

State of the Period

The widespread impact of period poverty on US students

Commissioned by Thinx & PERIOD

● Abstract

The results of this study show that students in the United States face considerable barriers in accessing menstrual hygiene products. The data, drawn by Harris Insights & Analytics from 1,000 teens ages 13 to 19, suggests that while economic barriers are significant, cultural and structural obstacles are also largely to blame. Lack of access is evident across various demographic groups, with effects that include risk of infection, emotional anxiety, and logistical challenges that present significant short and long-term repercussions. Thinx, together with PERIOD, proposes a multi-pronged effort to address these issues, calling for more comprehensive studies on period poverty in young people; medically accurate sexual education in schools; and legislation to make period products as available as toilet paper in school and public bathrooms.

● Introduction

Public awareness about **period poverty**, the inability to access menstrual hygiene products, has ignited a movement calling for free and accessible pads and tampons in restrooms and public spaces around the world.

Over the past four years, the **menstrual equity** movement has been gaining momentum, with successful policy proposals in high schools and on university campuses across the United States, as well as legislation calling for the elimination of the ‘tampon tax’ at the state and municipal levels. Although data is still sparse, early indicators suggest that policy reform works, showing, for example, an increase in school attendance after making period products available.¹ Over the past year, Thinx and PERIOD have used their joint **United for Access** campaign as a platform

1 Tonjanique Evans, Whitney Smith, and Demetria Themistocles, “Periods, Poverty, and the Need for Policy,” *Washington, DC: BRAWS* (2018):12.

to spread awareness, help students across the nation call for menstrual equity at their schools, and demand that Secretary of Education Betsey DeVos addresses the issue on a national scale.

To learn more about these topics, Thinx Inc., the period solutions company known for its creation of period-proof underwear, and PERIOD, a youth-led nonprofit group focused on combating period poverty and stigma, commissioned *State of the Period*, a survey from Harris Poll of 1,000 US teens who menstruate ages 13 to 19. Their survey data is organized by age, income, urban vs. city, and public vs. private school.

● Background

Period poverty affects menstruating individuals of all ages in communities throughout the United States. Menstrual equity is a question of equity in a broader sense, one that is vital for the health and success of future generations. Schools, prisons, and public restrooms overwhelmingly fail to provide pads and tampons, leaving a large sector of the population confronting a public health issue with profound consequences: physical health risks, social and psychological effects, and for students in particular, educational fallout. In a survey conducted with low-income women in St. Louis, lack of access to period products was comparable in many cases to that of women in countries that have far fewer resources than the United States.² This suggests that on the whole, factors other than economic poverty are also playing a role. Negative associations with menstruation are powerful, have been found to contribute to “self-objectification, body shame, and lack of agency in sexual decision-making” for young people.³

Fortunately, there is a rising tide of activism around menstrual equity. Former First Lady Michelle Obama highlighted the connection between lack of access to period products and school productivity as part of her *Let Girls Learn* initiative,⁴ while multiple groups are calling for broader reforms. Attitudes surrounding menstruation are beginning to shift, signaling a new era of open dialogue to move this important cause forward.

2 Anne Sebert Kuhlmann, PhD, MPH, Eleanor Peters Bergquist, MA, MSPH, Djenie Danjoint, MPH, and L. Lewis Wall, MD, DPhil, “Unmet Menstrual Hygiene Needs Among Low-Income Women,” *American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists*, 2019; Kuhlmann AS, Henry K, Wall LL, “Menstrual hygiene management in resource-poor countries,” *Obstet Gynecol Surv*, 72, (2017): 356–76.

3 Stubbs, Margaret, “Cultural Perceptions and Practices around Menarche and Adolescent Menstruation in the United States.” *The Menstrual Cycle and Adolescent Health*, 1 (2008): 58-66.

4 Tonjanique Evans, Whitney Smith, and Demetria Themistocles, “Periods, Poverty, and the Need for Policy,” *Washington, DC: BRAWS* (2018): 07.

● Survey Findings

The vast majority of students who responded to the *State of the Period* survey have experienced the stress of inaccessible period products. 1 in 5 teens have struggled to afford period products or were not able to purchase them at all. The results of this survey suggest that the practical consequences are clear. More than 4 in 5 teens have either missed class time or know a classmate who missed class time because they did not have access to period products. These physical, emotional, and educational consequences are clear to students, who are increasingly aware of the growing discourse around menstrual equity. The students surveyed expressed the need for stronger advocates who can help ensure that period products are available in their schools alongside basic necessities like toilet paper and soap.

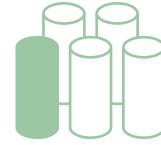
“Having to stuff
my underwear with toilet
paper and worrying about
it caused me so much
more stress in my everyday life.”

