

HOPE & COMFORT

WORKING TO END HYGIENE INSECURITY



Addressing Period Poverty and Hygiene Insecurity for Youth in Greater Boston

A Pilot Program



Report by Hope & Comfort
July 2020

Generously supported by Combined Jewish Philanthropies' The Miriam Fund


Creating opportunities for women and girls

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Executive Summary

Youth who lack access to essential hygiene and period products face substantial negative impacts on their stress levels, self-esteem, school performance, and social lives. Hope & Comfort - a Needham-based 501(c)3 nonprofit - executed a yearlong pilot program in 2019-2020 to address the issues of hygiene insecurity and period poverty for youth in Greater Boston through the support of The Miriam Fund, and in partnership with community-serving partner organizations, including the Waltham Boys and Girls Club (WBGC). Hygiene insecurity is the lack of access to essential hygiene products (such as soap, deodorant, and toothpaste), and period poverty is a lack of access to menstrual products (such as pads and tampons) - all of which are critical for health, self-esteem, and dignity.

The pilot program engaged with 55 self-identified menstruators in the Greater Boston area to provide personalized hygiene and period products on a monthly basis, as well as gather insights about their experiences and challenges as it relates to period and hygiene needs. The program consisted of: (1) One-on-one interviews with 20 participants to gather first-hand, in-depth and personal insights into menstrual experiences, (2) Engaging an additional 35 participants via monthly surveys to collect additional insights, as well as through the distribution of personalized period and hygiene products provided to survey participants on a monthly basis. In total, over 10,000 hygiene and period products were distributed as a part of the pilot.

The results of the surveys and interviews paint a complex picture of the vast and varied challenges youth face when they lack access to these essential products. To start, a significant portion of the participants did not have reliable access to hygiene and/or period products prior to the start of the pilot: *68% of participants stated they regularly ran out of period and/or hygiene products.* Many felt their self-esteem suffered as a result of running out of products.

This led to significant stress for youth and their families: *9 out of 10 participants stated they were more stressed when they didn't have the hygiene and period products they needed. 100% of participants stated that the burden of affording period products on a monthly basis causes them financial stress.*

For those lacking access, many noted that this impacted their school performance and ability to participate in social activities: *70% of participants said their school performance was more likely to suffer when they don't have the hygiene/period products they need. 9 out of 10 participants said they have missed one or more days of school due to their period. And, half of respondents stated that they were more likely to miss social activities when they did not have the essential products they need.*

The results – and the many stories and data points highlighted in the sections which follow – showed that not only is hygiene and period product access a major challenge, but also that this barrier has a cascade effect that creates additional and significant financial, emotional, social, and/or academic challenges.

Through the pilot program, youth unanimously reported benefits from receiving personalized, timely, and dignified hygiene and period products on a monthly basis: *100% of participants felt that receiving free*

Inclusive Language

Throughout this report, we say “period products” or “menstrual products” instead of “feminine hygiene,” as not all participants identify these issues or needs as “feminine.”

We also say “youth” or “menstruators” in referring to participants, because not all participants self-identify as female, girls, or women - just as not all females, girls, or women menstruate.

hygiene products – including period products – improved their self-esteem, confidence, and health, as well as reduced the financial stress felt by their family unit. 100% of participants said they would feel more confident at school and around their peers if they always had access to the hygiene and period products they need.

These results amplify the need for targeted programs that provide both hygiene and period products to youth in a dignified and timely manner. If all youth had free and reliable access to the products they needed to stay healthy and feel confident, the positive impact on school performance, social activities, family finances, and physical and emotional health would be meaningful.

This pilot program cultivated a wealth of data and insights about how to serve youth in need of hygiene and period products. For Phase Two of this pilot program in 2020-21, Hope & Comfort, supported by The Miriam Fund, looks forward to utilizing these initial outcomes to build an informed program to reach more youth across the Greater Boston area. Over the upcoming year, Hope & Comfort will provide hygiene and period products to over 100 youth in Greater Boston, while continuing to administer monthly surveys and working on grassroots advocacy to advance solutions to these pressing issues. Although our work aims to have a substantially positive impact on youth, there is still a great deal to be done in unraveling the adversity felt by so many who are faced with period poverty and hygiene insecurity. We hope this report begins a broader dialogue and learning process that values menstruators’ lived experiences and challenges, and raises awareness about the pressing issues of hygiene insecurity and period poverty in Greater Boston.

Introduction

Hope & Comfort is a Needham-based 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with a mission to provide essential hygiene products to support and improve the health, self-esteem, and hygiene education of school-aged children and young adults in need across Greater Boston. With the generous support of a grant from The Miriam Fund, a program of Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) in Boston, Hope & Comfort launched a year-long pilot program focused on addressing the issues of hygiene insecurity and period poverty. This program engaged with a diverse group of 55 youth from the Greater Boston area to provide essential hygiene products and gather insights to better understand youth’s lived experiences around menstrual and hygiene needs, their challenges, and product preferences.

Hope & Comfort’s

Vision

One day everyone living in the US will have access to essential hygiene products to feel clean, confident, and healthy.

The goal of this report is to shed light on the issues of hygiene insecurity and period poverty for youth who identify as menstruators in the Greater Boston area. This report is based on the lived experiences and challenges faced by this population related to accessing hygiene and period products, and describes in detail how these issues impact their day-to-day lives. The sections that follow outline the pilot program structure, key themes and findings, and next steps for program expansion.

