticipated that the majority of disability representation were going to be characters based in the US.

We are in Michigan, watching US-based television, and the criteria for show inclusion is the shows must be primarily English-based.

That ensures a lot of international representation is excluded – we wish we could include more shows and with greater funding we could.

We could even do a separate study into international television with the right amount of funding.

However, Hollywood is based in the US and that means that the majority of disabled characters are US-based.

Since we included other English language television we also knew that British, Australian, and Canadian representation would also potentially be included.

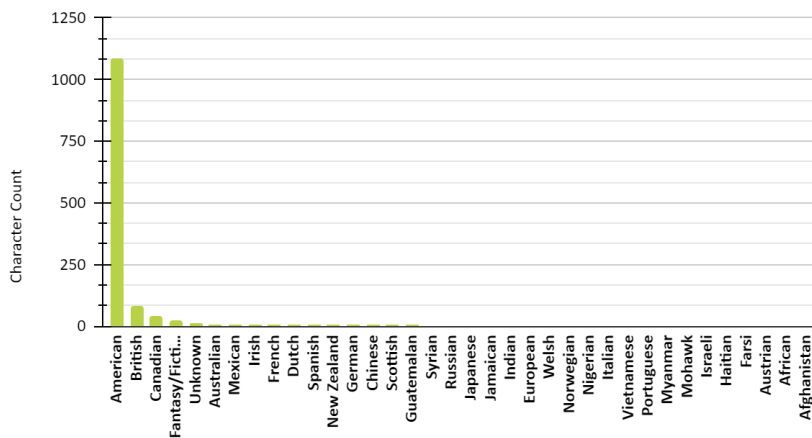
The shows had to be accessible to us to watch so that also limited some of the shows that we could watch.

Well, when it comes to nationality and disability representation over 80% is US-based or 1088 characters.

Other notable representation includes:

British (80), Canadian (40), Fantasy/Fictional (23), Unknown Nationality (10) and Australian (9).

Disabled Characters by Nationality



The fun thing about this study is that there are lots of nationalities represented.

They do not include a lot of characters, but there is a little diversity.

If we were watching a wider diversity of shows we would expect more diversity, but since most of the shows we watch are English-speaking shows it makes sense that most of the representation is US-based.

Something we were excited to report is for the first time we also have someone who identifies as a member of the Mohawk nation.

We hope that as more Indigenous representation is available, more Indigenous nations will be listed in this nationality list.

Below are some of the nationalities represented by the number of disabled characters.

Nationality	# of Characters
American	1088
British	80
Canadian	40
Fantasy/Fictional	23
Unknown	10
Australian	9
Mexican, Irish, French, Dutch	7
Spanish, New Zealand, German, Chinese	5
Scottish, Guatemalan	4
Syrian, Russian, Japanese, Jamaican, Indian, European	3
Welsh, Norwegian, Nigerian, Italian	2
Vietnamese, Portuguese, Myanmar, Mohawk, Israeli, Haitian, Farsi, Austrian, African, Afghanistan	1

Disability by Age

You would not think that there would be disparities when it comes to age and disability, but there are.

There is a reason that most of the characters in the study are adults. We define adults as people between the ages of 20 and 60.

Elders are above 60.

Teenagers are 13 to 19.

Children are 2 to 12.

Babies are under two years old.

Adults are easier to hire and shoot, so much of the mainstream narrative television is about them.

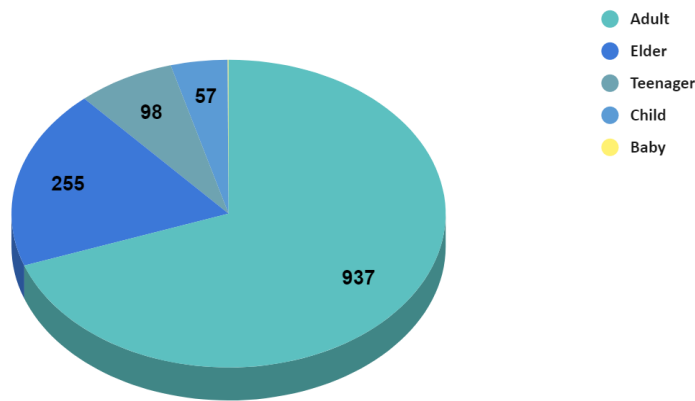
That being said, there are also other reasons why some of these categories are not represented – and some of it involves ableism.

