

# HOMELESSNESS & HOUSING SECURITY IN U.S. CULTURE:

HOW POPULAR CULTURE & NEWS  
DEPICT AN AMERICAN CHALLENGE

SEPTEMBER 2019



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# ABOUT THE REPORT

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## About the Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI)

The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), based at American University's School of Communication in Washington, D.C., is an innovation lab and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media for social impact. Focusing on independent, documentary and public media, the Center bridges boundaries between scholars, producers and communication practitioners across media production, media impact, public policy, and audience engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and academic research; convenes conferences and events; and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter. [www.cmsimpact.org](http://www.cmsimpact.org)



## About the Report

This report was prepared and written by a team at the Center for Media & Social Impact. CMSI director Caty Borum Chattoo served as principal investigator. The report was written by David Conrad, CMSI postdoctoral researcher, and Lori Young, PhD candidate at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, with the tremendous support of three American University (AU) School of Communication researchers: Aras Coskuntuncel, PhD candidate, Sarah Huckins, a graduate student, and Samantha Dols, a PhD candidate. This work was facilitated by the work and support of Varsha Ramani, CMSI communications and program manager. This work was funded by a grant from the Funders for Housing and Opportunity.

# OVERVIEW

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**The Center for Media & Social Impact research team of five individuals examined 150 episodes from 50 television programs, and 5,703 news articles published by 12 news outlets. All of the TV programs and news stories analyzed were released/published between 2017-2018.**

The group of 5,703 news articles reflects every news article that contained at least one mention of a housing stability issue (as captured by the keywords specified below), published by 12 high circulation newspapers (identified below) in 2018. Following a period of topical analysis and manual coding, we then removed articles that weren't relevant (i.e. obituaries with a fleeting mention of a person's past working to help the homeless), and identified a final set of 1,696 relevant articles that reflected the entire universe of news coverage on homelessness, affordable housing, and gentrification -- meaning that the group of 1,696 articles reflect every news article published on these issues by the 12 mainstream news outlets in 2018. This final set of 1,696 news articles (and their 1,362,719 million words) were then individually analyzed to produce the findings that follow.

“

*HOMELESSNESS AND OTHER HOUSING  
STABILITY RELATED ISSUES GARNERED LESS  
THAN 0.002% OF ATTENTION ON THE NEWS  
AGENDA IN 2018.*

”

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How are issues of homelessness and housing security portrayed in the landscape of U.S. entertainment and news, if at all?
- When issues related to homelessness and housing security are portrayed in U.S. pop culture and news, how are they framed?
- Who is telling the stories (gender and race/ethnic diversity)? And how does this matter?

## TWO LEVELS OF DISCOVERY

For this project, given the relative “invisibility” of housing-related issues in American media frames, we endeavored to reveal two levels of understanding:

- Whether housing-related topics were covered at all
- How housing-related topics were framed, when they were covered (i.e., who is represented, and who is invisible; who gets to speak, and who is silenced; what causes are identified and what solutions are offered)

“

*WHILE MORE THAN 40% OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN THE U.S. ARE BLACK, AND 39% ARE WOMEN, THE SHOWRUNNERS WHO PRODUCED THE “MOST WATCHED” TV STORIES OF HOMELESSNESS WERE DISPROPORTIONATELY WHITE (87%) AND MALE (76.1%).*

”



# METHODOLOGY



## RESEARCH APPROACH

To examine the issue of news and popular cultural portrayals of housing security issues in American media, we employed a social science research method in communication research – content analysis – which allows researchers to systematically and reliably examine patterns in portrayals and framing of complex social phenomena. Content analysis has been similarly employed for decades to examine such topics as gender representation and roles in American news and entertainment, portrayals of crime and criminal justice related to people of color, domestic violence, and other topical issues. It is the most rigorous way to make clear conclusions about how media content reflects “reality” in social problems.

## THREE TIERS OF EXAMINATION

### PART ONE



**Top Popular Culture**  
(most-watched U.S. TV programs)

### PART TWO



**Topic-Specific Popular Culture**  
(U.S. TV programs with precise  
narrative focus on the topic)

### PART THREE



**News Coverage**  
 (“most read” newspapers in the  
U.S., with adjustments to balance  
geographic and partisan diversity).

## KEY TERMS OF INTEREST FOR TOPIC DISCOVERY

Examining media content portrayals of such a broad, wide-ranging topic is not possible without first employing particular key terms with which to gather a sample of media materials. The terms below were informed by conversations with the Funders for Housing and Opportunity, as well as our own review of literature related to the topic.

