

# **Inequality Across 1,700 Popular Films: Examining Gender, Race/Ethnicity & Age of Leads/Co Leads From 2007 to 2023**

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Dr. Katherine Pieper

February 2024

**USC** Annenberg  
*Inclusion Initiative*

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The purpose of this study was to examine the gender identity, racial/ethnicity, and age of leads/co leads across the 100 top-grossing films from 2007 to 2023. The findings are awful, showing decreases in inclusion for women and women of color. Despite posturing, the legacy studios have dealt little or reversed course on inclusion in popular films. It is time for experts to guide their decision making rather than rely on internal mechanisms for change.

**Key Findings**

***Gender***

Across the 100 top films of 2023, only 30 featured a female-identified actor as a lead/co lead at the center of the plot.

The percentage of girls and women as protagonists in 2023 (30%) was substantially lower than the percentage in 2022 (44%). However, the results from 2023 (30%) were 10 percentage points higher than the results from 2007 (20%). Yet, females represent more than 50% of the U.S. population and half of the movie going audience.

Only 3 single led or co led movies in 2023 featured a woman 45 years of age or older at the time of theatrical release: Keri Russell (*Cocaine Bear*), Nia Vardalos (*My Big Fat Greek Wedding*), and Salma Hayek (*Magic Mike's Last Dance*).

32 films depicted a man in the same age bracket. For every 1 film led/co led by an older woman, there were 10.7 films led/co led by an older man.

The number of films that featured women 45 years of age or older as leads/coleads in 2023 (3) was significantly lower than 2022 (10 movies). The number of movies with women 45 years of age or older was not different than 2007 (1 film). In other words, if you were given only these two numbers, it would seem that nothing has changed for older women in 17 years.

***Underrepresented Status***

Of the 100 top films in 2023, 37% featured an underrepresented lead/co lead. Across those 37 films, a total of 38 lead/co lead actors were from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. 23.7% ( $n=9$ ) of the leads/co leads were Asian, 39.5% ( $n=15$ ) were Black, 7.9% ( $n=3$ ) were Hispanic/Latino, 2.6% ( $n=1$ ) were Middle Eastern/North African, and 26.3% ( $n=10$ ) were Multiracial/Multiethnic or from another race/ethnicity.

The percentage of films with leads/co leads of color significantly increased from 31 titles in 2022 to 37 titles in 2023. There also has been a notable uptick in the number of underrepresented leads/co leads since 2007 (13%). Notably, while still lower than the percentage of the underrepresented people

according to the U.S. Census (41.1%) 2023 was the closest year to reaching proportional representation. These changes are not due to the legacy studios but rather smaller distributors and international films.

A total of 14 movies across the 100 top films of 2023 featured a woman of color driving the plot. 2023 was lower than 2022, when 18 films were led by a woman of color, but still substantially above 2007 (1 film).

Only one film featured a woman of color 45 years of age or older in the leading/co leading role in 2023.

This was a decrease from 2022, when there were 5 and is on par with 2007. Comparatively, a total of 8 films in 2023 had a male-identified lead/co lead of color in the same age bracket.

Unsurprisingly, White men outpaced the total number of older underrepresented protagonists. A full 24 movies in 2023 featured a White male 45 years of age or older driving the plot. Older White men worked 24 times more frequently across the 100 top films of 2023 than older underrepresented women.

### ***Distributor***

The top distributors depicting female leads/co leads was Walt Disney Studios (46.1%) followed by Paramount Pictures (44.4%) and Warner Bros. Pictures (38.5%). The bottom feeders are “other” distributors (21.7%), Universal Pictures (21.1) and Lionsgate (20%).

For underrepresented racial/ethnic leads/co leads, the top performers were from “other” distributors followed by Walt Disney (38.5%) and Warner Bros. Pictures (38.5%). Those companies with the worst track record were Sony Pictures Entertainment (30.8%), Paramount Pictures (22.2%), and Lionsgate (20%).

Any increase in the percentage of underrepresented leads/co leads was due to the companies under the “other” distributor banner.

### ***Identity of Leads and Identity of Directors***

Of the 30 films with a girl or woman in a lead or co-lead role, 11 (36.7%) were directed by a woman and 19 (63.3%) were directed by a man.