Children may not be included because they are harder to shoot, but elders are often excluded because of age discrimination.

We already know age discrimination is rampant in Hollywood and that reflects the number of elders that are listed as disabled.

We also know that disability is a normal part of becoming older for most people. So the likelihood that you will become disabled as you become an elder is highly probable.

Disabled Characters by Age Group



As such, you would think that there would be more elder disabled characters but there are not.

The number of Adult disabled characters is about 70% of representation – a slight boost from last year. That factors out to about 937 characters.

Elder characters account for almost 20% of the representation or 255 characters.

That leaves about 10% split between Teenagers and Children. This year there was just 1 baby – down from 4 last year. Babies don't even make 1% of representation. Teenagers represent about 7% of the representation or 98 characters.

Disabled children account for just 57 disabled characters or about 3% of representation.

We know that nondisabled people don't want to see disabled children because they pity disabled children. They feel bad for disabled children. Some think it's sad to watch disabled children.

However there's no way to change that message or opinion of disabled children if they are not represented.

This also means that disabled children and teenagers rarely get to see themselves represented. That can be an incredibly lonely place and we know that suicidal ideation is particularly associated with lack of representation.

When you don't see yourself represented in the media, you wonder if you deserve to really exist – and a lot of nondisabled people give you the message you don't deserve to exist. You internalize that. Lack of representation does not help.

We need elder representation, but we desperately need children and teenagers that are disabled to be represented, as well.

The health and well-being of disabled children and teenagers depends on greater inclusion and better representation. There is no other way leading forward.

Disability by Role

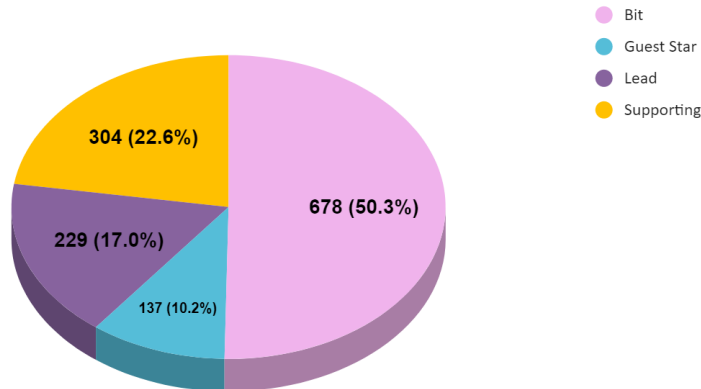
We didn't really understand how important this category was until we began to understand the research behind this study.

Most disabled characters are bit characters. With that in mind, we need to recognize that other studies often don't include these characters because they don't consider them significant enough.

We understand that – it's true they are not great representations of disability the vast majority of the time. Part of that is because there's not enough time to even get to know these characters.

We consider most Bit characters throwaway characters, but not counting them ignores the huge disservice Hollywood does to disabled people by insisting we must play Bit characters most of the time.

Disabled Characters by Part Type



This stunning graph shows that 50% of the disabled representation we have recorded are Bit characters.

Bit characters may be important to a single story, but they are often just throw away characters and only provide disabled actors with a day or two of work, if they are even cast.

Anything longer than a day's work means the character is probably a guest star with a season arc or a supporting character who shows up occasionally.

The problem with bit characters is that they take up a lot of room in our representation breakdown, but often do very little to help actual disabled representation.

We record them nonetheless because they are instances of disability on television and they do impact what nondisabled people think about disability.

They can impact how disabled people think about disability, as well.

However, if we want to see real change, Hollywood is going to need to step up their game and provide much more opportunities for Lead, Supporting, and even guest starring roles for disabled actors.

If Hollywood is interested, we have some stories we'd love to share.

Disability Representation + Extras

We generally break representation down by extras but we do not include them in any overall count of disability.

