

# Menstrual Poverty in the United States: Do Homeless and Low-Income People Have Access to Additional Feminine Hygiene Products?

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## Abstract

This study focuses on the level of unmet need in access to additional menstrual hygiene products for people experiencing homelessness or poverty. In addition, the study analyzes access to products at one site of public menstrual product access in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and specific barriers that may prevent people from obtaining products they need to manage their menstrual cycle. By identifying specific barriers to product access, informed initiatives can be developed and implemented to improve menstrual product access across the community and city. Following such implementation, data can be collected to analyze the effectiveness of these methods to provide a resource that will enable more marginalized people to access products necessary for basic menstrual hygiene. Participants, staff members recruited from Pittsburgh nonprofit SisterFriend, will be virtually interviewed about their experiences and observations as staff members who interact with people experiencing homelessness and poverty who receive menstrual hygiene products at the site.

## Research questions

Do people experiencing homelessness and poverty have consistent access to menstrual hygiene products? What are barriers to accessing additional menstrual hygiene products present at distribution sites?

## History

- Globally, 2.3 million people live without basic sanitation services, some of whom are people who are at risk from disease and infection due to improper maintenance of menstrual hygiene (Sanchez et al., 2019).
- A portion of these people live in the United States, including nearly 35 million women who live below the poverty line (Magistretti, 2019).
- They may be attending underfunded schools, incarcerated in prisons, or experiencing homelessness, but their ability to maintain hygiene can be compromised in a system where menstrual hygiene products are expensive and still taxed in thirty states (Period Equity, 2020).
- The research shows a minimal number of studies done within the United States on access to consistent menstrual hygiene products for people experiencing homelessness, which highlights a need for studies on the topic in particular in more cities to understand the level of unmet need across the United States (Kuhlmann, 2019; Sommer, 2020).
- Menstrual products, necessary for hygiene, are taxed in 30 states as of this writing (Period Equity, 2020).
- Research on puberty experiences of low-income girls in the United States has indicated that the majority of low-income girls feel unprepared for puberty and menstruation and have largely negative experiences related to this physical development due to an inability to maintain their menstrual hygiene regularly and a lack of education on menstrual hygiene (Cotropia, 2019; Herbert et al., 2017; White, 2012).
- This sentiment regarding the stigma surrounding menstruation is also exemplified in semi-structured interviews with women regarding positive and negative views of menstruation, where most women could not elicit a single positive anecdote about menstruation but could only recall descriptions of negative experiences that revolved around feeling negatively evaluated by others, especially men (Fahs, 2020).

## Definitions

Menstruation or menses: the natural bodily process of releasing blood and associated matter from the uterus through the vagina as part of the menstrual cycle (UNICEF, 2019).

Menstrual Hygiene Products: The products used to catch menstrual flow, such as pads, cloths, tampons, or cups (UNICEF, 2019).

Menstrual hygiene: The ability to consistently access soap and water for washing, access to clean sanitary materials (that can be changed in private), and access to a place for the hygienic disposal of used sanitary pads or washing reusable pads (Kuhlmann, 2019).

Menstrual poverty: The lack of consistent access to soap and water for washing, lack of consistent access to clean sanitary materials (that can be changed in private), and consistent access to a place for the hygienic disposal of used sanitary pads or washing reusable pads.