Of the 70 films that did not have a girl/woman in a lead/co lead role, only 3 (4.3%) were directed by women. For women directors, the likelihood of directing a top-grossing film increases when the lead/co lead is a girl or woman.

Roughly half (51.3%,  $n=19$ ) of the 37 films with an underrepresented lead/co lead had an underrepresented director, while 48.7% ( $n=18$ ) did not.

Less than 10% (9.5%,  $n=6$ ) of the top-grossing films without an underrepresented lead had an underrepresented director while 90.5% had a white director.

## Inequality Across 1,700 Popular Films: Examining Gender, Race/Ethnicity & Age of Leads/Co Leads From 2007 to 2023

Katherine L. Neff, Dr. Stacy L. Smith & Dr. Katherine Pieper

Research Brief  
Annenberg Inclusion Initiative  
University of Southern California

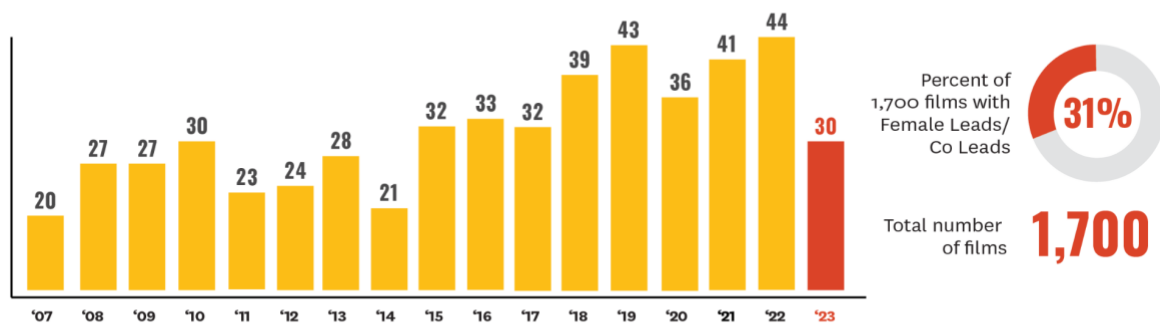
Longitudinally, this research brief examined the gender, race/ethnicity, and age of leads/co leads in popular movies across North America. This analysis included 1,700 top films, with a distinct focus on the 100 highest-earning fictional films released theatrically from 2007 to 2023.<sup>1</sup> Each film was broken down by type of protagonist: single lead ( $n=86$ ), two roughly equal co leads ( $n=10$ ), or an ensemble cast ( $n=4$ ).

Then, actors hired for these specific roles were evaluated for gender (male, female, nonbinary), and race/ethnicity (White, Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern/North African, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, Multiracial/Multiethnic or other).<sup>2</sup> These categories were then collapsed to create an underrepresented status vs. not (White). Finally, we assessed whether actors were 45 years of age or older at the time of a film’s theatrical release.

Below, we highlight key findings for gender, underrepresented status, and age of protagonists within movies with single or co leads only.<sup>3</sup> This brief does not delineate results on movies with ensemble casts as that information will be highlighted in our annual *Inequality in Popular Films* report later in the year. By identity group, the results from 2023 are presented and then those trends are compared to findings from 2022 and then 2007. The report concludes by summarizing key trends and offering solutions for change. Across all analyses, only differences at or above 5 percentage points were highlighted. This allows us to focus on meaningful change rather than trivial deviation

### DEI EFFORTS ARE FAILING WOMEN AND GIRLS AS PROTAGONISTS

*Prevalence of female leads or co leads across 1,700 films, in percentages...*



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### **Gender**

Across the top 100 films, 30 featured a female-identified actor as a lead/co lead at the center of the plot.<sup>4</sup> As illustrated in Infographic 1, the percentage of girls and women as protagonists in 2023 (30%)

was substantially lower than the percentage in 2022 (44%). However, the results from 2023 (30%) were 10 percentage points higher than the results from 2007 (20%). Put differently, films from 2023 were more likely to feature girls/women than the early 2000s. This echoes “progress” similar to 2010, but has not capitalized on any of the momentum of 2022. This trend also falls drastically short of the U.S. Census benchmark, where girls and women comprise 50.4% of the population.<sup>5</sup>

While focusing on gender overall is critical, an additional level of exploration illuminates which women actors continue to be underrepresented when it comes to employment access and opportunity. Focusing on age, we were curious if there were films with women 45 years of age or older at the time of theatrical release in a leading role.

