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

Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, PolicyLab. *Beyond Access: Building a Future of Menstrual Equity for Youth* [Online]. Available at: **http://www.policylab.chop.edu** [Accessed: plug in date accessed here].

PolicyLab Leads

Shelby Davies
Shelby Davies
MD
Faculty Member

Team

Nadia Dowshen
Nadia Dowshen
MD, MSHP
Faculty Member
Deborah Thomas, PhD
Sarah Wood
Sarah Wood
MD, MSHP
Faculty Scholar

Funders

Funders
PolicyLab
Clinical Futures
Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics
University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Experimental Ethnography

Project Contact

SHELBY DAVIES
DAVIESSH@CHOP.EDU

Related Tools & Publications

A Multimodal Qualitative Approach to Understanding Menstrual Health Equity among Adolescents and Young Adults
Article
Dec 2024

Achieving Equitable Access to Menstrual Health Care and Products for Adolescents and Young Adults
Issue Briefs
Sep 2023

Period Poverty: The Public Health Crisis We Don't Talk About
Blog Post
Apr 06, 2021