### PRIMARY SEARCH TERMS



**homeless(ness)**  
**affordable housing**  
**gentrification**

### SECONDARY SEARCH TERMS



**affordable housing**  
**housing insecurity**  
**rent**  
**evictions**  
**section 8 housing**  
**public housing**  
**housing projects**  
**foreclosure**  
**displacement**  
**mortgage**



# KEY FINDINGS: TOP-LEVEL HIGHLIGHTS



# PART I: TOP POPULAR CULTURE

## WHAT ARE THE “MOST WATCHED” TV PROGRAMS (2017-2018)?

We analyzed 120 episodes selected from 40 of the “most watched” television programs in the United States, determined by the best available data (from Nielsen, Netflix, and HBO) and with considerations of study relevance (i.e. we excluded unscripted, reality programming or sports entertainment).

### THE SHOWS:

*Roseanne, This is Us, Mom, Life In Pieces, Kevin Can Wait, The Middle, Good Girls, American Housewife, Empire, Rise, Star, Glow, Young Sheldon, Modern Family, Man With A Plan, The Goldbergs, Superior Donuts, Black-ish, Life in Pieces, Disjointed, Atypical, The Big Bang Theory, Ballers, Curb Your Enthusiasm, Silicon Valley, Splitting Up Together, High Maintenance, Crashing, Big Little Lies, Sharp Objects, Law and Order-SVU, NCIS, Blue Bloods, NCIS: New Orleans, 9-1-1 (LA), The Good Doctor, Grey’s Anatomy, Chicago Med, The Resident, Code Black.*



A homeless veteran and her son are depicted outside of their car, where they live, in an episode of NCIS. The characters appear in only one episode.

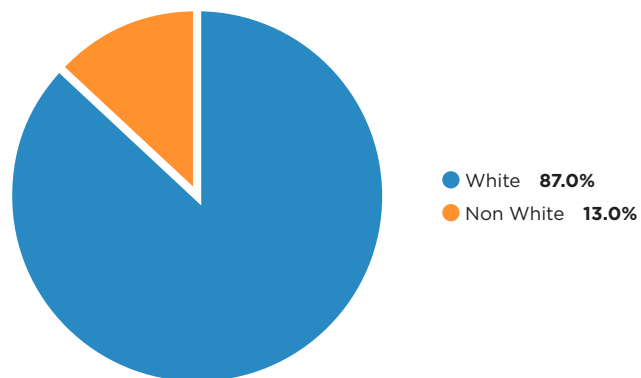


## WE FOUND THAT AMERICA'S "MOST WATCHED" TV PROGRAMS (2017-2018):

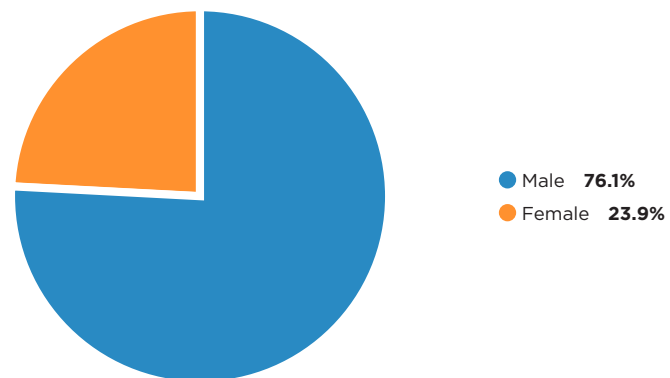
- **are telling Americans** that homelessness is a problem, through an abundance of references to national data and (harmful) narrative stereotypes of homeless victims and charity saviors.
- **lacked diversity of storytellers:** While more than **40%** of people experiencing homelessness in the U.S. are black, and **39%** are women, the showrunners who produced the “most watched” TV stories of homelessness were disproportionately white (**87%**) and male (**76.1%**).
- **didn't let homeless characters speak.** More than **80%** of the homeless characters were one-episode only characters, and more than half of them had less than 10 speaking lines. Nearly half of the homeless characters depicted were either ‘seen’ or ‘talked about’; they did not speak.
- **misrepresented the causes of homelessness:** **76%** of the narratives pointed to the characteristics and behavior of the homeless person as the cause of their homelessness (i.e. drug addiction, disability, criminal behavior, or mental illness).
- **mischaracterized homelessness** as a national issue that looks the same across the country.
- **oversimplified how to end homelessness.** More than **60%** of references to ending homelessness were related to supporting charity organizations. The next most common solution was for individuals to change themselves: to overcome their inclination for criminality (**12%**), to end their drug addiction (**12%**), or to get a job (**12%**). The least cited solution was for improvement in policies or systems of care (**6%**) related to housing stability and homelessness.
- **overrepresented two categories of homelessness:** Homeless characters are primarily assigned to one of two broad categories of homelessness (foster child or veteran) in **63%** of the episodes containing at least one homeless character. A homeless foster kid was present in **50%** of the episodes containing at least one homeless character.
- **oversimplified affordable housing issues:** **75%** of affordable housing references were part of discussions around a character's struggle to pay bills, rent, mortgage or utilities. The only other reference made was to the threat of eviction for not paying a bill.
- **rarely acknowledged the existence of gentrification in American life.** When gentrification is portrayed (n=3 out of 120), **it's most often oversimplified.** Gentrification is depicted as taking the form of changing communities and buildings, and as creating tensions between “outsiders and insiders.” It is framed as a “national” (rather than local) and “natural” (rather than deliberate or strategic) phenomenon.