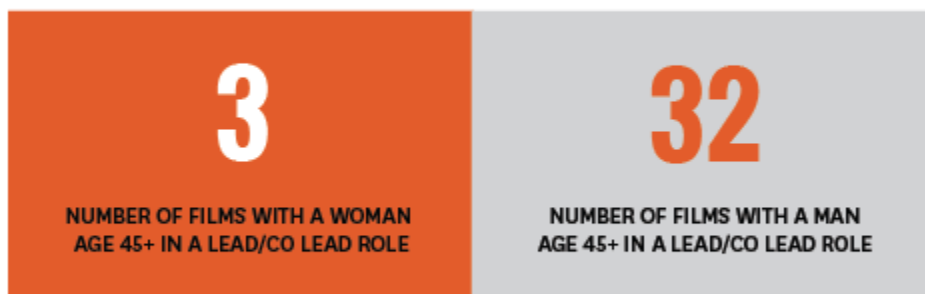
Only 3 single led or co led movies in 2023 featured a woman 45 years of age or older at the time of theatrical release.<sup>6</sup> Comparatively, 32 films depicted a man in the same age bracket. Put differently, for every 1 film led/co led by an older woman there were 10.7 films led/co led by an older man. It is important to note that these statistics do not count ensemble films of which two were driven by all women casts in 2023 (*80 for Brady*, *Book Club: The Next Chapter*).

The actors and 3 films with women 45 years of age or older, in box office order, were Keri Russell (*Cocaine Bear*), Nia Vardalos (*My Big Fat Greek Wedding*), and Salma Hayek (*Magic Mike’s Last Dance*). In contrast, these were the male actors 45 years of age or older who led a top-grossing film: Bert Kreischer, Bradley Cooper, Chris Sarandon, Cillian Murphy, Denzel Washington, Eugenio Derbez, Gerard Butler, Harrison Ford, Jason Statham (2), Jeffrey Wright, Jim Caviezel, Joaquin Phoenix, Keanu Reeves, Kelsey Grammer, Kenneth Branagh, Kristoffer Polaha, Kumail Nanjani, Leonardo DiCaprio, Matt Damon, Patrick Wilson, Paul Giamatti, Paul Rudd, Russell Crowe, Sebastian Maniscalco, Shah Rukh Khan (2), Tobin Bell, Tom Cruise, Vin Diesel, Will Ferrell, and Woody Harrelson.<sup>7</sup>

The number of films that featured women 45 years of age or older as leads/coleads in 2023 was significantly lower than 2022 (10 movies). More problematically, the number of movies with women 45 years of age or older was not different than 2007 (1 film). In other words, if you were given only these two numbers, it would seem that nothing has changed for older women in 17 years. Across the entire sample, 2018 (11 films) remains the stand out year for movies with an older woman protagonist.

### WOMEN AGES 45 AND OLDER ARE RARELY SHOWN AS LEADS

*Of the 100 top-grossing films in 2023, the number with leads/co leads age 45 and older...*



To summarize, 2023 is the same story retold. Girls and women were still less likely than boys and men to be the lead/co lead across the 100 top-performing fictional films of 2023. DEI efforts in Hollywood have failed women from all backgrounds. Older female actors continue to be dismissed and deemed unmarketable by Hollywood, something their male counterparts do not face. The gender gap only widened when we considered women protagonists 45 years of age or older.

