

Inequality across 1,900 Popular Films: Examining Gender, Race/Ethnicity & Age of Leads/Co Leads From 2007 to 2025

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

February 2026

USCAnnenberg
Inclusion Initiative

**Inequality Across 1,900 Popular Films:
Examining Gender, Race/Ethnicity & Age of Leads/Co Leads From 2007 to 2025**

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

Key Findings

Gender

Across the top 100 films theatrically released in 2025, less than half ($n=39$) were led by a female-identified actor as a lead/co lead. This is a significant step back from the gains made in 2024 (55%) but does not fall to the historic low of 2007 (20%).

In 2025, there were 4 single led/co led films that featured a woman 45 years of age or older at the time of theatrical release. Comparatively, 30 films had a man in the same age bracket. This has remained consistent since 2007, with older male actors continuing to have greater career longevity than older female actors. The 4 films with women 45 years of age or older were: Ginnifer Goodwin (*Zootopia 2*), Kate Hudson (*Song Sung Blue*), Cate Blanchett (*Black Bag*), and Olivia Colman (*The Roses*). All four women were White.

The number of films with a woman 45 years of age or older as a lead/co lead in 2025 echoes both the results of the previous year (2024, $n=8$) and the first year (2007, $n=1$) of this report.

Underrepresented Racial/Ethnic Groups

Across the 100 top films in 2025, 34 had an underrepresented lead/co lead actor. Across those 34 titles, a total of 35 unique lead/co lead actors were from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. 8.9% ($n=10$) were Multiracial/Multiethnic or from another race/ethnicity, 8% ($n=9$) were Asian, 8% ($n=9$) were Black/African American, 3.5% ($n=4$) were Hispanic/Latino, 1.8% ($n=2$) were Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and less than 1% ($n=1$) were MENA. There were no American Indian/Alaska Native actors in a lead/co lead role.

2025 had significantly more leads/co leads of color ($n=34$) than 2024 ($n=26$) and 2007 ($n=13$). This year, the number of leading actors of color was well below the percentage of underrepresented people according to the U.S. Census (42.5%).

Across the 100 top films of 2025, a total of 15 featured a woman of color as a lead or co lead. While this remains on par with 2024 (when 14 films were led by a woman of color), the trend continues to remain well above 2007 (1 film).

In 2025, not a single film featured a woman of color 45 years of age or older in a leading/co leading role.

This finding is similar to 2024 ($n=1$) and 2007 ($n=0$). Within the same age bracket, a total of 6 films in 2025 had an underrepresented male-identified lead/co lead.

In 2025, 24 films featured a White male 45 years of age or older driving the plot. In other words, older White men worked 24 times more frequently across the 100 top films of 2025 than older women of color.

Distributor

In terms of gender, the top performing distributor was Universal Pictures. Over half (54.2%) of their films centered on a female actor as the lead/co lead of the story. They were followed closely by Lionsgate (50%) and Disney (43.7%). Roughly a third of movies released under “Other” studios (36.4%) and Sony Pictures (33.3%) had a female lead/co lead. The worst performing distributors were Warner Bros (20%) and Paramount (12.5%).

Pivoting to underrepresented status, there were three distributors that exceeded proportional representation with the U.S. Census (42.5%). Half of all films released by Disney (50%), Lionsgate (50%), and Sony Pictures (50%) were led by a person of color. “Other” studios featured an underrepresented lead/co lead in just over a third of their combined content (36.4%). Both Universal Pictures (25%) and Warner Bros. (20%) fell behind their counterparts. Paramount did not have a single underrepresented actor as the lead of their film.

Given the distributor findings, it is clear a Paramount acquisition of Warner Bros would be devastating for actors that identify as women and people of color.