## Who is telling stories of homelessness?: Race and Gender of showrunners (within “most watched” programming)

*Race of Show Runners (for “Most Watched” programming)*

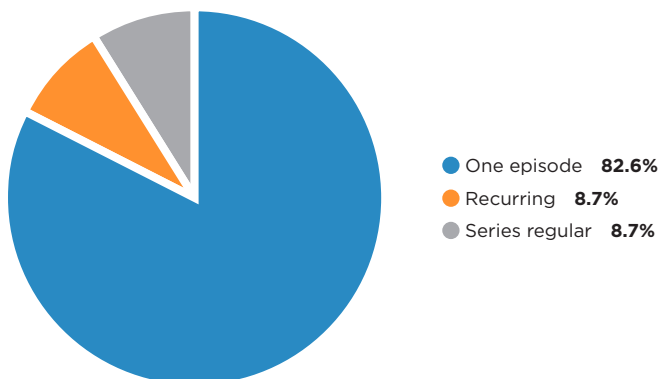


*Gender of Show Runners (for “Most Watched” programming)*

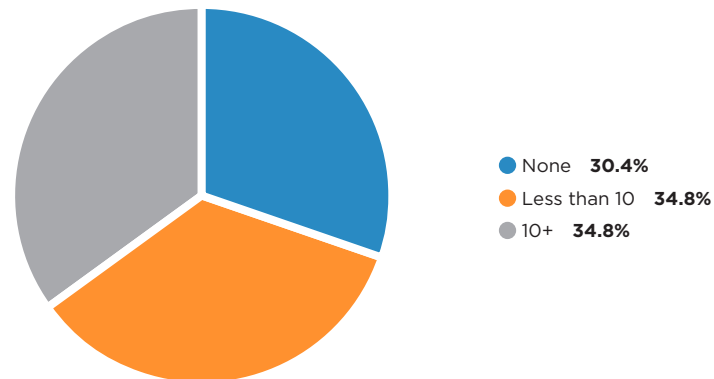


## How do we hear from people experiencing homelessness?: Role size and lines of dialogue (within “most watched” programming)

*Role Size*



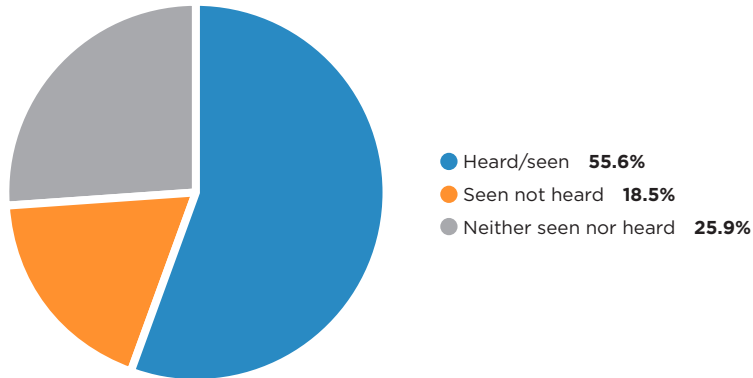
*Lines of Dialogue (in “Most Watched” programming)*





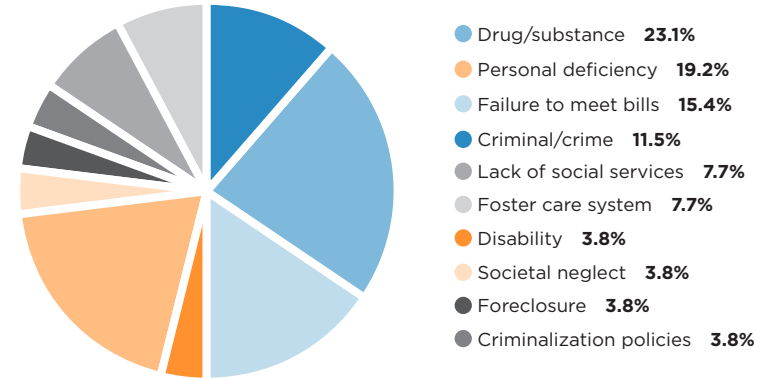
Nearly half of the homeless characters depicted (about 45%) were either 'seen' or 'talked about'; they did not speak. (within "most watched" programing)

Visibility of Homelessness (for "Most Watched" programming)



What causes homelessness? 76% of narratives pointed to the characteristics and behavior of the individual homeless person as the cause of their homelessness (within "most watched" programing)

Visibility of Homelessness (for "Most Watched" programming)



“

*MORE THAN 80% OF THE HOMELESS CHARACTERS WERE ONE-EPIISODE ONLY CHARACTERS, AND MORE THAN HALF OF THEM HAD LESS THAN 10 SPEAKING LINES.*

”

# PART 2: TOPIC-BASED POPULAR CULTURE

## WHAT ARE THE “TOPIC-BASED” TV PROGRAMS (2017-2018)?

We analyzed an additional 30 episodes selected from 10 programs that represent an emerging group of shows that are not necessarily among the “most watched” television programs, but which directly engage with issues of housing stability and gentrification.