This year we found 104 shows with Extras. These could be people at a group support meeting. They could be wheelchair users wheeling across screens in a scene or walking by with crutches or a cane.

They even include one person who someone pointed out happened to be disabled as they passed.

Extras provide a huge benefit that people don't understand.

Extras help set the scene for the background of the world. By having visibly disabled extras in the background, the media is able to help create the idea that disabled people are just a part of the world.

That you can see a random wheelchair user wheeling by you on the average street and it's just an everyday occurrence.

We always encourage more disabled extras.

LGBTQIA Disabled Representation – A Big Surprise?!

We thought it would also be provocative to include the breakdown amount based on LGBTQIA representation.

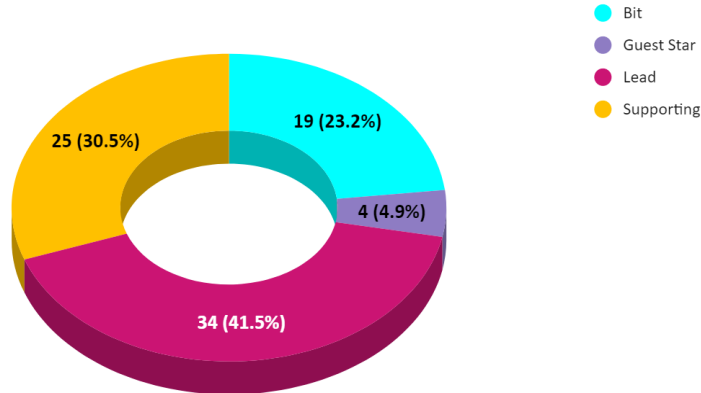
The results are actually shocking because we have not had this happen before within the Part Type category for our studies.

When it comes to LGBTQIA disabled representation by Part Type the vast majority of characters are Lead disabled characters!

And we are not talking by a small number – there are quite a few more disabled characters that are Lead characters.

Even more surprising is the fact that Supporting characters make up the next most representation by Part Type for LGBTQIA disabled representation.

LGBTQIA Disabled Characters by Part Type



There are 34 Lead and 25 supporting LGBTQIA disabled characters.

Bit characters are in third place with 19 characters followed by Guest Stars with 4 characters.

This is incredibly significant, because this shows that LGBTQIA disabled characters are actually getting really meaty roles compared to the vast majority of disability representation.

This doesn't necessarily mean the portrayals are good, but with more Lead disabled characters there's better opportunity for greater representation in general.

Essentially, there's a greater opportunity to find better representation because there's more opportunities for representation that are significant compared to what we see with Bit character representation in the greater disability population.

Lead LGBTQIA	Representation
Bisexual	12
Gay	13
GNC - Unknown	1
GNC - Gay	1
Lesbian	6
Trans - Lesbian	1

The Lead and Supporting representation are also very diverse offering multiple types of LGBTQIA disabled characters.

Supporting LGBTQIA	Representation
Asexual	1
Bisexual	4
Gay	6
Lesbian	10
NB - Unknown	1
Trans - Unknown	1
Trans - Lesbian	1
Trans - NB - Unknown	1

**Unknown above refers to Unknown Sexuality*

We were definitely not expecting to find that LGBTQIA disabled characters were more likely to get significant representation, because there are so few of these characters.

What this tells us is that Hollywood is not trying hard enough when it comes to disability representation – they slap disability representation on a bunch of characters and consider it business as usual.

Our whole goal is to get greater disability representation on television – and that’s why we believe that more LGBTQIA disabled people are going to be part of the process and leading to greater disability representation for all.

Now we look forward to seeing how this representation is broken down by motivation in our 2022-2023 study.

We wait with baited breath and excitement at this new development.

Disability by Network

The local networks have been competing for disability representation for years.

We once had a meeting with the head of diversity at CBS, where they talked about wanting to make strides in disability representation on television.

That was some years ago, and for a long time people have said that CBS is the network to watch for disability representation.