**Inequality Across 1,900 Popular Films:
Examining Gender, Race/Ethnicity & Age of Leads/Co Leads From 2007 to 2025**

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

Research Brief
Annenberg Inclusion Initiative
University of Southern California

This brief has examined the gender identity, race/ethnicity, and age of actors who held a leading/co leading role in the most popular films across the United States from 2007 to 2025. Specifically, the focus has been on the yearly 100 highest-earning scripted theatrically-released films.¹ We began by looking at every film and categorizing them into one of three silos: single lead ($n=66$), two roughly equal co leads ($n=26$), or an ensemble cast ($n=8$).²

Next, we focused on the actors who were hired to fill leading/co leading roles. We then evaluated them for gender identity (i.e., male, female, nonbinary), and race/ethnicity (White/Caucasian, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern/North African, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, Multiracial/Multiethnic or Other).³ These race/ethnicity categories were collapsed to create a measure with two levels: underrepresented status vs. not (White). We also assessed the age of the actor at the time of original theatrical release. Finally, we broke down distributor performance and just who has continued to champion inclusion across its films.

Below are the findings for gender, underrepresented status, and age of actors in leading roles within movies with single or co leads.⁴ While the focus of this paper is on leads/co leads, we will dive deeper into the breakdown of ensembles in our annual *Inequality in Popular Films* report that comes out in August of this year. Across each section, we present the results of 2025 before comparing these findings to trends observed last year (2024) and the very first year of this report (2007). We round out this brief by summarizing the key trends and proposing solutions for change. Only differences at or above 5 percentage points were highlighted to avoid focusing on trivial deviations.

Gender

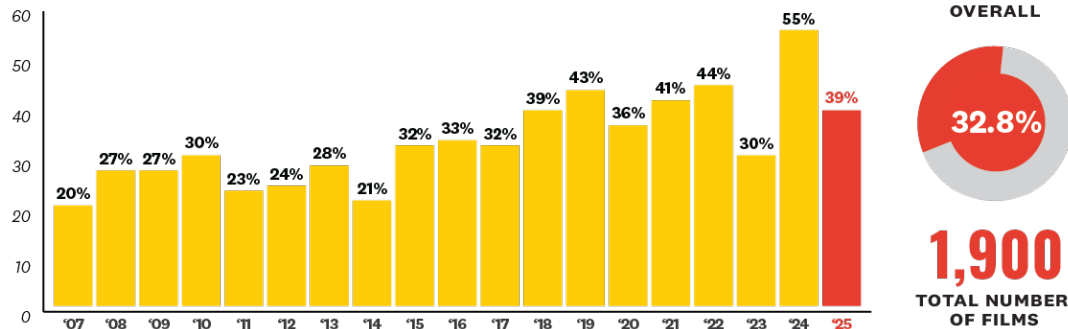
Across the 100 top films theatrically-released in 2025, less than half ($n=39$) were led by a female-identified actor as a lead/co lead.⁵ As highlighted in Infographic 1, this is a significant step back from the gains made in 2024 (55%) but does not fall to the historic lows of 2007 (20%).⁶ This finding falls short of the U.S. Census benchmark, where girls and women comprise 50.5% of the population.⁷

Gender highlights one part of the story but to understand the longevity of careers for female leading actresses, we pivot to age. Historically, the number of films led by women 45 years of

age or older at the time of the original theatrical release has been grim. Unfortunately, this year is no exception.

