

the
national
research
initiative
on
period
poverty

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PERIOD POVERTY IN AMERICA

2023

Executive Summary

In May 2023, Dignity Grows commissioned a national survey to explore the prevalence and multiple impacts of Period Poverty in America. Survey results show that Period Poverty is a pervasive issue, experienced by more than a third of American women and girls.

The impacts of Period Poverty are significant and affect numerous aspects of a woman's life. Impacts on employment, education, mental health, personal relationships, and sexual relationships warrant additional research and policy considerations, which are also outlined here.

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Introduction and Overview

In May 2023, Dignity Grows commissioned a national survey to explore the complex nature of Period Poverty in the United States of America (US). Intended as a wayfinding instrument to help inform and guide much-needed research and policy development in this space, the survey engaged 1,000 American women over 18 years of age.*

For the purposes of this study, Period Poverty is defined as a lack, of or uncertain access to, basic menstrual hygiene supplies, due to financial constraints.

The survey revealed the pervasive nature of Period Poverty, which impacts multiple dimensions of a woman's life including employment, educational attainment, personal and sexual relationships, and mental health.

The survey results demonstrate the need and call for further research into several key issues, including the relationships and causality between Period Poverty and mental health, relational connections, education and employment, and generational persistence.

*See Methodology, page 12

Background and Organizational Context

Over the last five years, public awareness, as well as the number of nonprofits and corporations that assert a role in the fight against Period Poverty through some sort of direct product support, has increased exponentially, reflecting the dire nature of a crisis that has gone under-reported for far too long.

Despite this welcomed increase in attention and activity, comprehensive research studies and lived experience surveying in the US has been suboptimal. This wayfinding survey serves as a first step in remedying this challenge.

Since 2019, Dignity Grows has provided direct support to those in need of period products through a model of monthly complimentary comprehensive and menstrual hygiene product distributions.

We learned from our frontline partners and those we serve together that Period Poverty has gone unnoticed for decades and has become even more acute since the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the growing need, we aim to expand rapidly in the next 24 months. This survey was born out of a desire to understand those we serve and ensure our growth is aligned with and meeting their needs. What we have found is that a more systematic and systemic approach to research and policy development in this field is not only warranted but is critically necessary.

Prevalence of Period Poverty

Period Poverty is a pervasive issue, experienced by more than one-third of American women at some point in their lives (35.8% of the sample).

For the purposes of this study, Period Poverty is defined as a lack of, or uncertain access to, basic menstrual hygiene supplies, due to financial constraints.

We acknowledged Period Poverty as a latent trait and identified three observable manifestations related to financial limitations. In this sample of 1,000 women, 108 reported they had gone without period products because they couldn't afford them, 272 women said they worried they would run out of period supplies because they could not afford products, and 118 women reported they worried they would run out of period supplies because of transportation issues.**

In total, 358 women (35.8% of the sample) had experienced Period Poverty, in that they answered yes to at least one of these questions.

- **SES Indicators**

Period Poverty occurs across the educational and employment spectrum. Of those experiencing Period Poverty, 38% have a college or postgraduate degree, while 38% have a high school education or less.

Period Poverty occurs across household income levels. The issue also seems to transcend or complicate our traditional understanding of 'poverty' in American society. Of the respondents who experienced Period Poverty, 39.66% made over \$50,000 and 37.99% held a college or advanced degree. This is significant when compared to the 2023 USA Federal Poverty Level (FPL) individual income of \$14,580 (Federal Register, 2023).

Additionally, the number of menstruators in a household seems to have a noteworthy impact on the Period Poverty experience.

**See References, page 14

- **Race and Ethnicity**

Period Poverty is prevalent among American women, regardless of background, however the issue is still somewhat racialized. 45.6% of black survey respondents and 36.6% of Hispanic respondents reported experiences with Period Poverty. 32.7% of white women surveyed reported having experienced Period Poverty in their lives.

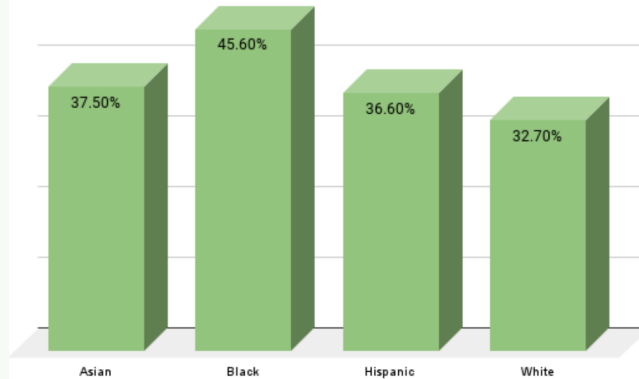


Figure 1. Prevalence of Period Poverty by Race & Ethnicity

- **Geography**

Among the women surveyed, the prevalence of Period Poverty is fairly evenly distributed across the USA, with only slightly higher percentages in the West and Midwest regions. 34.5% of Northeastern respondents and 34.1% of Southern respondents reported personal experiences with Period Poverty; 39% - 39.1% of respondents in both the West and Midwest reported experiencing Period Poverty.