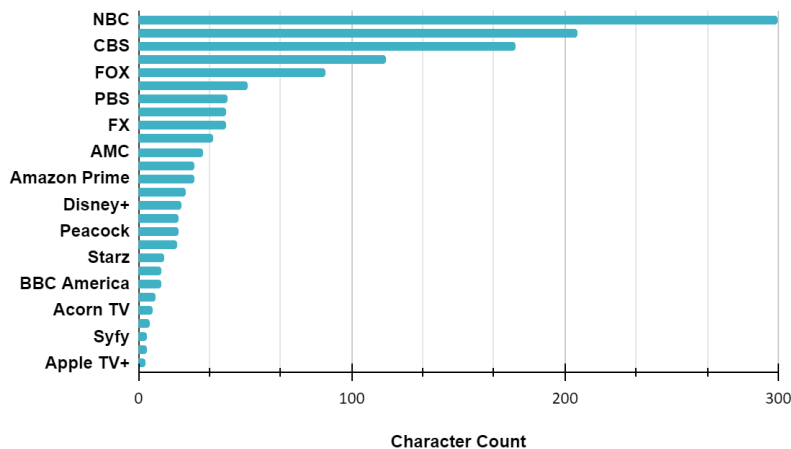
Over the years we've seen multiple initiatives with the network, and our 2018-2019 study had CBS as the top network for disability representation.

Then came our 2019-2020 study, and CBS fell to second place behind a new winner, NBC.

NBC has the medical drama we consider the best out of all of them when it comes to disability representation – *New Amsterdam*.

However, the show just ended its series run in January 2023, so that representation will only be included in our next study (Ashtyn has already watched it for 2023 – we've been multitasking doing two studies at once!).

Disabled Characters by Network



So, what network gets top honors this year? CBS? NBC? A new contender?

The winner is actually NBC with 300 characters!

CBS did not even come in second. The network came in third place behind ABC, which has 206 characters.

There are 177 characters on CBS. That's over 100 less than NBC.

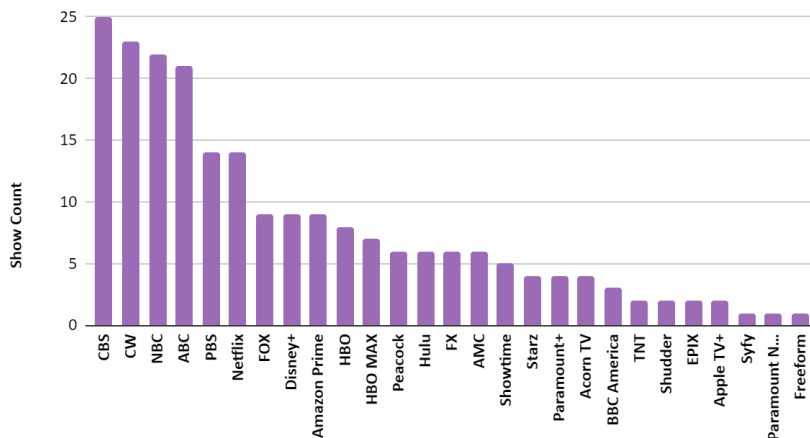
We also decided to break down network shows by how many shows feature disabled people, and intriguingly, it's not the same network with the most number of characters.

CBS actually wins this with 25 shows.

So CBS has the most shows with disabled characters – they just don't have the most disabled characters.

CBS is spreading their disabled representation around a little more than the other networks, but that just means they're more likely to have one or two disabled characters on one show, while other networks have multiple disabled people on individual shows at one time.

Disabled Shows by Network



There are more shows with disability representation on CW than NBC. These two networks round out the top three.

CW has 23 shows with disabled representation.

NBC has 22 shows. However, they spread 300 disabled characters across those shows.

Despite having the most shows, CBS had over 100 less disabled characters than NBC. This tells us that just because your network has more shows with disabled representation doesn't mean those aren't tokenized forms of representation – fewer characters means less disabled rep per show.

It also means that you can have more disabled representation by including more disabled characters on shows. NBC wins because they utilize the most disabled characters no matter how many shows they have.

Now we just have to find out what that representation is saying – which we will in our next study.

Disabled Mimicry

Disabled mimicry is part of the reason we started doing this study. The rampant amount of mimicry which is in turn rewarded with statues and praise by Hollywood made us passionate about greater inclusion and better representation.