A RECENT HISTORY OF WOMEN & GIRLS AS PROTAGONISTS IN MOVIES

Prevalence and percentage of female leads or co leads across 1,900 films by year



© 2026 DR. STACY L. SMITH

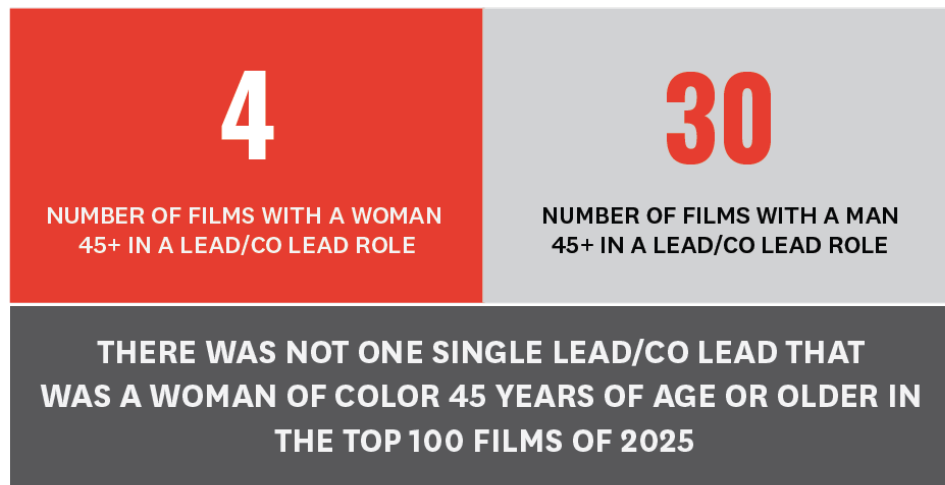
USCAnnenberg
Inclusion Initiative

In 2025, there were 4 single led/co led films that featured a woman 45 years of age or older at the time of theatrical release.⁸ Comparatively, 30 films had a man in the same age bracket. This has remained consistent since 2007, with older male actors continuing to have career longevity in leading roles as opposed to their female counterparts.

In box office order, the actors and 4 films with women 45 years of age or older were: Ginnifer Goodwin (*Zootopia 2*), Kate Hudson (*Song Sung Blue*), Cate Blanchett (*Black Bag*), and Olivia Colman (*The Roses*).

In contrast, these were the 31 distinct male actors 45 years of age or older who led a top-grossing film: Anthony Mackie, Ben Affleck, Benedict Cumberbatch, Benicio Del Toro, Bob Odenkirk, Brad Pitt, Brendan Fraser, Channing Tatum, Chris Sanders, Dwayne Johnson, Eric Bauza, Gerard Butler, Hugh Bonneville, Hugh Jackman, Jack Black, James Corden, Jared Leto, Jason Bateman, Jason Statham, Joaquin Phoenix, Ke Huy Quan, Leonardo DiCaprio, Liam Neeson, Michael Fassbender, Neal McDonough, Paul Rudd, Pedro Pascal, Peter Hastings, Sam Rockwell, Tom Cruise, and Tom Kenny.

The number of films with a woman 45 years of age or older as a lead/co lead in 2025 echoes both the results of the previous year 2024 ($n=8$) and the first year 2007 ($n=1$) of this report.

WOMEN 45 AND OLDER ARE RARELY SHOWN AS LEADS*Of the 100 top-grossing films in 2025, the number with leads/co leads age 45 and older...*

© 2026 DR. STACY L. SMITH

USCAnnenberg
Inclusion Initiative

To summarize, 2025 failed to continue the momentum of 2024 and faltered on proportional representation of girls and women being cast in a leading/co-leading role across the 100 top-performing fictional films. Not only is this a step back for gender equality, older female actors continue to face limited opportunities that their male counterparts do not. Career longevity continues to not be guaranteed for older women.

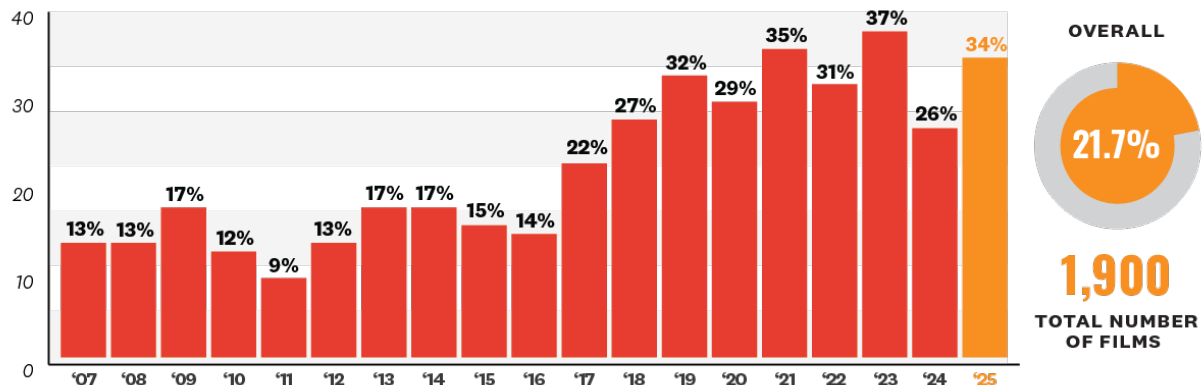
Underrepresented Status

Across the 100 top films in 2025, 34 had an underrepresented lead/co lead actor. Across those 34 titles, a total of 35 unique lead/co lead actors were from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups.⁹ 8.9% ($n=10$) were Multiracial/Multiethnic or from another race/ethnicity, 8% ($n=9$) were Asian, 8% ($n=9$) were Black/African American, 3.5% ($n=4$) were Hispanic/Latino, 1.8% ($n=2$) were Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and less than 1% ($n=1$) were MENA.¹⁰ In 2025, there was not a single American Indian/Alaska Native actor in a lead/co lead role.