### THE SHOWS:

*Vida, Shameless, Insecure, The Neighborhood, The North Pole, The Last OG, Atlanta, She’s Gotta Have It, The Conners, Brooklynification.*



*A recurring character, Papo, who is a homeless veteran, artist, proud Dominican, and one of the main character’s old schoolmates, is depicted in an episode of She’s Gotta Have It.*

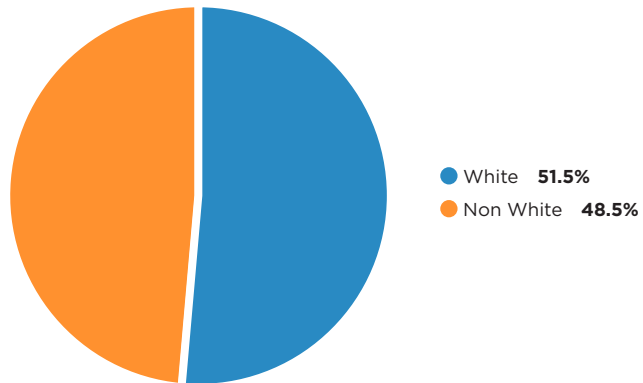


## WE FOUND THAT AMERICA'S "TOPIC-BASED" TV PROGRAMS (2017-2018 SEASON):

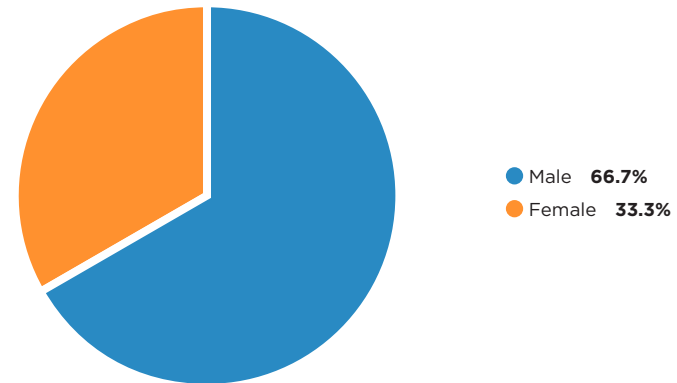
- **are showing Americans** portrayals and representations of homelessness and housing stability issues at a local level through (transformative) narratives of civic imagination.
- **reflect a greater diversity of storytellers.** Nearly half (**48.5%**) of the "topic-based" showrunners are people of color.
- **anchored narratives in specific neighborhoods and cities:** All but one of these programs contained storylines of homelessness and/or gentrification that were rooted in the unique contexts of specific cities and neighborhoods. Further, homeless characters were depicted as being part of the social/work/community circle of the show's main characters in every episode, and outside of the social/work/community circle in none.
- **let homeless characters speak.** EVERY homeless character that was depicted were series regulars or recurring characters, and all but one of them had more than ten speaking lines.
- **identified social systems and structures as potential causes of homelessness:** The cause of homelessness is predominantly placed on inequities and failures of social systems and structures (**67%**), and less frequently on individual characters/choices/actions (**33%**).
- **provided alternative narratives of homelessness and gentrification:** By rooting homelessness and gentrification into the core struggles and backgrounds of main characters on the show, many of the episodes provide a space of civic imagination through which avenues of public engagement and broadened understanding of housing stability are made visible.
- **depicted affordable housing issues as relating to more than just 'paying rent':** While the topic of affordable housing primarily rotated around conversations about struggles with "paying bills" (**44%**), considerable references were also made to Section 8 housing, public housing, housing projects, evictions, displacement, and mortgage.
- **made gentrification its focal point: 6 of the 10** shows analyzed are explicitly about a community's struggle with "gentrification." They were all created within the last year.
- **represented gentrification as complicated and multifaceted:** gentrification is depicted as signaling both the arrival of new buildings/business and the loss of buildings/business, along with the arrival of new communities and the departure of communities. Relations are also made to gentrification and affordable housing issues, evictions, and homelessness. There is a split over whether gentrification is a natural occurrence (**31%**) or the result of strategic/deliberate decisions by landlords and cities (**31%**); the majority of episodes (**39%**) contained references to both perspectives. There is also not a uniform agreement over whether gentrification is a positive (**12.5%**) or negative phenomenon (**37.5%**); in half of the episodes (**50%**), it is depicted as both.
- **frequently related gentrification with affordable housing issues:** nearly **1 out of every 4** references to gentrification were related to affordable housing issues.