You can't improve disability representation without addressing disabled mimicry.

We understand you may not have heard this terminology before. That's because years ago we created it as an alternative to terminology that marginalized disabled people, particularly Black and Brown disabled people said was harming their communities.

It replaces terminology like crippling up, cripface, and disability drag. We personally have problems with all of this terminology as it appropriates terms from other cultures and communities.

Disabled mimicry is the act of portraying disability, typically for a role on stage, in film, or on television, when you are either not disabled at all or don't have the disability you are portraying.

There are, of course, instances where portraying a disability you don't have is acceptable – for example wheelchair users might not always have the disability they are cast as having and people might not know or it might not be relevant to the story.

Disabled mimicry is specifically when a disabled person portrays a disability vastly different than the disability they may have – think a wheelchair user being portrayed by someone with a disability that does not include any mobility issues or does not affect their ability to walk or do physical things.

A Deaf person with no mobility issues is a great example – that casting would be considered mimicry.

The same would be someone with a disability who has great hearing but is cast as someone Deaf.

Say, an autistic or someone with dwarfism who takes the role but is not Deaf, and doesn't understand Deaf culture.

We don't have any examples of disabled actors that we know of, portraying disabilities they don't have in this study, but it has happened before.

The majority of people engaging in disabled mimicry though are nondisabled people playing disabled roles.

The vast majority of disabled characters are portrayed by actors who don't have enough biographical info or web presence to allow us to know whether they are disabled or not.

Out of 1348 disabled actors (playing 1342 disabled characters), 843 are actors with whom we have no idea if they are disabled or not.

We have discussed a little behind the reasoning why the disability status of so many disabled characters is unknown.

One reason could include the fact that so many disabled characters are small roles – primarily bit characters. These actors may not have biographies, pictures, or other things that help during our investigation into whether each character is played by an actor that is openly disabled.

That is incredibly common for this study. We would say that this is the leading reason why we don't know. We can't find information on the actor telling us one way or the other.

Another reason is because disabled actors can be afraid to disclose, and if they can hide their disability a lot of them will.

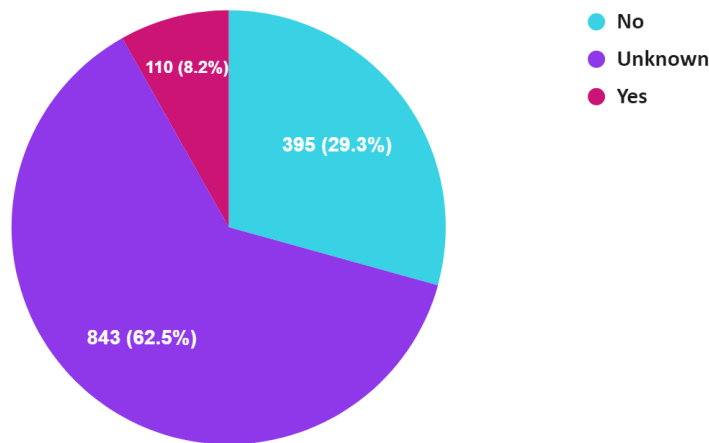
Hollywood is not kind to disabled actors, so hiding a disability is not surprising.

We've spoken with so many actors across the years who have lost jobs and access to audition in Hollywood by coming out as disabled – and some don't have a choice.

For those who do, though, coming out can be job limiting, so many don't.

We are certain that there are definitely some actors who are disabled that have not disclosed, for this very reason, who are a part of this study.

Disabled Characters + Disabled Mimicry



Others may not understand they are able to identify as disabled because society still has skewed ideas about what disability is.

For example many with chronic disabilities and mental health disabilities don't always feel they have a right to call themselves disabled even though they would benefit from some type of accommodation (which can include things like medication, treatment options, therapies, etc.).

If more people were aware of how many disabled people there are in the world (it's documented at over a billion, but think about how many people don't understand they are disabled or not – that number is higher we are certain), perhaps Hollywood would consider casting more disabled people.

Of course, even when we do know about disability there are more nondisabled people partaking in disabled mimicry than there are disabled people playing disabled characters.