As shown in Infographic 3, films in 2025 had significantly more leads/co leads of color ($n=34$) than 2024 ($n=26$) or 2007 ($n=13$). This year, the number of leading actors of color was well below the percentage of underrepresented people according to the U.S. Census (42.5%).¹¹

UNDERREPRESENTED PROTAGONISTS REBOUND FROM 2024

Percentage of underrepresented leads or co leads across 1,900 films by year



© 2026 DR. STACY L. SMITH

USCAnnenberg
Inclusion Initiative

As we continue to extend our intersectional analysis to gender and race/ethnicity of actor leads/co leads, a familiar picture emerges. As shown in Infographic 4, across the 100 top films of 2025 a total of 15 featured a woman of color as a lead or co lead. While this remains on par with 2024 when 14 films were led by girls/women of color, the trend continues to remain well above 2007 (1 film).

In box office order, these were the films that featured girls/women of color as leads/co leads in 2025: Maia Kealoha (*Lilo & Stitch*), Cynthia Erivo (*Wicked: For Good*), Kaitlyn Santa Juana (*Final Destination: Bloodlines*), Rachel Zegler (*Snow White*), Greta Lee (*Tron: Ares*), Ana de Armas (*Ballerina*), Keke Palmer and SZA (*One of Them Days*), Chase Sui Wonders (*I Know What You Did Last Summer*), Laila Lockhart Kraner (*Gabby's Dollhouse: The Movie*), Arden Cho (*KPop Demon Hunters*), Crystal Lee (*Ne Zha 2*), Danielle Deadwyler (*The Woman in the Yard*), Sora Wong (*Bring Her Back*), Jenna Ortega (*Death of a Unicorn*), and Naya Desir-Johnson (*Sarah's Oil*).

WOMEN OF COLOR LEADS/CO LEADS ARE STILL BELOW PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Of the top 100 films of 2025...



In 2023, 21.1% of the U.S. population identified as females of color according to the U.S. Census

And of those Lead and Co Leads*...

14 films in **2024** had an underrepresented female lead or co lead

1 film in **2024** featured a woman of color age 45 or older as a lead or co lead

*Excludes films w/ensemble casts

© 2026 DR. STACY L. SMITH

USCAnnenberg
Inclusion Initiative

Pivoting to age, we highlight the opportunities afforded to women of color vs their counterparts. In 2025, not a single film featured a woman of color 45 years of age or older in a leading/co leading role.

This finding is similar to 2024 ($n=1$) but directly mirrors 2007 ($n=0$). Within the same age bracket, a total of 6 films in 2025 had an underrepresented male-identified lead/co lead. To no surprise, the longevity of White men's careers in leading/co-leading roles continue to outpace the combined total number of older underrepresented protagonists. In 2025, 24 films featured a White male 45 years of age or older driving the plot. In other words, older White men worked 24 times more frequently across the 100 top films of 2025 than older women of color.

Distributor

Across the 100 top films of 2025, we evaluated major distributors to understand what companies continue to prioritize inclusion across their content. Since the first year of this study, the major distributors we highlight have been categorized as follows: Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Universal Pictures, Walt Disney Studios, and Warner Bros. Pictures. The mini-major distributor, Lionsgate, has also remained singled out which is consistent with the first year of the study. Any subsidiaries or specialty companies were combined with their parent organizations (i.e., Searchlight Pictures and Walt Disney Studios).¹² All other films that were distributed by historically smaller companies (e.g., Angel Studios, A24, Neon) were placed into the "Other" category.¹³

IDENTITY OF LEADS/CO LEADS BY DISTRIBUTOR

Across the 100 top-grossing films of 2025, the percentage released by each distributor with a...