## Who is telling stories of homelessness?: Race and Gender of showrunners (within “topic-based” programming)

*Race of Show Runners (for “Most Watched” programming)*

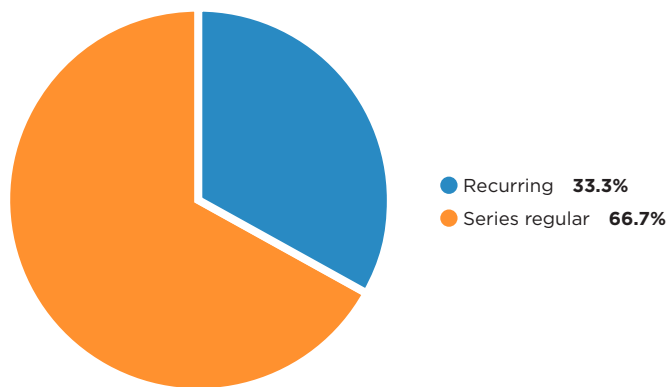


*Gender of Show Runners (for “Most Watched” programming)*

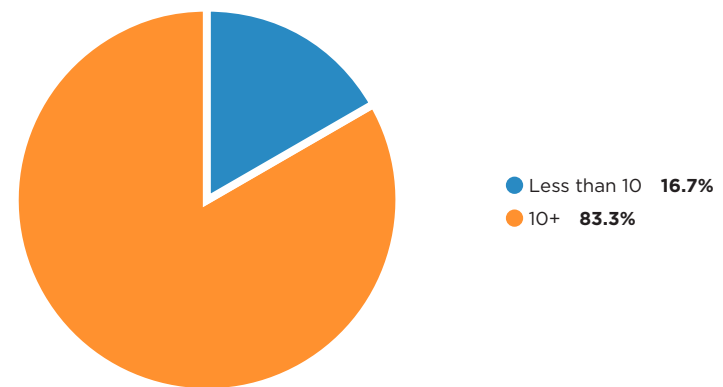


## How do we hear from people experiencing homelessness?: Role size and lines of dialogue (within “topic-based” programming)

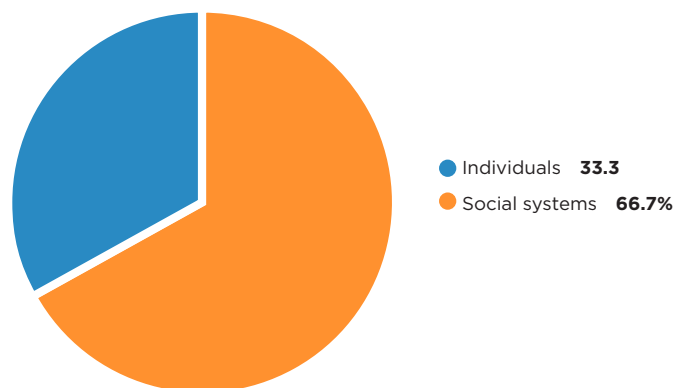
*Role Size*



*Lines of Dialogue*



What causes homelessness? About 67% of the episodes pointed to inequities and failures of social systems and structures (not individuals) as the driving cause of homelessness (within “topic-based” programing)



“

*EVERY HOMELESS CHARACTER THAT WAS DEPICTED WERE  
SERIES REGULARS OR RECURRING CHARACTERS, AND ALL  
BUT ONE OF THEM HAD MORE THAN TEN SPEAKING LINES.*

”



# PART 3: NEWS COVERAGE

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## WHAT ARE AMERICA'S MOST-READ NEWS OUTLETS (JAN. 1-DEC. 31, 2018)?

We analyzed the 2018 news coverage in twelve of the “most read” mainstream print news outlets in the country, with adjustments to balance geographic and partisan diversity in order to increase the generalizability of findings.

### THE NEWSPAPERS:

*Los Angeles Times, Seattle Times, New York Times, (Minneapolis) Star Tribune, Denver Post, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Houston Chronicle, Tampa Bay Times, USA Today.*

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*NEARLY 90% OF ARTICLES ABOUT HOUSING STABILITY FOCUSED EXCLUSIVELY ON ONE OF THE THREE MAIN ISSUES (HOMELESSNESS, AFFORDABLE HOUSING, OR GENTRIFICATION).*