There are 395 nondisabled actors playing disabled characters.

By comparison, there are only 110 disabled actors playing disabled characters.

That's about 8% of representation played by actual disabled actors.

Gay	Unknown	24
	No	7
	Yes	4
Lesbian	Unknown	12
	No	4
	Yes	3
Bisexual	Unknown	10
	No	6
	Yes	1
Trans	Unknown	2
	No	1
Trans - Lesbian	Unknown	2
NB	Unknown	2
Trans - NB	Unknown	1
GNC - Gay	No	1
GNC	Unknown	1
Asexual	Unknown	1

Out of 82 disabled LGBTQIA characters, 19 are played by nondisabled actors, and 53 we don't know if they are disabled or not.

Only 8 LGBTQIA disabled characters are played by actors we know are disabled.

Again, there is a huge overlap between disabled and LGBTQIA communities. There is no reason we shouldn't have an abundance of disabled actors playing disabled characters.

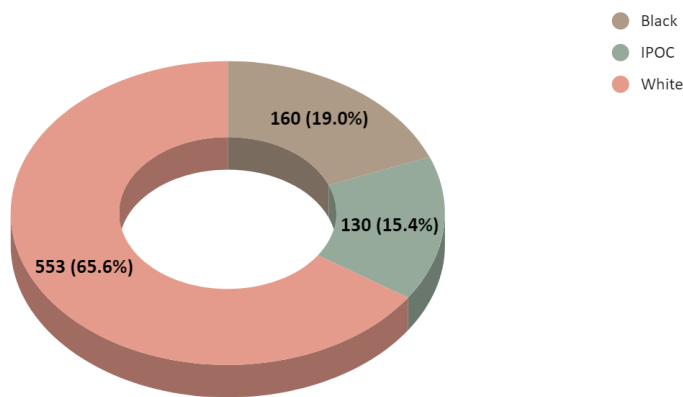
When it comes to race and disabled mimicry, white people obviously dominate everything, but when it comes to unknown sexuality, every community based on race has high numbers.

Hollywood does not like showing disabled people with whom you can look at visibly and determine they are disabled just by looking at them.

This is why so many disabled actors are excluded even from auditioning for disabled roles.

Breaking down the 843 disabled characters played by actors with unknown disability status by race we find this.

Disabled Mimicry + Race by Unknown Disability Status



There are 553 white actors, 160 Black actors, and 130 IPOC actors with unknown disability status.

The next section we are exploring is those that are actively participating in disabled mimicry.

These are nondisabled actors.

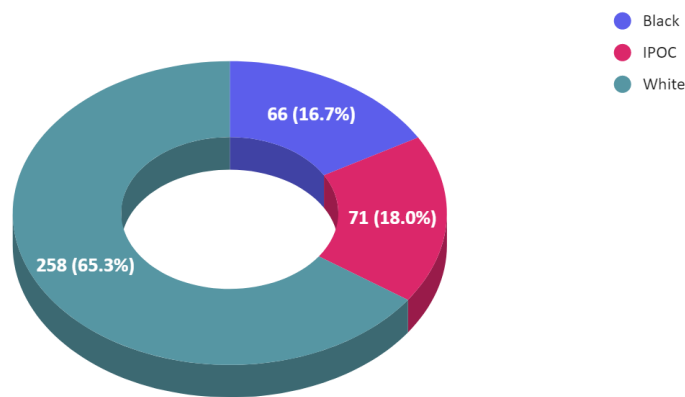
We are not trying to shame them.

Most of them don't understand the harm they are causing. Hollywood has taught them that these roles are "a challenge" and therefore will win them awards – so they are often highly coveted roles.

It's interesting to note that white representation stayed the same percentage wise as those with unknown disability status, for the amount of representation by nondisabled actors portraying disabled characters.

Black actors and IPOC actors have switched places, but the percentages are only off by a couple values, so even though the IPOC category had a few more actors than Black, who are engaging in mimicry, these communities are very close to the percentages they have for unknown disability status.