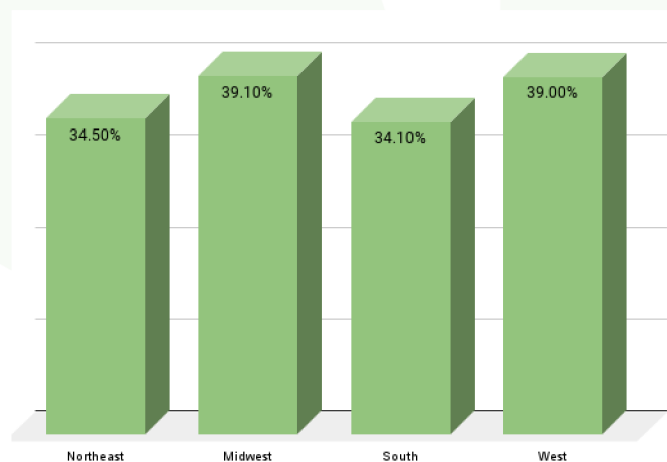


Figure 2. Prevalence of Period Poverty by Geographical Region

Documented Impacts

Respondents who experience Period Poverty were also asked to evaluate the issue’s disruptive impacts on their lives across eight broad categories:

- School / education
- Work
- Participation in sports activities
- Mental health
- Attendance at religious services
- Daily Routine
- Personal relationships
- Sexual relationships

Not having access to period products challenged the respondents’ abilities to maintain their daily routines. Of the respondents who experienced Period Poverty, 55.6% reported disruption to their daily routines and 30.4% and 46.9% reported Period Poverty had negative impacts on their education and work, respectively. Sports activities were also noticeably interrupted, as reported by 36.9% of the surveyed women who experienced Period Poverty.

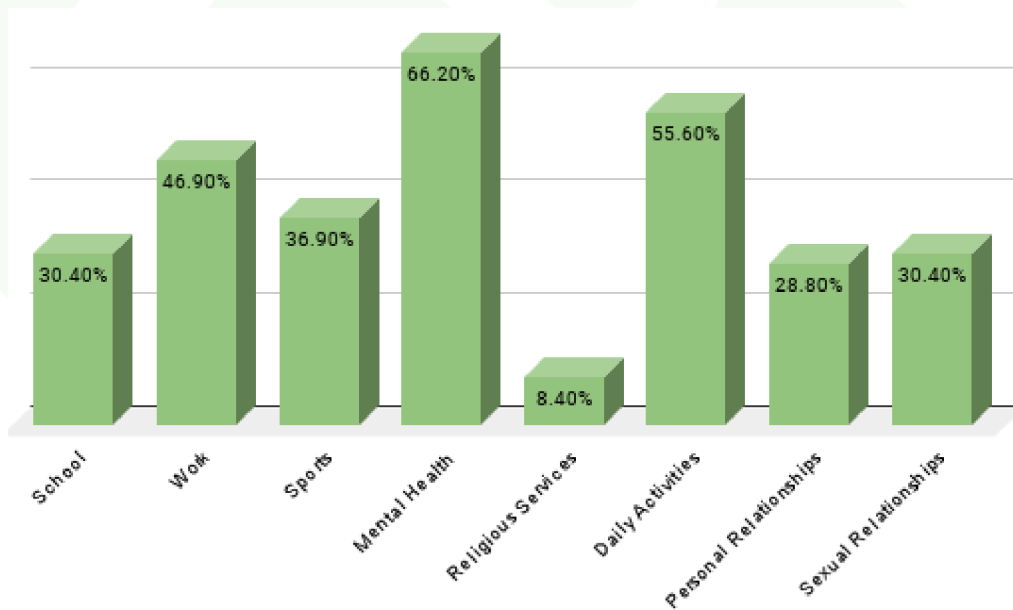


Figure 3. Disruptive Impacts of Period Poverty

Among those impacted by Period Poverty, the average number of areas of life impacted was three and over 75% of women indicated that at least two of these areas were impacted by Period Poverty.

Of note are the reports of Period Poverty impacting personal and sexual relationships. Of the women surveyed who experienced Period Poverty, 28.8% reported interference in their personal relationships and 30.4% noted Period Poverty as a disruption to their sexual relationships. This is of particular interest as it reflects on Period Poverty as a disconnecter for the women it affects, separating them from other people, and not just activities and routine.