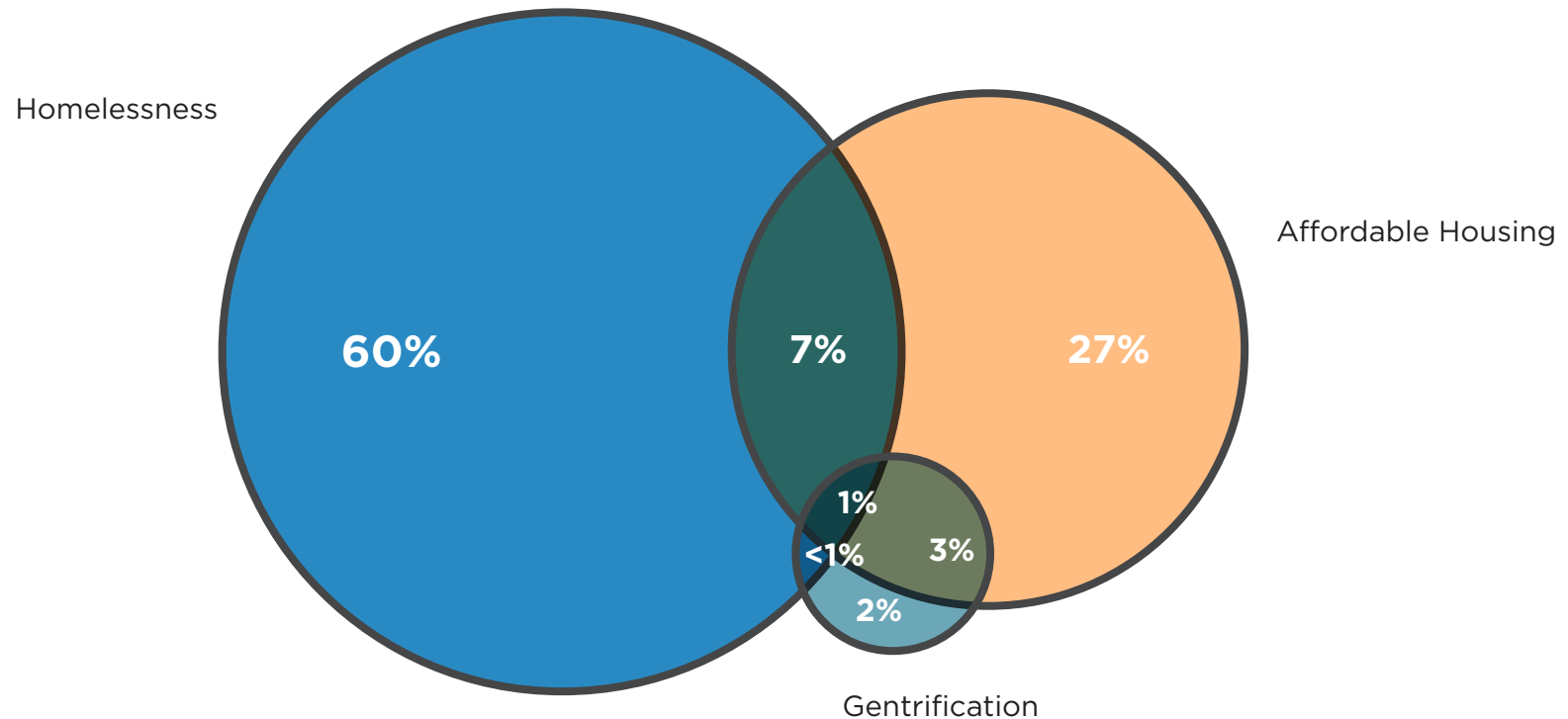
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## WE FOUND THAT AMERICA'S MOST READ NEWS OUTLETS, FROM JAN. 1 TO DEC. 31, 2018:

- **grossly underreported issues of homelessness, affordable housing, and gentrification:** In 2018, just **1,696** news articles were published, in total, on housing stability related issues across **12** of the country's "most read" newspapers. This means that a meager total of **5 stories each day on housing stability were published nationwide**, across the twelve leading newspapers, in 2018. In other words, **homelessness and other housing stability related issues garnered less than 0.002 percent of attention on the news agenda in 2018.**
- **covered housing stability far less if its political partisanship leaned center or right:** Center and right-leaning newspapers cover housing stability far less than left-leaning newspapers. The newspapers which covered housing stability the most were left-leaning outlets on the west coast. Outlets with the least coverage of housing stability were in the South or South Atlantic and were much more likely to be center or right-leaning.
- **oversimplified and isolated housing stability issues:** nearly **90%** of articles about housing stability focused exclusively on one of the three main issues (homelessness, affordable housing, or gentrification). In other words, the intersections and relationships between these issues are overwhelmingly being ignored. A mere one percent of the newspaper coverage (n=18) included a thematic engagement with all three aspects of issues surrounding housing insecurity.
- **often only referenced homelessness as fleeting:** **50%** of news articles that mention "homelessness" are single mentions. That is, when the keyword "homeless\*" is employed, it is just as likely to be a single mention within an article about some other topic as it is to be a more substantive mention (two or more times) reflecting the issue itself.
- **overwhelmingly promoted philanthropic efforts:** 1 in 5 articles about homelessness were focused on philanthropy and charity efforts. And about **1 in 3** of the solutions promoted to end homelessness pointed to philanthropic efforts, more than any other solution.
- **primarily represented homelessness as a policy story:** The most common subtopics within news coverage on homelessness were policy conversations (**33%**), followed by philanthropy (**19%**), shelters (**18%**), encampments (**14%**), crime (**14%**), and, lastly, profiles of individuals who were experiencing homelessness (**7%**).
- **disproportionately linked race and ethnicity (especially indigenous peoples) with coverage on encampments, while ignoring race and ethnicity in coverage of shelters, policy and philanthropy:** When reporting about homelessness coverage on encampments, it was dominated by language of race and ethnicity (**44% of mentions**), specifically about indigenous peoples. Yet, race and ethnicity were largely invisible within reporting on sheltering (**2%**), philanthropy (**3%**) and policy (**8%**) efforts. In other words, race and ethnicity is not mentioned when the news discusses helping or sheltering of the homeless. Race and ethnicity dominate, however, within discussions of sweeps, evictions, criminalization and decriminalization policies, dangerous spaces, health scares, and health interventions.