## Background/Literature Review

- A recent study conducted in St. Louis, Missouri, found that over half of high-school girls in a low-income district relied on school resources for menstrual products and nearly half had experienced a period cycle in the past year but did not have money to buy period products (Kuhlmann et al., 2020).
- The impacts that the financial barrier has on menstrual hygiene management was examined in a study of unmet menstrual hygiene needs of low-income women in St. Louis, Missouri, where researchers found that nearly two-thirds of low-income women surveyed and interviewed in their study were unable to afford menstrual hygiene supplies in the past year, and forty-six percent of women could not afford both food and menstrual hygiene products in the past year (Kuhlmann et al., 2019).
- A recent study conducted in New York City highlighted this lack of access, including the need to "pass" as someone who was not experiencing homelessness in order to gain access to a private sector toilet, such as one located in a store or restaurant.
- These realities, combined with the lack of privacy necessary to change and maintain menstrual hygiene products and lack of adequate clean spaces for hygiene management, can leave menstruators experiencing homelessness at risk of severe infection or disease (Sommer et al., 2020; Parrillo et al., 2017).
- Not washing genitals daily, especially during menstruation, is associated with increased risk of contracting reproductive tract infections, such as urinary tract infections, yeast infections, and vulvar dermatitis (Parrillo et al., 2017).
- These infections can be potentially life-threatening if left untreated (Schultz et al., 1992).
- The studies conducted in St. Louis, Missouri and New York City provide evidence for unmet need and inaccessibility but are the only recent studies done within the United States on the issue (Kuhlmann et al., 2019; Kuhlmann et al., 2020; Sommer et al., 2020).
- In all literature reviewed, there was no research gathered on whether homeless or low-income people who menstruate had access to additional feminine hygiene products throughout their cycle in order to maintain their hygiene; in one source, a single qualitative interview referenced that one shelter only provided 2 feminine hygiene products per cycle, while the average person who menstruates uses approximately 20 feminine hygiene products throughout their cycle (Parrillo et al., 2017).
- According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, there are approximately 738 people experiencing homelessness on any given night in Allegheny County, making up 6.4 per 10,000 people in the general population (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2019).
- There is evidence of menstrual poverty caused by inaccessibility in Pittsburgh that is presented in a documentary interviewing homeless and formerly homeless women in Pittsburgh who discussed their experiences with menstrual poverty, but there has been no published, peer-reviewed research conducted on the issue in Pittsburgh (Baumann, 2017).

## Methods

Participants, recruited from Pittsburgh nonprofit SisterFriend, are individually interviewed over Zoom in a single 35-minute interview. The interview will consist of questions relating to the participants' observations their experiences and observations as staff members who interact with people experiencing homelessness and poverty who receive menstrual hygiene products at the site. Interviews will be qualitatively assessed to identify similarities in responses from staff members. These interviews will be recorded and saved on a secure USB drive only accessible by the researcher and co-researcher. The interview questions can be found below.

1. What gender do you identify as?	8. How often do you witness clients at your site ask for menstrual products?
2. What is your age?	9. How often do you see the same client ask more than once for menstrual hygiene products?
3. What race do you identify as?	10. If clients ask for menstrual hygiene products, how many menstrual hygiene products are they given, on average?
4. What is your role as a staff member at your site?	11. At the site where you are a staff member, are clients permitted to ask for more menstrual hygiene products if they have asked for menstrual products before?
5. How often, in a week, do you interact with people potentially experiencing homelessness or poverty?	12. Have you worked for your site for more than a year? If so, have you noticed any difference in number of clients requesting menstrual hygiene products or any other difference in clients than before March of 2020?
6. At your site, do clients have to ask for menstrual hygiene products in order to obtain them?	13. Do you have any additional comments, questions, or concerns you would like to share regarding the topic of menstrual poverty?
7. What is the procedure at your site for giving menstrual products to clients?	

## Results

- It is expected that the results of the ongoing data collection will reflect evidence of a level of unmet need for menstrual hygiene products among those experiencing homelessness and poverty, demonstrating a need for further research in Pittsburgh and other cities on menstrual poverty.
- Discovered insights regarding the identification of barriers to access additional menstrual hygiene products at product distribution sites could be indicative of systemic inefficiencies within sites that mitigate the abilities of their clients to manage their menstrual hygiene.

## Discussion and Capstone Recommendation

Given the projected nature of the results, the research would provide compelling evidence for further research into the level of unmet need for menstrual products, specifically with regards to the ability to consistently access additional menstrual products throughout the menstrual cycle, to be conducted in Pittsburgh and in cities and regions across the United States. It is proposed that an appropriate capstone project would include a workshop on solutions addressing identified barriers to access menstrual hygiene products to be conducted in the city of Pittsburgh with nonprofits and shelters identified as providing menstrual hygiene products to clients at their sites.

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