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Rural, Midwestern, and Southern U.S. Viewers Want to See Work and Family Issues on Screen

In a segmented media and cultural environment, the demand for relatable work-family depictions is universal.

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Agnes (Eva Victor) stands outside her rural New England Home in Sorry, Baby (2025).

Forty-six million people live in rural communities in the United States.[1] Small- and mid-size Southern communities are among the fastest growing in the country, and Hollywood has always had a fascination with "middle America" and the midwestern "heartland," which 70 million people call home.[2] To compete for viewership, studios and platforms must consider how television shows and films serve populations that may be underrepresented in industry conversations, including viewers far from Hollywood and other urban production and creative centers.

A new analysis of survey responses among U.S. TV and film viewers, collected by MarketCast in 2025 for the Re-Scripting Gender, Work, Family, and Care initiative at New America, explores the perspectives of streaming audiences living in rural communities and in the Midwest and South.[3] We find that, in a time of media fragmentation and cultural divisions, work and family narratives can be a powerful unifying force across regions and community sizes. This new analysis adds to our overall findings that these stories resonate with viewers regardless of political affiliation or personal beliefs about family and gender roles.[4]

More specifically, viewers living in the Midwest, the South, and in rural communities are interested in seeing authentic, relatable work-family dynamics in solutions-oriented stories that explore diverse cultures and circumstances. These viewers decide which services their households subscribe to, and they are clear about what they want to see on screen.

Viewers in Every Region Want Work-Family Dynamics on Screen

Nationwide, more than nine in 10 viewers (92 percent) say it's important that TV shows and films depict realistic work and family scenarios woven into characters' everyday lives. Rural (91 percent), Midwestern (90 percent), and Southern viewers (94 percent in the Southeast, 86 percent in the Southwest) agree. Across all geographies, relatable family and workplace situations are also resonant with supermajorities of viewers, as shown in Table 1.

For media companies, there's a business imperative to include these stories in shows and films. More than six in 10 viewers (65 percent) across all regions and community types nationwide say that seeing authentic work, family, and caregiving stories makes them more likely to subscribe or stay subscribed to a streaming service.

- Among rural viewers specifically, 62 percent say they'd be more likely to subscribe or stay subscribed to a service with content exploring these topics.
- Southwestern (71 percent), Southeastern (69 percent), and Midwestern (64 percent) viewers are especially likely to say these stories would motivate subscription decisions.

TABLE 1

Across the U.S., Most Viewers Say It's Important to See Relatable Work-Family Dynamics

Percent of viewers who say it's important to see each topic on-screen

Audience	Realistic Work and Family Scenarios	Relatable Family Challenges	Relatable Workplace Situations
U.S. Viewers Overall	92%	89%	83%
Rural	91%	89%	82%
Midwest	90%	91%	84%
Southeast	94%	90%	84%
Southwest	86%	86%	77%

Source: Survey of 1,130 U.S. streaming viewers, aged 18–59, conducted by MarketCast for New America, April 2025. Data are weighted to reflect the demographic composition of the U.S., with Black, Latine, and Asian over-samples.

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Familiar Challenges and Dialogue Drive Perceptions of Authenticity

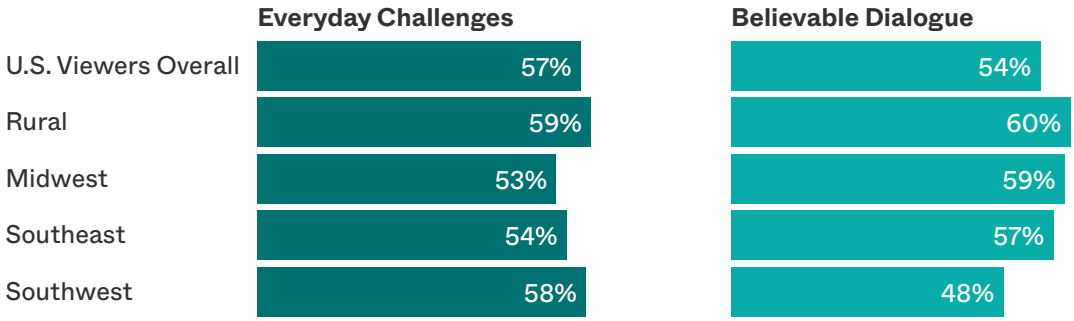
Most U.S. streaming viewers (79 percent) say that it's easier to connect with characters who face challenges similar to the ones they've experienced in their work and family lives. Southeastern viewers (83 percent) are particularly likely to say that relatable challenges make a character easier to connect with.

