

STUDENT PERIOD POVERTY PRIMER

A guide to understanding period poverty and the disproportionate impacts on marginalized groups.

#FREEthe
PERIOD



Free The Period is a student-led campaign and coalition fighting to end period poverty, or the systemic lack of access to menstrual healthcare, by securing access to menstrual products in all California K-12, college, and university institutions.

Join our movement and find more menstrual advocacy resources at freetheperiodca.org. *Let's #FreeThePeriod!*

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Student Period Poverty: A Primer



MISSED CLASS



BLOODY PANTS



**URINARY TRACT
INFECTIONS**

These issues of [period poverty](#) occur when students [lack access to menstrual products or other menstrual health necessities](#), such as bathroom facilities, pain relievers, menstrual product receptacles for safe disposal, and medically accurate, comprehensive menstrual health information that often isn't covered in schools.

Just like toilet paper and soap, these resources are needed for menstruators to fully participate in the public sphere. Instead, our society taxes menstrual products as a non-essential good, stigmatizes conversations around periods, and places an unfair burden on menstruators to carry products with them at all times.

IN THE FACE OF THESE INEQUALITIES, STUDENTS ARE RALLYING TO

FREE THE PERIOD.

The Impact of Period Poverty

EDUCATIONAL BARRIERS

1 in 4 menstruating students in the US miss class due to lack of access to menstrual products.¹ Menstrual pain without access to pain relievers such as heating packs and ibuprofen can make class participation difficult.



FINANCIAL BURDEN

1 in 5 teens struggle to afford menstrual products or have not been able to afford them at all.² Since menstrual products are not covered by food stamps, Medicaid, or health insurance spending accounts,³ low-income students face the choice between buying a proper meal or buying menstrual products.⁴ Some resort to using rags, wads of toilet paper, or even newspaper to manage their periods.



STRESS, ANXIETY, AND PUBLIC SHAME

- Nearly half of all menstruators have been "period-shamed". In 10% of these cases, shaming occurs in the classroom.⁵
- Students report that the fear of bleeding through their pants and the embarrassment of peers seeing their menstrual products takes a toll on their mental health and may increase absenteeism.
- Periods are often seen as gross or unclean, leading teens to develop negative associations with their periods and not seek out menstrual health information when needed.⁶

HEALTH RISK

Students who cannot find a menstrual product during the school day wait longer than the recommended 4-6 hours to change their pad or tampon. Poor menstrual health maintenance can lead to toxic shock syndrome and reproductive tract infection - one of the leading causes of death during pregnancy and pre-pregnancy.^{7,8,9}

**EXCLUSIONARY
CAMPUS
CLIMATE**

Lack of free menstrual products on campus sends the message that menstruators' health and academic participation **does not matter**. One student sums up the gross disparities:

"To those who claim that menstrual products in on-campus bathrooms will simply not be feasible, I ask, why is it feasible to provide free condoms and chapstick in every residence hall? Free water bottles with built-in filters in every dorm room?"¹⁰

¹ *State of the Period*, white paper authored by PERIOD and Thinx, survey conducted by Harris Analytics

² *State of the Period*.

³ Smith, A. "The State of Period Poverty in the US." University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing.

⁴ "Women Forced to Choose Between Food and Menstrual Products." DePaul's Center For Journalism Integrity and Excellence.

⁵ Seibert, V. "Nearly half of women have experienced period shaming," New York Post.

⁶ *State of the Period*.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Kaur, R., Kaur, K., & Kaur, R. *Menstrual Hygiene, Management, and Waste Disposal: Practices and Challenges Faced by Girls/Women of Developing Countries.* *Journal of Environmental and Public Health.*

⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Causes of pregnancy-related death in the United States: 2011-2016."

¹⁰ Lau, C. "Campuses should provide free menstrual products to students." The Daily Californian.

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON MARGINALIZED GROUPS

Period poverty is created by barriers to menstrual healthcare access, and those barriers are created by systemic inequities. Thus,

- Different menstruators experience different barriers to access
- Menstruators who are part of marginalized groups can face more barriers than others.

Ending period poverty means prioritizing the unique challenges these groups face – we highlight some of them below.

TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

Transgender students are three times as likely to be unemployed and twice as likely to be living in poverty than cisgender people.¹¹ Men’s bathrooms do not have trash cans for safe disposal of menstrual products, making menstrual hygiene management **inaccessible for trans men who menstruate**.

“I’m a trans man and get a period maybe twice a year, out of nowhere. I do not carry menstrual products because my friends may see them in my backpack and that would out me [as a trans man]. Having access to menstrual products would aid this issue greatly, and also ease my mind.”

– Undergraduate Student

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

- Preexisting mental and physical health problems can **worsen during periods**, and some disabilities are **specifically related to menstruation**. Symptoms can include excruciating pain, excessive bleeding, fainting, and GI issues.
- Since **menstrual pain and PMS is normalized societally and by many doctors**, severe symptoms that are signs of serious underlying disorders, such as PCOS, PMDD, and endometriosis **commonly go undiagnosed** or are misdiagnosed and mistreated.¹²¹³¹⁴

These disorders are highly under-researched, even though endometriosis, for example, affects **1 in 10 women**.¹⁵

Students with undiagnosed disorders cannot qualify for needed disability accommodations.



- Difficulty with menstrual health maintenance for **adolescents with disabilities** is so severe that **many parents choose to medically suppress their child’s periods**.¹⁶¹⁷
- It’s hard for the average student to locate menstrual necessities and get to the bathroom in between classes; it’s even harder for someone who has **impaired mobility**.

**BIPOC
STUDENTS**
(BLACK, INDIGENOUS
PEOPLE OF COLOR)

- A quarter of all Native Americans live in poverty – the highest rate of any US racial or ethnic group.¹⁸ 80% of people living in areas of concentrated urban poverty are Black or Hispanic, though they make up only a third of the population.¹⁹
- Evidence has shown that Black and Hispanic adolescents may experience menarche (their first period) earlier than their peers, which leads to poor health outcomes across the life course, including reproductive cancer in adulthood.²⁰
- Many religions and ethnicities carry taboos that shroud periods in shame and forbid participation in everyday activities, such as leaving the house, praying, or being in the kitchen, during menstruation. Risk of mental illness and life-threatening physical conditions are consequently increased among these groups.²¹


**STUDENTS
GRADES K-12**


- Periods can begin as early as 8 years old, a time when kids have little to no access to information about menstrual health maintenance.

“I wrapped a sock around my underwear just to stop the bleeding, because I didn't want to get shouted at. And I wrapped a whole tissue roll around my underwear, just to keep [it] dry until I got home. I once Sellotaped tissue to my underwear. I didn't know what else to do. I kept this secret until I was 14 years old and then I finally started asking for help.”

- Students are barred from caring for their periods during the school day. In addition to punishments that teachers enforce for using the bathroom during class, a student in CA who misses more than 30 minutes of academic instruction over 3 times in a school year is labelled truant and can be subject to weekend classes, monetary fines, and community service hours.

“When I went on my period I started taking time off school, because I didn't know what was going on with my body. That made my attendance really low and I was getting in trouble. I thought it was only happening to me...so I was scared and I wanted to stay at home.”

76% of teens say that schools teach them more about frog anatomy than female anatomy 

64% say that society teaches them to be ashamed of their periods 

KEY TERMS

MENSTRUATOR

A gender-inclusive term to refer to anyone who menstruates, as people of all genders can have a period.

MENSTRUATION

The approximately monthly discharging of blood, secretions, and tissue debris from the uterus. This occurs from puberty to menopause as part of the menstrual cycle. If ovulation occurs (i.e. an egg is released to the fallopian tube), but the egg is not fertilized by sperm, then the uterine lining, which facilitates pregnancy by providing nutrients to the fertilized egg, is then not needed and is discharged through the vagina.²³



TRANSGENDER

An adjective describing someone who was assigned a gender at birth (usually based on genitalia) that does not match the gender they identify with. Conversely, cisgender people do identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.



MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS

Anything used to collect blood during the menstrual cycle including pads, tampons, menstrual cups, menstrual discs, and period underwear.



FEMININE HYGIENE PRODUCTS AND SANITARY NAPKINS

Terms for menstrual products that promote stigma around periods being "unclean" and misconceptions that period are only experienced by cisgender women.



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