An overwhelming 66.2% of respondents who experienced Period Poverty reported its impact on their mental health. Significant correlations are noted between personal relationship and sexual relationship impacts and mental health. Respondents who experienced Period Poverty AND reported mental health impacts noted impacts on personal relationships nearly twice as frequently as those who did not report mental health impacts (34% vs 18%). Similarly, surveyed women who experienced Period Poverty AND reported mental health impacts noted impacts on sexual relationships more than those who did not report mental health impacts (36% vs 20%).

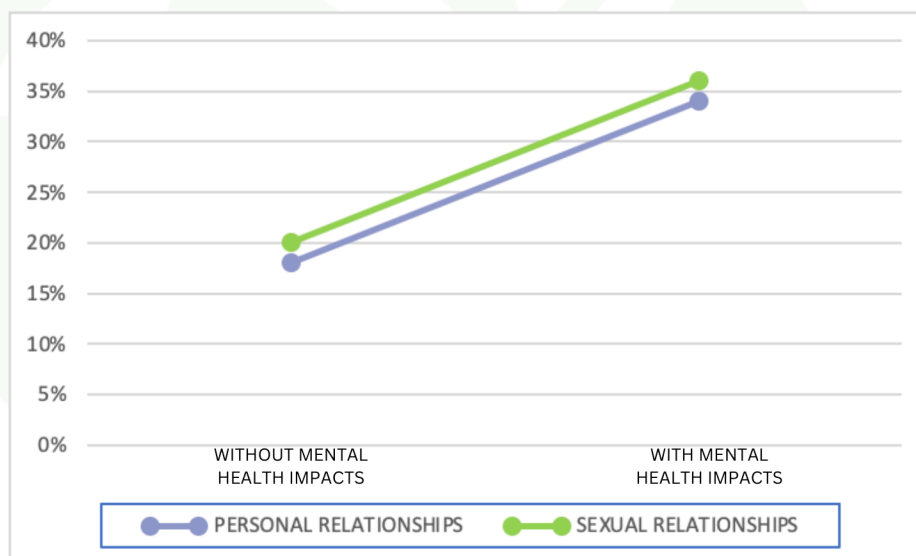


Figure 4. Correlation Between Mental Health Impacts & Relationship Impacts

Research and Policy Considerations

To summarize the main findings, Period Poverty is a pervasive issue, experienced by about one-third of American women at some point in their lives. This is an issue that affects women of all backgrounds: women of every race, age, geographic region, and socioeconomic status. The latter is particularly striking: income is not a significant predictor of Period Poverty, which suggests that this process is far more complex than the typical narrative of “poverty” in America.

More broadly, it is worth noting that Period Poverty tends to impact multiple aspects of women’s lives. In our total sample, 19% (over 190 women) reported that four or more (of the eight life domains queried, including mental health) were impacted by Period Poverty, highlighting the pervasive and holistic impact this issue can have on a woman.

Period Poverty is interwoven with a woman’s relational circumstances. A significant predictor of experiencing Period Poverty is the total number of people in one’s household who are menstruating. One hypothesis that emerges from this trend is that it may be that mothers with older children might prioritize their children’s period products over their own. It may also be that in households with extended kinship networks or female friends living together, period products become a scarce resource in ways that are less common in households where there is only one person who is menstruating.

A woman’s relational circumstances are also significantly impacted by the experience of Period Poverty, particularly when paired with mental health outcomes. Future research opportunities are apparent, including those to better examine longitudinal impacts of Period Poverty on personal relationships and sexual relationships.

Additional opportunities for future research center around education and employment impacts of Period Poverty. Among the women surveyed who experienced Period Poverty and reported educational outcomes, current income levels appear unimpacted, even slightly higher than those who reported Period Poverty but did not indicate educational impacts. This may indicate that these respondents were more personally invested in their education and therefore recognize the impact more strongly.

Similarly, responses indicate that those who experience Period Poverty and report educational impacts are more likely to attend college. This may simply be due to a longer educational trajectory, with additional school years creating more opportunity for impact. Longitudinal analysis of income and education correlations may yield enhanced results.

In terms of direct product distribution efforts intended to alleviate Period Poverty, it is crucial to identify distribution channels and opportunities that extend beyond those of lower socioeconomic status, given Period Poverty's prevalence across income levels.