For most viewers, authenticity derives from characters facing challenges that happen to everyday people (57 percent) and believable dialogue (54 percent), and this is true for six-in-ten rural viewers—see Figure 1.

FIGURE 1

U.S. Viewers Say Everyday Challenges and Believable Dialogue Are Key to Making a Show or Film Feel Authentic

Percentage of viewers who say each element is most likely to make depictions of work, family, and care feel authentic.



Note: Respondents selected up to 3 elements; the two most frequently chosen are shown.

Source: Survey of 1,130 U.S. streaming viewers, aged 18–59, conducted by MarketCast for New America, April 2025. Data are weighted to reflect the demographic composition of the U.S., with Black, Latine, and Asian over-samples.

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Audiences nationwide are interested in seeing relatable dynamics and conversations in all types of stories, including high-concept shows and films whose settings or core conflicts may less resemble everyday life. Viewers—especially those in the Southwest—expressed interest in seeing work and family issues woven into stories that primarily focus on:

- scientific and technological advancements and their impacts;
- extinction-level/apocalyptic events; and
- extreme weather and climate.

Majorities of audiences nationwide would like to see realities around jobs, money, and the distribution of household labor better reflected on screen. Majorities are also dissatisfied with status quo representation and want content to be more realistic.[5] Rural, Midwestern, and Southern viewers—who often have distinct real-life experiences with gender roles, work-family dynamics, and caregiving due to demographic, economic, and cultural factors—have an even stronger desire for more realistic representation.[6]

- Midwestern viewers are especially eager for more representation of dads as competent co-parents who simultaneously manage work (63 percent believe content should be more realistic).
- Rural audiences are eager to see women depicted as key breadwinners (60 percent).
- Southeasterners are interested in seeing more realistic depictions of family caregiving (56 percent).
- Southwesterners would like to see more realistic discussions of child care costs (62 percent) and the unique challenges faced by student parents (57 percent).
- Southwesterners are also eager to see more realistic stories about poverty and health that explore systemic factors rather than solely blaming individuals (62 percent).

Audiences Across Regions and Communities Crave Stories that Explore Solutions

More than nine in 10 viewers nationwide (91 percent) say it's at least somewhat important to see characters looking for and finding solutions to relatable challenges, with a majority (51 percent) saying it's very important—see Figure 2. Southeastern viewers place particular importance on solutions-seeking in storytelling—57 percent say this is very important to see.

Eighty-five percent of viewers nationwide say it's important to see lessons they can apply to their own lives on screen, including 44 percent who say this is very important.

- In particular, southern audiences (87 percent of Southeastern and 86 percent of Southwestern respondents) consider this important.
- Similarly, more than eight in 10 rural (84 percent) and Midwestern (81 percent) viewers place importance on shows and films that can help them solve problems in their own lives.

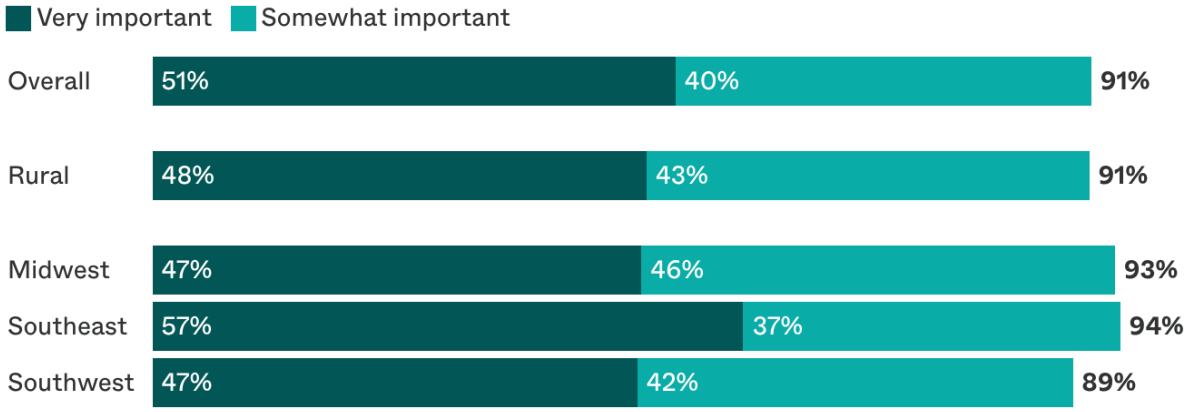
Of the possible solutions they were presented with, all viewers—including rural, Southern, and Midwestern ones—are interested in seeing characters who:

- speak with pride rather than apology about being parents or caregivers;
- are supported by bosses and co-workers;
- navigate conflict with family and co-workers related to work and care; and
- look for and find resources like paid leave, child care, and elder care.