Disabled Mimicry by Race



We hope that by now anyone reading this recognizes that all of these patterns that continue repeating themselves when it comes to racial, sexuality, and gender breakdowns are a symptom of how disability is cast in Hollywood.

Last study, we wrote about how we believe that Hollywood is using a tally sheet when it comes to disability representation. We believe that all of these patterns support this hypothesis.

The final thing we're going to look at for this category is how many actors are actually disabled.

We already stated that only 6% of actors playing disabled characters are disabled actors.

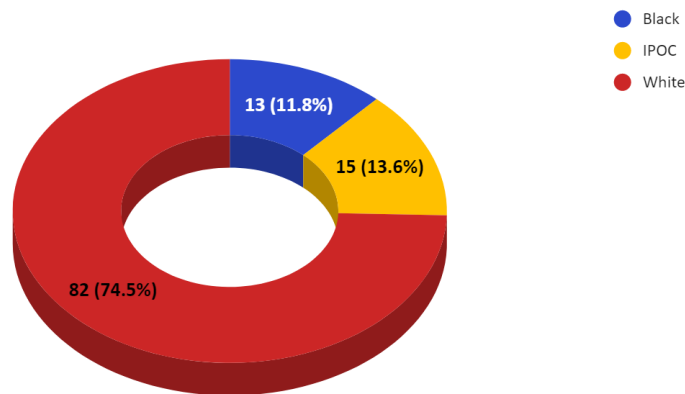
When we started our first study in 2018, we were angry when we found out that only about 10% of the actors playing disabled characters were known to be disabled themselves.

Our second study had the same exact result– about 10%. So to go down by 4% when the numbers are already so low is disappointing, infuriating, and confounding.

Hollywood claims they are getting better when it comes to representation but we've actually found less LGBTQIA disabled characters this year by 4%.

When you only have 10% authentic representation, 4% is a significant amount of representation to lose from that.

Disabled Actors by Race



So, the most intriguing part of this breakdown is the fact that white representation went up by almost 10 percentage points when it comes to authentic casting by disabled actors.

You know what this means?

White disabled actors received at least 10% more representation when it came to casting disabled characters.

In the two previous breakdowns, Black and IPOC representation split respectively approximately 20% and 15% of the representation.

For disabled actors playing disabled characters, this is reduced to between 10% and 15% per breakdown. This means about 25% of the representation is split between Black and IPOC representation leaving 75% to white disabled roles.

Again, when you have so few characters, those percentage points are huge drops in representation.

The disabled mimicry category has done a fantastic job of outlining all of the ideas we proposed not only in this paper but in our previous two papers.

The more familiar we become with disability representation the more patterns we are seeing that are exploitative, unfair, and help to explain why both disabled actors struggle to gain access to casting and auditioning in Hollywood and why disability representation is often unauthentic and harmful.

Our hope is that Hollywood will start paying attention to our work, will continue consulting us on representation when it comes to disability, and will allow us and other disabled creators to start sharing our work (scripts) on television (and in film).

Conclusion

As you can see, we have spent a lot of time putting in work to figure out exactly what's going on when it comes to disability representation on television.

After three studies we believe we have a firm idea of where disabled representation is and what needs to happen to make representation better.

This study was not surprising, but it still remains heartbreaking because we want representation to be better. We don't want to have to keep reporting how abysmal the state of disability representation and inclusion is in Hollywood.

It is 2023, and disabled people are tired of not being heard.

We are tired of not being represented.

We are tired of the harmful representation that is out there impacting the way we are treated, what legislation is passed about us – whether to hurt us or help us, and what opportunities we receive.

For many disabled people, every aspect of our lives that revolve around our disability are impacted by whether disability representation is good or not.

The disabled community has been dragged down, been mistreated, been given less than crumbs, and we are tired.

We know how to fix representation. We've been saying this, this whole paper. We've been saying this in every paper we've written.

We don't know how to get society to care about disabled people when they won't represent us the way we deserve to be represented.

At this point, we must demand change. We must demand Hollywood include disabled people. That means in front of the camera, behind the camera, on the crews, on the sets, in all stages of production.

The disabled community is resourceful. The disabled community is talented. There is no reason disabled actors should not be included in auditioning processes. They should not be relegated to only playing or auditioning for the disabled roles.