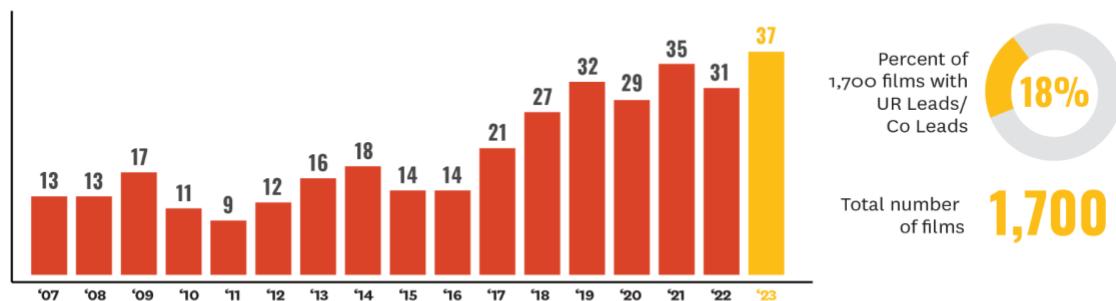
**Underrepresented Status**

Of the 100 top films in 2023, 37% featured an underrepresented lead/co lead. Across those 37 films, a total of 38 lead/co lead actors were from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups.<sup>8</sup> 23.7% (n=9) of the leads/co leads were Asian, 39.5% (n=15) were Black, 7.9% (n=3) were Hispanic/Latino, 2.6% (n=1) were Middle Eastern/North African, and 26.3% (n=10) were Multiracial/Multiethnic or from another race/ethnicity.

The percentage of films with leads/co leads of color significantly increased from 31 titles in 2022 to 37 titles in 2023.<sup>9</sup> As shown in the infographic, there also has been a notable uptick in the number of underrepresented leads/co leads since 2007 (13%). Notably, while still lower than the percentage of the underrepresented people according to the U.S. Census (41.1%) 2023 was the closest year to reaching proportional representation.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the number of underrepresented leads/co leads was close to reflecting the current U.S. demography.

**INCHING TOWARDS INCLUSION**

Prevalence of underrepresented leads or co leads across 1,700 films, in percentages



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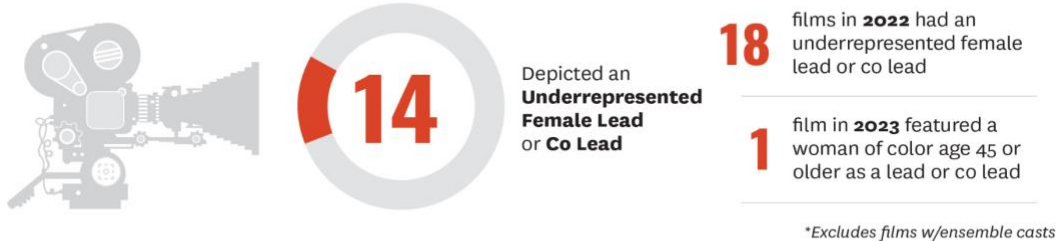
It was also important to intersect gender and race/ethnicity to examine the opportunities afforded to girls and women of color vs their male counterparts. As seen in Infographic 4, a total of 14 movies across the 100 top films of 2023 featured a woman of color driving the plot. 2023 was lower than 2022, when 18 films were led by a woman of color, but still substantially above 2007 (1 film).

In order of box office receipts, these were the films featuring women of color as leads/co leads in 2023: Halle Bailey (*The Little Mermaid*), Dominique Fishback (*Transformers: Rise of the Beasts*), Leah Lewis (*Elemental*), Melissa Barrera (*Scream VI*), Ariana DeBose (*Wish*), Fantasia Barrino (*The Color Purple*), Sophie Wilde (*Talk to Me*), Storm Reid (*Missing*), Salma Hayek (*Magic Mike's Last Dance*), Lana Condor

(*Ruby Gillman*, *Teenage Kraken*), Ashley Park (*Joy Ride*), Ayo Edebiri (*Bottoms*), Nichole Sakura (*Suzume*), and Greta Lee (*Past Lives*).

## WOMEN OF COLOR LEADS/CO LEADS ARE RARE IN TOP FILMS

Of the 100 top films in 2023...



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We continued our intersectional analysis by examining the gender, race/ethnicity and age of leads/co leads. **Only one film featured a woman of color 45 years of age or older in the leading/co leading role in 2023.** This was a decrease from 2022, when there were 5 and is on par with 2007. Comparatively, a total of 8 films in 2023 had a male-identified lead/co lead of color in the same age bracket.

Unsurprisingly, White men outpaced the total number of older underrepresented protagonists. A full 24 movies in 2023 featured a White male 45 years of age or older driving the plot. Put simply, older White men worked 24 times more frequently across the 100 top films of 2023 than older underrepresented women.