FIGURE 2

U.S. Audiences Say It's Important to See Solutions-Oriented Stories on Screen

Percentage of survey respondents who say it's important to see "characters looking for and finding solutions to relatable challenges" in TV shows and films



Source: Survey of 1,130 U.S. streaming viewers, aged 18–59, conducted by MarketCast for New America, April 2025. Data are weighted to reflect the demographic composition of the U.S., with Black, Latine, and Asian over-samples.

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Depictions of Diverse Cultures and Family Structures Are Widely Appealing

The vast majority of viewers nationwide (85 percent) say it's important to see characters of varied cultures and family or individual circumstances on screen, contradicting the cultural myth that audiences prefer homogeneity that reflects their own identity, experience, or community.

- Eighty-five percent of rural viewers say seeing characters from a range of backgrounds is important to them.
- Similar shares of Midwestern (84 percent), Southeastern (86 percent), and Southwestern (90 percent) viewers say this is important.

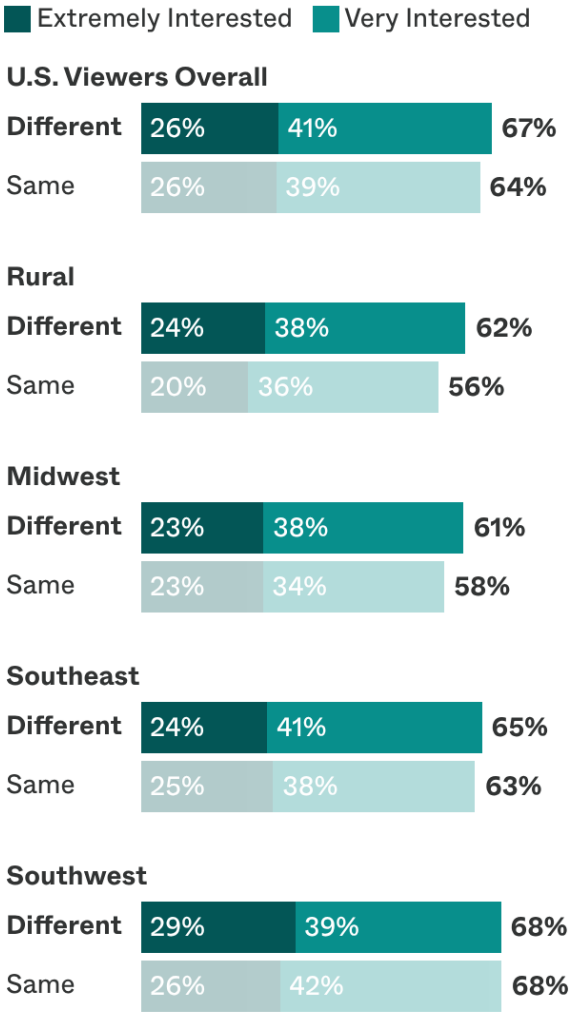
A large majority of U.S. viewers say they are extremely or very interested in seeing families with racial/ethnic backgrounds different from their own (67 percent). Across regions and community types, audiences are equally or more interested in seeing families different from their own, compared to seeing families who share their racial or ethnic background–see Figure 4.

Viewers nationwide are also more interested in seeing families with income levels different from their own (70 percent). A large majority of rural (64 percent), Midwestern (67 percent), Southwestern (63 percent), and Southeastern (73 percent) viewers are interested in seeing characters from different income levels.

FIGURE 3

A Majority of Viewers Are Interested in Seeing Families of Different Races/Ethnicities, Regardless of Geography

Percentage of viewers who are interested in seeing families with different racial/ethnic backgrounds from their own on screen



Source: Survey of 1,130 U.S. streaming viewers, aged 18–59, conducted by MarketCast for New America, April 2025. Data are weighted to reflect the demographic composition of the U.S., with Black, Latine, and Asian over-samples.