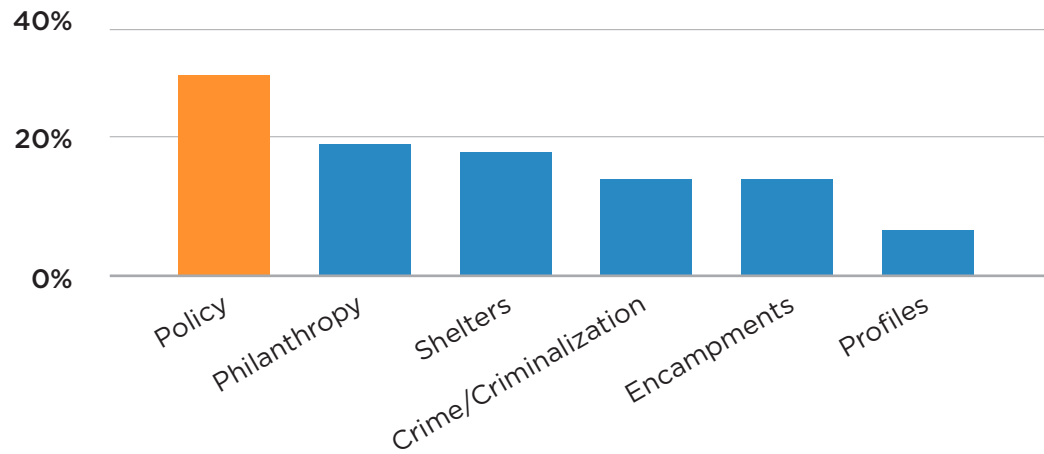
- **cited structural causes as the leading contributor to homelessness, affordable housing, and gentrification:** the driving forces of homelessness are predominantly attributed more to structural causes (**62%**) than to individual causes (**38%**). Similarly, within affordable housing and gentrification coverage, about **90%** of references are attributed to structural over individuals causes.
- **rarely acknowledged the existence of gentrification in American life:** Almost **70%** of news articles on housing stability focus on or mention issues relating to homelessness; **38%** focus on or mention issues relating to affordable housing; and less than seven percent include some mention of gentrification.

**Focus of newspaper coverage:** About 90% of articles about housing stability focused exclusively on one of the three main issues. The intersections and relationships between these issues are overwhelmingly being ignored.