### **Distributor**

To understand how companies are doing on inclusion, we evaluated major distributors across the 100 top movies of 2023. The distributors were categorized as follows: Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Universal Pictures, Walt Disney Studios, and Warner Bros. Pictures. A mini major distributor, Lionsgate, was also included in the analysis. All movies distributed by smaller companies (e.g., A24, Roadside Attractions) were coded as "other." Subsidiary or specialty companies were categorized by parent organizations (i.e., Screen Gems and Columbia Pictures with Sony Pictures Entertainment). For this analysis, we focused only on the number of movies in 2023 with a female or underrepresented racial/ethnic lead/co lead out of the distributors' total number of movies in the top 100.<sup>11</sup>

## IDENTITY OF LEADS/CO LEADS BY DISTRIBUTOR

Across the 100 top-grossing films of 2023, the percentage released by each distributor with a...

GIRL/WOMAN LEAD/CO LEAD			UNDERREPRESENTED LEAD/CO LEAD		
DISTRIBUTOR	2023	# OF FILMS	DISTRIBUTOR	2023	# OF FILMS
WALT DISNEY STUDIOS	46.1%	6	OTHER	56.5%	13
PARAMOUNT PICTURES	44.4%	4	WALT DISNEY STUDIOS	38.5%	5
WARNER BROS. PICTURES	38.5%	4	WARNER BROS. PICTURES	38.5%	5
SONY PICTURES ENT.	30.8%	4	UNIVERSAL PICTURES	31.6%	6
UNIVERSAL PICTURES	21.1%	5	SONY PICTURES ENT.	30.8%	4
LIONSGATE	20%	2	PARAMOUNT PICTURES	22.2%	2
OTHER	21.7%	5	LIONSGATE	20%	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>37</b>

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As shown in Infographic 5, not one distributor has reached proportional representation for girls/women or people of color across the films they distributed in 2023. On gender, Paramount Pictures led, with 44.4% of its films centered on at least one girl/woman. For race/ethnicity, the leader was Warner Bros., as 38.5% of its films had an underrepresented lead/co lead. Films from three categories brought up the rear on gender: Lionsgate, Universal Pictures, and movies from other distributors. Less than one-quarter of movies from these groups featured girls/women in leading roles. For race/ethnicity, Paramount and Lionsgate fell to last place among distributors.

### Identity of Leads and Identity of Directors

Our research has shown that opportunities for women directors and directors from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups remain limited.<sup>12</sup> Given this, it was important to understand whether directors gain opportunities behind the camera when the lead/co lead is from a similar identity group (e.g., female leads/co leads with women directors; underrepresented leads/co leads with underrepresented directors). To investigate this phenomenon, we examined whether films with female or underrepresented leads were directed by individuals who were women or who identified with an underrepresented group.

Of the 30 films with a girl or woman in a lead or co-lead role, 11 (36.7%) were directed by a woman and 19 (63.3%) were directed by a man. In contrast, of the 70 films that did not have a girl/woman in a lead/co lead role, only 3 (4.3%) were directed by women. For women directors, the likelihood of



directing a top-grossing film increases when the lead/co lead is a girl or woman. Undoubtedly, when the number of top films starring girls and women drops, so too do opportunities for women directors.

A similar trend was noted for underrepresented directors and leads. Roughly half (51.3%,  $n=19$ ) of the 37 films with an underrepresented lead/co lead had an underrepresented director, while 48.7% ( $n=18$ ) did not. Underrepresented directors were much less likely to work on films with leads/co leads who were not underrepresented. Less than 10% (9.5%,  $n=6$ ) of the top-grossing films without an underrepresented lead had an underrepresented director while 90.5% had a white director. As with gender, the identity of the lead is connected to the identity of the director.

### ***Conclusion and Limitations***

After several years of encouraging news, it is disappointing to report that the percentage of films with girls/women in leading roles fell back to levels not seen since the mid-2010s. The numbers this year will likely be particularly shocking to those who anticipated a banner year for women, given the success of *Barbie*. It is a difficult lesson but one that must be restated: one film does not represent progress across the industry and cannot bear the burden of lifting the industry to inclusion.