GIRL/WOMAN LEAD/CO LEAD			UNDERREPRESENTED LEAD/CO LEAD		
DISTRIBUTOR	2025	# OF FILMS	DISTRIBUTOR	2025	# OF FILMS
UNIVERSAL PICTURES	54.2%	13	WALT DISNEY STUDIOS	50%	8
LIONSGATE	50%	4	LIONSGATE	50%	4
WALT DISNEY STUDIOS	43.7%	7	SONY PICTURES ENT.	50%	6
OTHER	36.4%	8	OTHER	36.4%	8
SONY PICTURES ENT.	33.3%	4	UNIVERSAL PICTURES	25%	6
WARNER BROS. PICTURES	20%	2	WARNER BROS. PICTURES	20%	2
PARAMOUNT PICTURES	12.5%	1	PARAMOUNT PICTURES	0	0
TOTAL	39%	39	TOTAL	34%	34

© 2026 DR. STACY L. SMITH

USCAnnenberg
Inclusion Initiative

As highlighted in Infographic 5, several studios featured women at the center of their stories and met or exceeded proportional gender representation.

The top performing distributor was Universal Pictures, with over half (54.2%) of their films centered on a female actor as the lead/co lead of the story. They were followed closely by Lionsgate (50%) and rounding out the top three was Walt Disney Studios (43.7%). Roughly a third of movies released under “Other” studios (36.4%) and Sony Pictures (33.3%) also had a female lead/co lead. At the bottom were Warner Bros. (20%) and Paramount (12.5%).

Pivoting to underrepresented status, there were three distributors that exceeded proportional representation with the U.S. Census (42.5%).¹⁴ Half of all films released by Walt Disney Studios (50%), Lionsgate (50%), and Sony Pictures (50%) were led by a person of color. “Other” studios featured an underrepresented lead/co lead in just over a third of their combined content (36.4%). Both Universal Pictures (25%) and Warner Bros. (20%) fell behind their counterparts. Paramount did not have a single underrepresented actor as the lead of their films.

Conclusion

Each year this report provides insights that speak to decision-making regarding leads and co leads across top-grossing movies. Across 19 years, this evaluation continues to reveal the

inconsistent ways in which the entertainment industry represents its audience. In this section, we summarize the findings across the study.

Looking first to gender, after 2024 exceeded gender parity, 2025 reverted to featuring women in 39% of lead or co-lead roles. If 2024 demonstrated that decision-makers can achieve equality, 2025 adds the caveat “when they want to.” While certain distributors— namely Universal Pictures and Lionsgate— did meet or exceed gender equality, others fell far below. Less than a handful of women 45 years of age or older filled a protagonist role, meaning there were few stories that focused on the lives of older women, though nearly a third of films last year focused on men in the same age bracket.

The story was different for individuals from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. 2025 featured significantly more underrepresented leads/co leads than 2024. Half of all films from three distributors (Lionsgate, Disney, Sony) featured an underrepresented lead/co lead, indicating that at least some decision-makers see the value in advancing stories about underrepresented groups. For girls and women of color, there was no significant decline from 2024 to 2025. However, for the seventh time in 19 years, there was not 1 film that had a woman of color age 45 or older in a lead or co lead role. The regular erasure of women of color in mid-life and beyond speaks to the limited imagination of filmmakers and decision-makers when it comes to the stories that appeal to audiences.

One finding that stands out amidst the current industry news applies to distributors. Paramount and Warner Bros. distributed the fewest films with women or underrepresented leads in 2025— including 0 underrepresented lead actors in a Paramount movie last year. In contrast, since 2019, at least half of Netflix movies have had a woman in a lead/co lead role. In all but 1 recent year (2023), Netflix films also reached proportional representation for underrepresented leads/co leads. These data are a clear indication of what a merger with Warner Bros. would mean. One between Paramount and Warner Bros. offers little hope for a film slate that features women and people of color in significant leading roles to match the population. A merger between Netflix and Warner Bros. would result in more films with women and people of color at the center.

As with all research, a few limitations must be noted. This report covers the most popular films as measured by box office grosses. Less popular films or popular films on streaming services may feature a different constellation of leading or co-leading roles. Top-grossing films released in movie theaters reflect a series of decisions made by studios and producers that offer insight into how much inclusion is valued, which is why we continue to rely on this sample to investigate whether there has been change. Other work from the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative focuses on less popular or streaming films and provides insights on leads/co leads among those samples.

