

# Beyond Access: Building a Future of Menstrual Equity for Youth

## Statement of Problem

Period poverty is [defined as](#) inadequate access to menstrual hygiene tools and education, including but not limited to sanitary products, washing facilities and waste management. While the term period poverty is relatively new in medical literature, menstrual hygiene management has been [discussed](#) for decades in the context of the gender gap in education for youth living in low- and middle-income countries.

The lived experiences with menstruation for those living in poverty in the U.S. are often similar to those communities within low- and middle-income countries, though few studies have explored the reality of these adolescents' and young adults' lives.

## Description

Funded by a PolicyLab and Clinical Futures pilot grant in 2021, we used a qualitative, youth-centered approach to understand the experiences of adolescents and young adults who menstruate and live in poverty in the U.S., identify the barriers and facilitators to adequate menstrual health and hygiene, and recognize the impact of shame and stigma on this community. Thematic findings were then mapped onto a proposed framework for menstrual equity that can be applied to future research and policy change efforts.

Our team engaged adolescents and young adults ages 13-21 from Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's (CHOP) Adolescent Specialty Clinic who had at least one menstrual period and screened positive on a menstrual access questionnaire.

We collected visual narratives, or video diaries, that illustrated their experiences with menstruation, including documentation of their daily lives and personal monologues on their observations. We also conducted in-depth interviews using the video diaries to prompt further discussion with the participants.

- *Learn more about what youth shared during these interviews in [this video](#).*

As part of this [study](#), we recruited participants for a youth advisory board, in which they assisted with interpreting study results, and created and disseminated a [short film](#) that incorporates some of the video narrative footage. This film premiered as part of [The Film Collective](#) Film Festival in October 2022.

## Community Partnerships

Additionally, our work includes local efforts focused on tackling interconnected social challenges, such as period poverty and food insecurity, through a [PolicyLab-funded project](#).

- *Find actionable policy and systems recommendations to improve menstrual equity for young people in this [issue brief](#), co-authored by PolicyLab and No More Secrets Mind Body Spirit Inc.*

## Next Steps

For the first time in the Commonwealth, a [state initiative](#) is funding a program to support the distribution of period products in schools, helping to close a critical gap in menstrual health care. We see an opportunity to support effective implementation and sustainability through evaluations of the program roll-out in partnerships with students and the school districts.

In addition to local and state policy impact, our findings also have important implications for clinical care and future research and have contributed to [practice guidelines](#) put forth by international medical organizations. We aim to improve clinical and patient care by integrating menstrual equity into youth health practices, including initiatives to develop and test appropriate screening tools in both clinical and non-clinical settings that serve youth. By ensuring that menstrual health is recognized as a vital component of overall well-being, we can begin to create more space for healthy adolescent development.

*This project page was last updated in April 2025.*

## Suggested Citation

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## PolicyLab Leads

### **Shelby Davies MD**

#### **Faculty Member**

Prior to joining CHOP, Dr. Davies received her medical degree from The New York University School of Medicine. She completed her pediatric training at the Residency Program in Social Pediatrics at The Children's Hospital at Montefiore in Bronx, New York, which provides pediatric medical training focused on the health of underserved urban children and adolescents in the context of the community.

Dr. Davies is passionate about advocating for adolescent health and social justice through patient care, education and research. Her primary research interests are in merging creative and interdisciplinary practice through multimodal methods with scholarly production, while engaging, empowering and elevating youth voices. Her research aims are to explore through personal narratives the lived experiences of adolescents and young adults who menstruate, understand the barriers and facilitators to adequate menstrual health and hygiene, and explore the impact of shame and stigma that exists around menstruation. By better understanding the lived experiences of this population, she hopes to generate ideas for future research, programmatic and policy change.



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## Team

## Nadia Dowshen MD, MSHP

### Faculty Member

Nadia Dowshen (she/her) is a faculty member at PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) and serves as Director of Adolescent HIV Services in the Craig Dalsimer Division of Adolescent Medicine at CHOP. She is also an associate professor of pediatrics and the Associate Director of the Masters of Health Policy Research at the Perelman School of Medicine at University of Pennsylvania and a Stoneleigh fellow.

In addition to specialized care for youth living with HIV/AIDS, Dr. Dowshen also provides general adolescent medical care at CHOP and Covenant House, PA, a youth shelter located in Philadelphia. She recently co-founded the CHOP Sexuality and Gender Development Clinic which now provides medical and psychosocial support to more than 2,000 gender variant children and adolescents. Dr. Dowshen's research focuses on using youth-friendly technology to improve adherence to antiretroviral therapy and improve other health outcomes for adolescents living with HIV/AIDS. She is also interested more broadly in research around issues of STD and HIV prevention and treatment as well as achieving health equity for other marginalized youth including LGBT and homeless adolescents.

Dr. Dowshen received the 2010 Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine New Investigator Award for her research identifying protective factors against HIV infection among transgender youth. She was recently named an NIH Adolescent Trials Network (ATN) Scholar and a Best Young Investigator by the National Centers for AIDS Research (CFAR). Dr. Dowshen also serves on the Board of Directors of the Sexual Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), a national non-profit which promotes comprehensive education about sexuality, and advocates for the right of individuals to make responsible sexual choices. Dr. Dowshen received both her M.D. and Masters of Science in Health Policy Research from the University of Pennsylvania.



Nadia Dowshen

MD, MSHP

Deborah Thomas, PhD

## **Sarah Wood MD, MSHP**

### **Faculty Scholar**

Sarah Wood (she/her) is a faculty scholar at PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) and the division chief of Adolescent Medicine and director of the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center. Prior to assuming her role at Sinai, Dr. Wood was an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine and served as the assistant director of Adolescent HIV Services in CHOP's Craig Dalsimer Division of Adolescent Medicine.

Dr. Wood is an early-stage clinician investigator, implementation scientist, and adolescent medicine and HIV specialist with a career focused on reducing the incidence of HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among adolescents and young adults (AYA). Over almost two decades, she has led clinical research exploring the structural and health care-associated determinants of HIV prevention behavior in AYA, and in the clinicians and health systems that serve them. Her secondary research focus uses implementation science to improve the integration of sexual health preventative services into primary care for adolescents.

Dr. Wood's funding success includes grants from the National Institute of Mental Health, the Penn Center for AIDS Research, the Penn Mental Health AIDS Research Center and PolicyLab. Her scholarly work blends implementation science and quality improvement methodology based on experience as project leader of an American Board of Pediatrics-endorsed 31-clinic quality improvement initiative to improve STI screening among adolescents. Dr. Wood oversees research efforts at Sinai's Adolescent Health Center, a comprehensive free clinic for AYA. She leads a robust computational science laboratory that uses clinic-derived STI testing data from over 100,000 adolescent STI testing encounters to develop interventions to address gaps in high quality and equitable service delivery.

Dr. Wood received her medical degree from the Drexel University College of Medicine and a Master of Science in Health Policy Research from the University of Pennsylvania.



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## Related Tools & Publications

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[A Multimodal Qualitative Approach to Understanding Menstrual Health Equity among Adolescents and Young Adults](#)  
[Article](#)

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[Period Poverty: The Public Health Crisis We Don't Talk About](#)  
[Blog Post](#)

Apr 06, 2021

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[Achieving Equitable Access to Menstrual Health Care and Products for Adolescents and Young Adults](#)  
[Issue Briefs](#)

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