Methodology

Survey respondents completed a quantitative mobile phone survey administered through an online survey platform in partnership with Pollfish, a leading market research platform that enables businesses to gain valuable insights from global audiences. One-thousand self-selected participants were eligible to participate if they indicated they were over the age of 18, lived in the US, and identified as female. Respondents answered eight questions designed to gauge their familiarity with and impact of Period Poverty on their lives and households. When applicable, a non-response option was offered to avoid opinion or attitude enforcement (Alwin, 2006).

- **The survey contained the eight following questions:**

Q1: At what age did you get your first period?

Q2: Have you ever gotten your period and not had access to a period product? (“Period products” are defined as: maxi pads or tampons.)

“Yes” responses had the following specifiers:

- “Because it was first period and I didn’t know what I needed”
- “Because my period started unexpectedly”
- “Because I forgot to bring a product with me”
- “Because I could not afford to buy the product I needed”

(Note: Only the response: “Because I could not afford to buy the product I needed” was recorded as a report of Period Poverty.)

Q3: If you answered “Yes, because I could not afford to buy the product I needed”, how many times in the past 12 months have you had this experience?

Q4: In the past 12 months, have you worried you would run out of period products during your period?

“Yes” responses had the following specifiers:

- “Because I couldn’t afford the products at that time”
- “Because of transportation issues”
- “For another reason”

Q5: Do you know any friends, family members or colleagues who have been unable to afford period products when they needed them?

Q6: If you have gone without period products because you could not afford them, how did that impact you?

Q7: How many individuals in your household regularly get periods?

Q8: Were you previously aware of the challenges that women face when it is difficult to access period products due to financial constraints?

- **Participants**

1,000 US-based females over the age of 18 completed the survey over a two month period between May and June of 2023. Participants self-reported information regarding their location, education, income, race/ethnicity, marital status, employment, and number of children.

Baseline Sample Characteristics		
<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Percent total sample (n=1000)</i>	<i>Percent women experiencing period poverty (n=358)</i>
Race		
Non-Hispanic white	65.5	59.78
Black	17.1	21.79
Hispanic	8.3	8.4
Asian	4.8	5.03
Multiracial / Other	4.3	5
Education		
High School or Less	34	38.3
Some College	23.8	23.74
Bachelors or more	42.2	37.99
Income		
Under 50K	55.4	59.5
Between 50-100K	27.6	26.82
Over 100K	15.1	12.84
Age		
18-24	11.9	15.1
25-34	22.6	33.8
35-44	23.7	31.6
45-54	15.7	12.3
55+	26.1	7.2

Figure 5. Baseline Sample Characteristics

- **Data Collection and Analysis**

Random Device Engagement (RDE) uses organic non-probability sampling (Rothschild and Konitzer, 2022). RDE relies on advertising networks to engage people where they already are. Survey respondents are asked to participate in a poll in exchange for an incentive token that corresponds to the app in which they are engaged.

Survey results were analyzed using inferential statistics to reflect the effect Period Poverty can have on an individual unable to access menstrual hygiene products.

References

1 Resources on transportation and poverty:

- Ziliak JP, Thomas W. Sanchez LS (2016) Commuting to opportunity: The working poor and commuting in the United States. In: Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/commuting-to-opportunity-the-working-poor-and-commuting-in-the-united-states/>.
- (2023b) The high cost of transportation in the United States - Institute for Transportation and Development policy. In: Institute for Transportation and Development Policy - Promoting sustainable and equitable transportation worldwide. <https://www.itdp.org/2019/05/23/high-cost-transportation-united-states/>.

2 (2023a) The Federal Register¹.

<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/01/19/2023-00885/annual-update-of-the-hhs-poverty-guidelines>.

3 Alwin, D. F. (2006). Margins of Error: A Study of Reliability in Survey

4 Rothschild and Konitzer (2022) Online survey sampling methods: Random device engagement & organic sampling: Pollfish. In: Random Device Engagement and Organic Sampling. <https://resources.pollfish.com/market-research/random-device-engagement-and-organic-sampling/>.

Acknowledgements

Period Poverty in America was made possible by the generous support of the many founding members of the Dignity Grows Strategic Growth Fund. We thank Grace Brandt, Andrew J and Joyce D Mandell Family Foundation, the Simon Family Foundation, Steven and Gayle Temkin, Judith Zachs, Anonymous I, and Anonymous II for their national philanthropic leadership. We acknowledge the steadfast support of the Dignity Grows Board of Directors, Board of Advisors, and the charter members of the National Leadership Council.

We are indebted to Jessica Zachs, Dignity Grows Chair and CEO, for her unparalleled commitment to bettering the world for those facing Period Poverty.

Dignity Grows Inc. is solely responsible for the content of this study. For additional information on our National Research Initiative on Period Poverty, our direct product support programs, and other efforts, visit **dignitygrows.org**.