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In Their Own Words: Topics Viewers Want to See More

Survey respondents described a work, family, or care story that they'd like to see.

Rural viewers were most likely to bring up disability, serious illness, and eldercare.

Millennial man living in a rural western community:

> *I would like to see the real-life scenario of a working adult having to take care of his dementia-inflicted parent that is slowly progressing into Alzheimer's disease while still having to focus on the work at his job.*

Gen X woman living in a rural southwestern community:

> *…Having early retirement or leaving the workforce early—like in my 50s—because of health problems, and people—even my children—mak[ing] me feel like I am a burden.*

Southern viewers were most likely to describe financial stressors and working families.

Millennial man living in a southeastern city:

> [Stories about modern parenthood that] honestly reflect our daily struggles: fathers caring for children between work meetings, and mothers fighting for their dreams without guilt. A true drama that blends fatigue with achievement, and shows the beauty of family chaose when both parents make equal sacrifices.

Gen Z woman living in a rural southeastern community:

> *Maybe a single mom navigating life raising kids without her significant other, or stories revolving around people and what growing up and aging is like. Coming of age stories with teens or young adults losing themselves but also finding themselves [is] something that people can seriously relate to…*

Gen X man living in a southeastern city:

> *Money challenges, trying [to] make end[s] meet week to week and deciding what to cut back on from the normal day to day.*

Methodology

Data in this brief is from the New America/MarketCast April 2025 survey of 1,310 U.S. streaming viewers aged 18-59 who watch 5 or more hours of content per week. The margin of error (MOE) for the full sample is ±2.7 percentage points at a 95 percent confidence interval; the MOE for subgroups is larger.

Find our original press release, topline, and report at https://newamerica.org/entertainment/2025research.

For this analysis, respondents were categorized as living in rural, urban, or suburban communities based on National Center for Education Statistics locale classifications, which assign community-density labels to each U.S. zip code. Regions were designated by Marketcast. Data includes 470 rural viewers (MOE ±4.5 percentage points), 286 Midwestern viewers (MOE ±5.8), 314 Southeastern viewers (MOE ±5.5), and 149 Southwestern viewers (MOE ±8.0).

About Us

The Re-Scripting Gender, Work, Family, and Care initiative at New America advises entertainment creators and executives on how to tell rich, meaningful stories and amplify the great shows and films already doing so. We aim to see more authentic stories on screen that engage and grow audiences by reflecting their own lived experiences and aspirations. To learn more, visit newamerica.org/entertainment.

Endnotes

1 Tracey Farrigan et al., *Rural America at a Glance: 2024 edition (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2024), https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details?pubid=110350*.

2 Tim Henderson, "New Census Estimates Show Movers Swelling Population in Small Southeast Counties," *Stateline*, March 26, 2026, https://stateline.org/2026/03/26/new-census-estimates-show-movers-swelling-population-in-small-southeast-counties/; U.S. Census Bureau, "Resident Population in the Midwest Census Region [CMWRPOP]," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, retrieved April 2, 2026, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/CMWRPOP.

3 Vicki Shabo and Jasmine Heyward, *The Power of Stories About Work, Family, and Care on Screen* (New America, 2025), https://www.newamerica.org/insights/the-power-of-stories-about-work-family-and-care-on-screen/.

4 Vicki Shabo, *Breaking Out of a Gendered Box: Centering What's Most Human When Writing About Work, Family, and Care* (New America, 2025), https://www.newamerica.org/insights/breaking-out-of-a-gendered-box/

5 To evaluate perception of the status quo, survey respondents were presented with a series of findings from research conducted by the Geena Davis Institute and the Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project paired with data on realities for American families. For more detail, see Shabo and Heyward, The Power of Stories About Work, Family, and Care on Screen, https://www.newamerica.org/insights/the-power-of-stories-about-work-family-and-care-on-screen/#:~:text=When%20presented%20with,1.

6 Xin Qin et al., "Gender Bias in Cultural Tightness Across the 50 U.S. States, Its Correlates, and Links to Gender Inequality in Leadership and Innovation," *PNAS Nexus 2* (August 2023): 238, https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad238; Vicki Shabo and Hannah Friedman, *Health, Work, and Care in Rural America* (New America, 2022), https://www.newamerica.org/insights/health-work-and-care-rural-america/.