One positive finding was that the percentage of underrepresented leads increased from 2022 to 2023. There are three important things to note about this finding. First, the increase is for men of color only. The percentage of films with a woman of color at the center decreased from 2022 to 2023. Second, the notable increase for underrepresented leads/co leads was not attributable to the legacy studios (Walt Disney Studios, Warner Bros. Pictures, Universal Pictures, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Paramount Pictures, Lionsgate). Stated differently, “other” distributors were solely responsible for the meaningful uptick in the number of films featuring underrepresented male leads. Third, this suggests that efforts around diversity and inclusion have not borne the hoped-for fruit that activists have desired for years.

Adding insult to injury are the findings that women and people of color have an age limit on their big screen careers. Only 3 women— including 1 woman of color— age 45 or older were at the center of top-grossing films in 2023. Only 8 movies had an underrepresented man in a leading role. Meanwhile, 24 white men age 45 or older were leads/co leads in 2023. The focus on younger actors means that the career sustainability of women and people of color is imperiled and that for audiences, movies rarely showcase the lives and stories of people in middle age or above.

As with all our reports, we must note two limitations with the methodology. First, we examined only the most popular theatrically-released movies of 2023. Less popular films might be more inclusive, but they are not the agenda-setting films released by major distributors. Additionally, films released directly to streaming services may also be more likely to feature a more inclusive set of leads/co leads. While those films are the subject of some of our other work, it is imperative to consider whether distributors feel that streaming platforms are the place to launch films with women and underrepresented leads— rather than giving them a shot at the box office.

The results this year point to an industry grown apathetic about efforts surrounding diversity and inclusion. While it is critical to celebrate the achievements of significant films like *Barbie*, there must be more than one or a handful of films that reflect the experiences of women and people of color each year. Until the industry stops hiding behind a single exemplar, change will remain elusive.

## Footnotes

1. The sample for the 100 top films of 2023 was pulled from Box Office Mojo on February 6, 2024. For the purpose of this longitudinal study, all documentaries, television shows, and short films were removed prior to selecting the 100 top movies. As specified by IMDb, the list featured the 100 top theatrically-released (within a year) films across North America (U.S., Canada, and Puerto Rico).
2. Categories and labels for the race/ethnicity variable were derived and adapted originally from the U.S. Census distinctions.
3. This report focuses on an actor's access and opportunities to a leading role. The focus on actors, rather than characters, is intentional. Each leading actor was classified by gender identity and race/ethnicity. If the report were to focus on characters, there would be missing data regarding voice actors who play characters that may or may not have a race/ethnicity (i.e., Jenny Slate voiced the male character Marcel in the film *Marcel the Shell*). Ultimately, actors with a gender, race/ethnicity, and age are the ones receiving opportunities and compensation independent of the type of character they portray.
4. While references to "female" or "male" may be used to identify sex assigned at birth in other contexts, we are using these terms for a character whose gender expression falls into these categories (male, female) at any age of the lifespan. This allows us to code girls/women and boys/men as female or male, respectively, without separate levels for children and adults. In 2023, there was only one nonbinary actor with a leading role, Ezra Miller (*The Flash*). No transgender actors were in a leading role across 1,700 movies. Additionally, there were no female-identified actors whose on screen character's apparent gender was identified as male or nonbinary.
5. See U.S. Census figures (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045223>)
6. There were 4 films that had an ensemble cast. With the inclusion of these films, there were two who featured women 45 years of age or older during theatrical release. *80 for Brady* and *Book Club: The Next Chapter* both had an ensemble that consisted of women over the age of 65.
7. Jason Statham and Shah Rukh Khan each led two films.
8. The 37 actors were only counted once, independent of the number of titles they appeared across the 100 top films.
9. While conducting analytics for this year's report, we discovered an error pertaining to the recorded race/ethnicity of one protagonist in an external database across two films. This has been corrected and updated in our 2023 report updating the number of films with an underrepresented lead/co lead in 2022 from 29 to 31 and the number of films with an underrepresented female lead/co lead in 2022 from 16 to 18.
10. See U.S. Census figures (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US#>)
11. The percentage of female or underrepresented leads/coleads was calculated out of the total number of films a distributor released including ensemble films.
12. Smith, S.L. & Pieper, K. (2024) *Inclusion in the Director's Chair*. Annenberg Inclusion Initiative.

## Acknowledgements

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