The results in this paper reveal that, when it comes to inclusion, Hollywood finds it difficult to multi-task. Last year, we saw significant gains for women and this year, increases were observed for people of color. Instead of being an industry where a rising tide lifts all boats, it

seems that inclusion goes in and out with that tide. Until decision-makers realize that audiences will watch stories about women *and* people of color— and women of color!-- little will change each year.

Acknowledgements

As always, this research brief could not have been possible without the amazing effort of our Annenberg Inclusion Initiative team. We would like to thank Sam Wheeler for assistance with data analysis and Sarah Neff for our infographics. We are grateful to the team for their work on data collection: Ariana Case, Aimee Christopher, Braxton Albers, Karla Hernandez, Mackenzie Jaimes, Matthew Davis, Terrell Shaffer, W. Michael Sayers, Zoe Moore, and Zoily Mercado.

Footnotes.

1. The 100 top domestically earning films of 2025 was retrieved from Box Office Mojo on January 13, 2026 to create the sample for this research brief. This list featured the 100 top theatrically-released films (within in year releases) across all of North America. While we included any theatrically released film (e.g., limited, wide, re-release, etc.) we did not include documentaries, television shows, short films, or pre-recorded stage plays (e.g., I love you *Hamilton*). When a non-English language film was released theatrically with English dubbing, the English voice actor's information was used.

Given the relatively small fluctuations in this report over the 19-year sample, we have moved to using “templated” language for this report. In explanation, we are relying more heavily on using the same framing, language, and infographics from year to year. This allows us to provide consistency in presentation and timely reports for those readers following our research findings closely.

2. To determine the lead we focused on which character is the central force pushing the plot forward using Syd Field's three act structure. A single lead is when there is only one protagonist who must navigate through crucial plot points. On the other hand, a co lead occurs when two characters are equally involved in each act.
3. These categories for race/ethnicity are based on the U.S. Census.
4. The focus of this research brief is on actors as opposed to characters. The purpose of this is to highlight hiring opportunities and to ensure that demographic information of the actor is not lost. If we were to focus on characters only, we would be missing data regarding actors in full prosthetics or in voice acting roles (i.e., Jason Bateman in the film *Zootopia 2*).

In the film *The Day the Earth Blew Up: A Looney Tunes Movie*, Eric Bauza voices two distinct leading characters. Separate from the type or number of characters they play, it is the actor who receives leading employment opportunities.

Additionally, Crystal Lee is the English dub female-identified voice actor whose on screen character's apparent gender was identified as male (*Ne Zha 2*).

The film *KPop Demon Hunters* (I love you HUNTR/X) has two distinct voice actors for the lead character Rumi. Due to the constraints of this longitudinal project, we used Arden Cho's speaking voice acting credit for analysis.

5. While in other contexts these references (i.e., female and male) refer to sex assigned at birth, our purpose is to refer to characters across the age span (both girls and women, boys and men). In 2025, there were no openly non-binary or transgender actors in a leading role.

6. Due to domestic distribution difficulties one film faced in 2024, the sample was adjusted to ensure we had a complete top 100 list. This resulted in the addition of one more film led by a woman of color.
7. See U.S. Census figures
(<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045224>)
8. Of the 8 films that had an ensemble cast, three films had a lead woman 45 years of age or older at the time of theatrical release. In order of box office standing as of January 13, 2026, *Avatar: Fire and Ash*, *The Conjuring: Last Rites*, and *Freakier Friday*.
9. The 35 actors were only counted once, independent of the number of titles they appeared in across the 100 top films (i.e., Rami Malek led both *The Amateur* and *Nuremberg*).
10. There were two films led by an actor identified as Hispanic/Latina, Ana de Armas (*Ballerina*) and Jenna Ortega (*Death of a Unicorn*).
11. See U.S. Census figures
(<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045224>)
12. These analyses were calculated out of the total number of films a distributor released and included ensemble films.
13. As this brief is part of a longitudinal study, we must adhere to the pre-established guidelines. As a result, studios who have arguably become major distributors in recent years must remain categorized as "Other".
14. See U.S. Census figures
(<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045224>)