Anonymous high school student,
Portland, OR

Access

Students across demographic groups (including age, household income, living in both urban and rural areas, and attending public and private schools) reported a lack of access to period products. The data below therefore pertains specifically to issues of access among the survey participants across the demographic groups accounted for in this survey:

- Two-thirds of teens have felt stress due to lack of access to period products.
- 20% (1 in 5 teens) have struggled to afford period products or were not able to purchase them at all.
- 61% have worn a tampon or pad for more than 4 hours because they did not have enough access to period products (puts them at risk of infection and TSS).
- 84% (more than 4 in 5 teens) have either missed class time or know someone who missed class time because they did not have access to period products.
- 25% (1 in 4 teens) have missed class because of lack of access to period products.
- 83% (more than 4 in 5 teens) think lack of access to period products is an issue that is not talked about enough.



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Shame

The majority of teens surveyed reported feelings of shame, self-consciousness, and/or embarrassment about their periods. The following statistics reflect the negative sentiments that follow teens throughout their lives on what is typically a monthly basis, and are a foundation for increased emotional anxiety with numerous potential effects:

- 64% believe society teaches people to be ashamed of their periods.
- 66% do not want to be at school when they are on their period.
- 80% feel there is a negative association with periods, that they are gross or unsanitary.
- 71% feel self-conscious on their period.
- 69% feel embarrassed when they have to bring period products to the bathroom.
- 57% have felt personally affected by the negative association surrounding periods.
- The majority (51%) of students feel like their school does not care about them if they do not provide free period products in their bathrooms.

Education

The data below reflects both the lack of education about periods in schools as well as the educational repercussions when students lack access to period products. The following data points to questions of equity in educating teens in the United States:

- Only 23% of teens said they know what ‘menstrual equity’ means.
- 79% feel that they need more in-depth education around menstrual health.
- 76% think we are taught more about the biology of frogs than the biology of the human female body in school.
- 51% have missed at least part of a class or class period due to menstruation symptoms such as cramps.

● Taking Action

The data here present a compelling argument for the importance of making menstrual products and menstrual health education available to all young people. As organizations dedicated to equity and bodily integrity, Thinx and PERIOD believe that free and readily available access to period products is a fundamental right. We are committed to working with others to transform the landscape around period poverty and ensure products are freely accessible in schools, shelters, and prisons and jails, and are no longer taxed as luxury items. This complex issue with a multitude of effects calls for an integrated response.

On the most fundamental level, more research must be done to better understand period poverty in teens specifically. That’s why Thinx and PERIOD are calling on Congress to fund comprehensive impact studies on period poverty’s effects on students and their access to education.

On the federal level, we call for the passage of the **Menstrual Equity for All Act** (H.R. 1882), which would improve access to period products in schools, incarceration facilities, homeless shelters, businesses, and public federal buildings as well as allow period products to be covered by Medicaid and pre-tax flexible spending accounts.

Lawmakers must also prioritize medically accurate sex education at the state level to ensure period education is accessible and available for all students by passing the **Real Education for Healthy Youth Act** (H.R. 2720). The bill would ensure Federal funding is allocated to comprehensive sexual health education programs that provide young people with the skills and information they need to make informed, responsible, and healthy decisions. This legislation sets forth a vision for comprehensive sexual health education programs in the United States.

And on the state level, we call for the repeal of the sales tax on period products, ie the “tampon tax”. It puts an unfair financial burden on people with periods in thirty-five states that still categorize period products as “luxury items” and not medically necessary.

The study highlights a serious problem with a solvable solution. When we achieve menstrual equity, people with periods have the freedom to work, study, and participate in society with basic dignity. With menstrual equity, we can all further realize our full potential.

References

1. Tonjanique Evans, Whitney Smith, and Demetria Themistocles, “Periods, Poverty, and the Need for Policy,” *Washington, DC: BRAWS* (2018):12.
2. Anne Sebert Kuhlmann, PhD, MPH, Eleanor Peters Bergquist, MA, MSPH, Djenie Danjoint, MPH, and L. Lewis Wall, MD, DPhil, “Unmet Menstrual Hygiene Needs Among Low-Income Women,” *American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists*, 2019; Kuhlmann AS, Henry K, Wall LL, “Menstrual hygiene management in resource-poor countries,” *Obstet Gynecol Surv*, 72, (2017): 356–76.
3. Stubbs, Margaret, “Cultural Perceptions and Practices around Menarche and Adolescent Menstruation in the United States.” *The Menstrual Cycle and Adolescent Health*, 1 (2008): 58-66.
4. Valenti, Jessica, “Anti-Abortion Lawmakers Have No Idea How Women’s Bodies Work,” *Medium* (May 15, 2019).