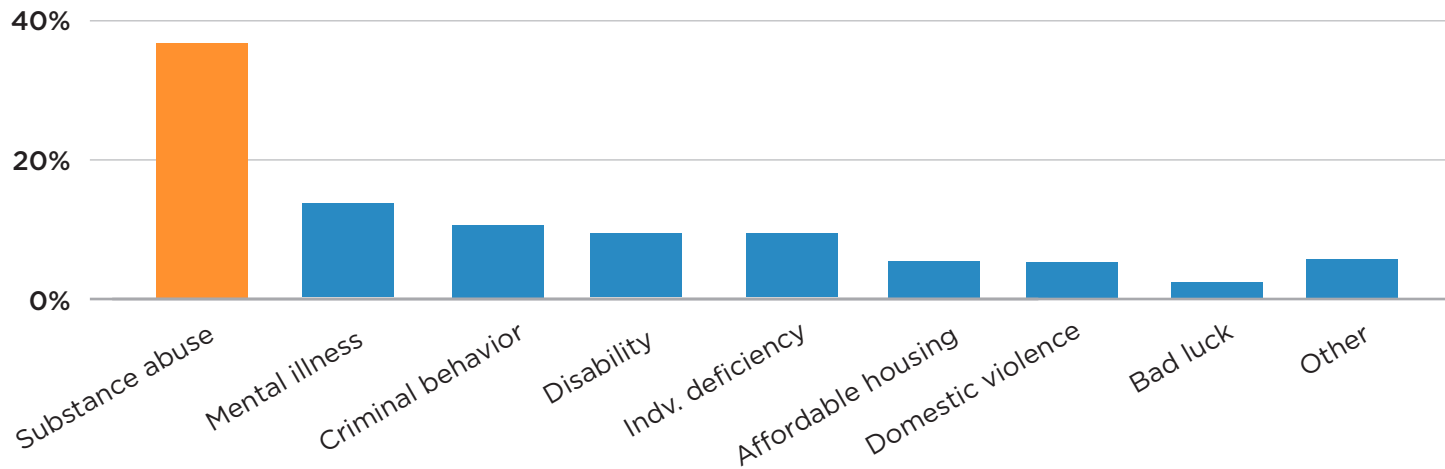




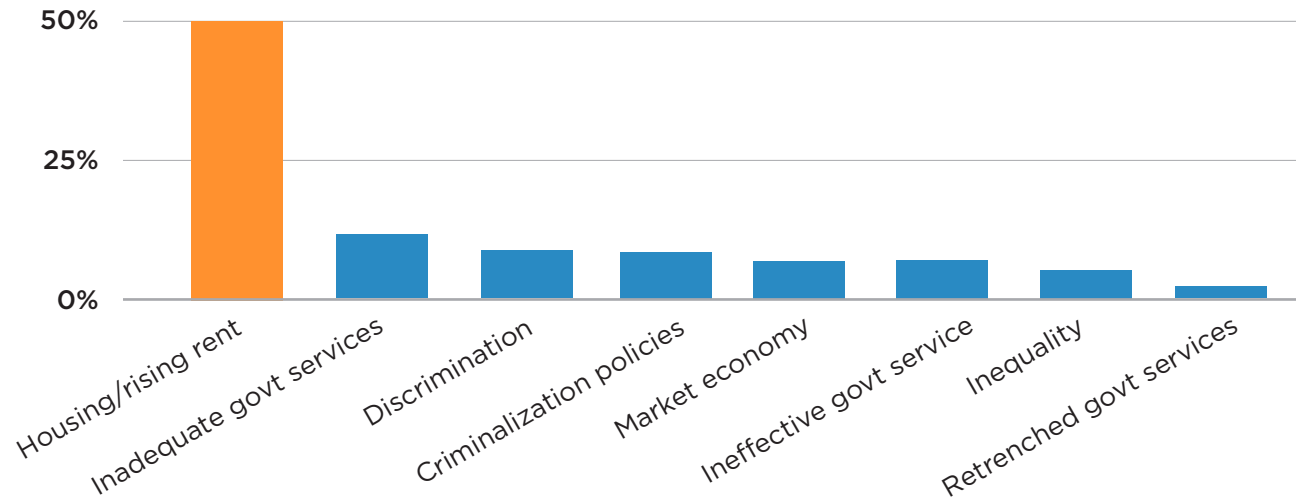
### Focus of homelessness coverage: Primarily represented homelessness as a policy story



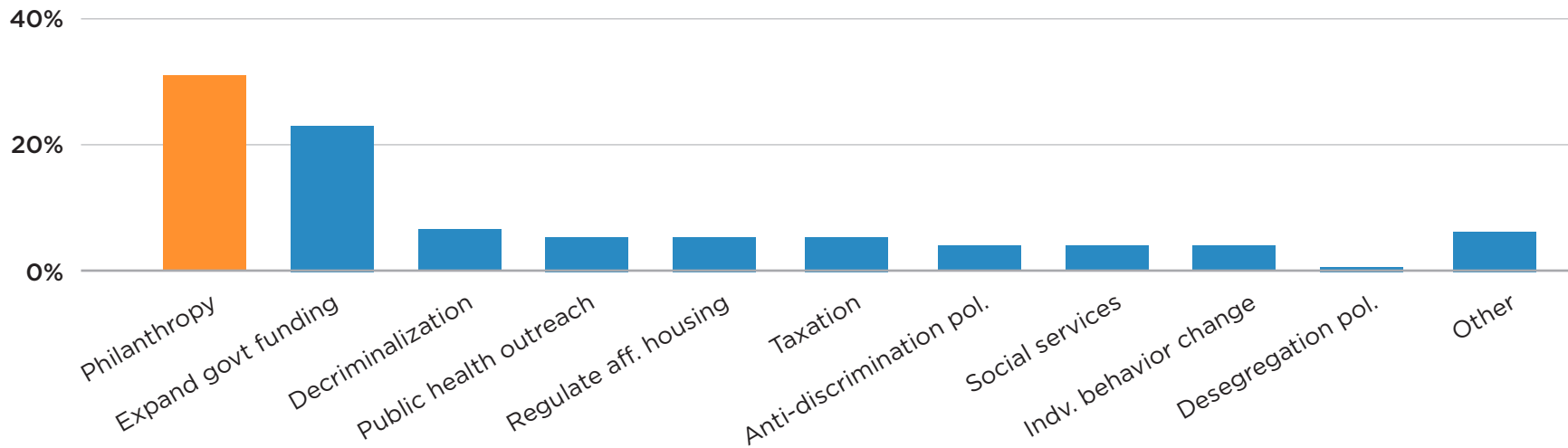
### Depictions of Cause: When about the individual, focus is on substance abuse



### Depictions of Cause: When about structures/systems, focus is on rising rent and availability of housing



### Solutions in homelessness coverage: Focus on philanthropy





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