We are not just researchers. We are filmmakers. We understand how to make inclusion on set and in productions seamless.

Inclusion should not be something you must try to achieve. True inclusion is easy because you think about it from the get go.

Disabled people, especially disabled children, deserve to see themselves represented.

Disabled children are highly mistreated in society. Disabled children rarely get to see themselves anywhere.

While lack of representation can impact the mental and physical health of anyone, children are especially vulnerable.

Children are still trying to form a sense of identity, and part of their identity may involve their disability. If it does, they are especially going to struggle if they never see themselves represented.

They are going to feel alone. They are going to feel like they don't have a place in this world.

Accompany that message with portrayals like "better dead than disabled" and many disabled children have felt and will feel like their life is not worth living.

We know this is true because this is the story of many disabled children who have not seen themselves in the media, and some of them are adults now.

If disability representation does not improve we fear not only for disabled children today, but for disabled children in the future.

What legacy will they have to look back on as disabled people continue to be excluded, mistreated, and harmed by the representation currently on television?

What will representation be like for them if we don't change things now?

Notes and Support

Definition: *Disabled mimicry is the performance of disabled roles by nondisabled actors or actors without the specific disability represented, which is often reduced to mimicking disability through physicality and vocal intonation.*

We want to continue to acknowledge that not all Deaf/HOH, psychosocial, and/or chronically ill people consider themselves disabled.

These are based on intra-community discussions that we are not going to get into in this paper. However, we remain committed to releasing data on all of these communities as they all remain excluded and discriminated against by Hollywood.

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 (125 for each of them) every year. Most of the expenses come out of pocket although they receive 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](https://www.paypal.me/FilmDis)

Pay William Neeley, Data Analyst:

[paypal.me/neew98](https://www.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

Please Consider Helping Us!

This study was financed with a small grant from GADIM as well as the blood, sweat, and tears of Ashtyn Law & Dom Evans. They both put much of their own money and time into this project.

Without further funding we fear for the future of this study.

Further support would allow us to not only hire more people to help with this study, but also pay our data analyst. It will also support paying for studies looking at film, video games, web content, Broadway, and more!

Organizations & Businesses can financially support our FilmDis 2022-2023 Study into Disability Representation on Television by becoming a sponsor. [Email us for further details.](#)

About FilmDis: FilmDis started out as a discussion on Twitter back in 2014, by filmmaker, Dom Evans, about disability representation in the media. Today it is a full-fledged media-monitoring organization offering research, education, media creation/development, and consulting on disability representation in film, television, video games, and other forms of popular media. Check us out on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) for news, reviews, resources, and research studies into representation of all forms of media.

Also check out our website here: <http://www.filmdis.com/>

About Ashtyn Law: Ashtyn Law (She/Her) went to school for screenwriting. She is the screenwriter of *The Park*, *Rights for Waffles*, *Tracy*, *Chickadees*, *Overture*, *trip*, *Nance + Sydney*, and *Inamorata*. She is currently developing the scripts for four new television series'. She also works as a script consultant and tech writer. Ash has worked with major studios reviewing film and television including HBO, Showtime, Acorn, 20th Century Fox, CBS, ABC, and Disney. Ashtyn is neurodivergent with chronic health disabilities, and is also bisexual. Check her out on [Twitter](#).

About Dom Evans: Dom Evans (they/he) received their BFA in Motion Pictures Production from Wright State University where he learned from Oscar-winning filmmakers. They started their career as a child actor and public figure in their hometown of Toledo, Ohio. He also studied theater/acting at BGSU, WSU, and the University of Michigan – Flint.

They primarily work as a director and disability consultant for Hollywood. Dom has consulted on multiple films and television series for networks that include Lionsgate, Discovery+, and Netflix. He recently directed the music video for James Ian's "Spaces." They have also reviewed material for major studios including HBO, Microsoft, Cinemax, Starz, EA, CBS, Disney, and Sony. He is a neurodivergent HOH wheelchair user with chronic pain who is also trans, non-binary, and queer. You can follow them on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Tik Tok](#).

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