Hope & Comfort recognizes that this pilot program is relatively small in scale and therefore may not be representative of the diverse experiences of all menstruators in Greater Boston. This report, however, serves as an instrumental first step. Through learning about the lived experiences of youth facing these issues, we hope to inform more effective youth-serving programs, foster public dialogue, and inspire action to address hygiene insecurity and period poverty in a more widespread fashion going forward. Finally, although most youth in this program self-identified as female, girls, and/or women, Hope & Comfort refrains from using gendered language out of respect for the full spectrum of identities we serve (see ‘Inclusive Language’ graphic, above).

The Intersection of Period Poverty and Hygiene Insecurity

In this pilot program, teen and young adult menstruators in the Greater Boston area found that their period often increases financial and emotional stress, reduces self-esteem, impacts health, interrupts school, and/or inhibits their social lives. To put it simply, one teen noted: “My period affects every part of my life.” Nearly half the global population has or will experience menstruation, while one in five youth in the United States experience period poverty.¹ Despite this, period poverty is a topic that has been minimally researched and is often overlooked.

What is

Period Poverty?

The inability to afford and/or access products for managing menstruation on a monthly basis, such as pads and tampons.

SNAP Benefits

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
(AKA food stamps)

What you **CAN** buy

- Milk
- Bread
- Fruit
- Vegetables
- Meat
- Canned goods
- Eggs

What you **CAN'T** buy

- Soap
- Deodorant
- Shampoo
- Toothbrushes
- Toothpaste
- Pads
- Tampons

Period poverty is a subset of the broader issue of hygiene insecurity. Hygiene insecurity is the lack of access to essential hygiene products such as soap, deodorant, and toothpaste, which are critical for health, self-esteem, and dignity. Hygiene products, including menstrual products, are not eligible for purchasing under SNAP benefits (under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as ‘food stamps’) and are not covered by other existing state or federal safety net programs. The dearth of services and systems available to provide these essential products to under-resourced populations presents a major challenge in

maintaining health, self-esteem and dignity. For young menstruators who face hygiene insecurity, lacking access to period products specifically is an issue that can have great impacts on self-esteem, school performance, social endeavors, and stress levels. These hardships are further complicated by the fact that they are closely linked to health status, body image and self-esteem, and stigma. At a very basic level, however, this issue can be addressed by leveraging relatively straightforward solutions: *By getting the most-needed hygiene and menstrual products to the right recipients, at the right time, and in the most dignified manner possible.*

Program Structure

A Pilot Program Designed to Address Hygiene Insecurity and Period Poverty

To address hygiene insecurity and period poverty through this pilot, Hope & Comfort engaged 35 students who self-identified as menstruators at a Waltham-based Boys and Girls Club (WBGC) from November 2019–July 2020. See Charts 1 and 2 for participants’ demographic information. Each participant received a personalized hygiene kit on a monthly basis, containing a comprehensive

Chart 1
All participants by age (n=55)

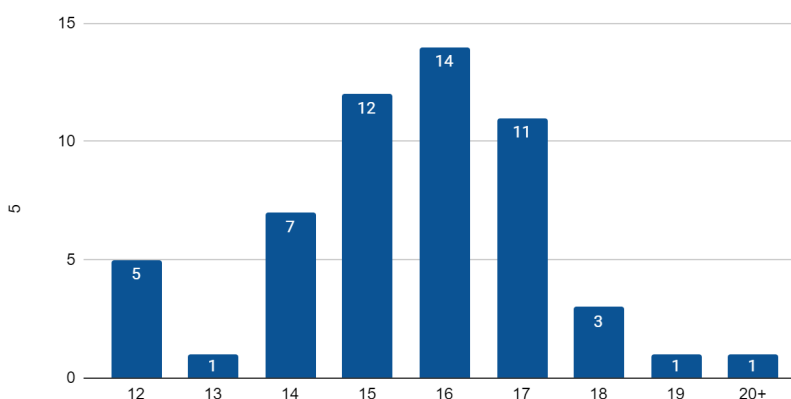
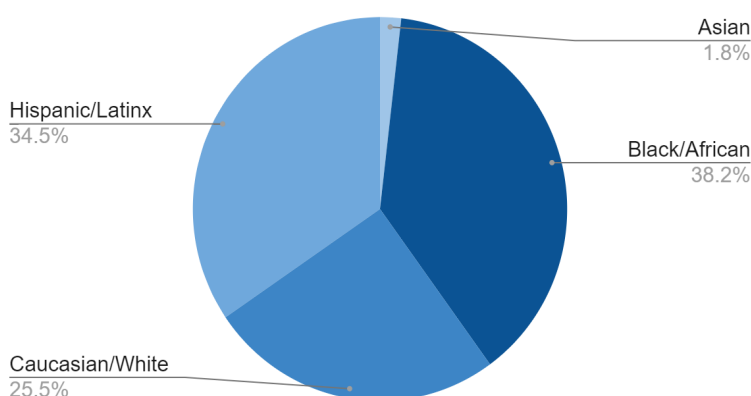


Chart 2
All participants by race/ethnicity (n=55)



collection of both hygiene and period products – including soap, deodorant, shampoo, toothpaste, a toothbrush, additional hygiene and personal care products as requested, as well as a full month’s supply of pads and/or tampons. Through a monthly survey administered online, each participant was able to personalize their hygiene kit based on their unique needs. For example: When requesting soap, shampoo, and deodorant, youth could note their preference for sensitive

skin, textured hair products, or add notes to indicate favorite styles or brands. In requesting menstrual products, youth could request a month's supply of pads, tampons and/or pantliners - with the ability to specify based on absorbencies, tampons that came with or without applicators, preferred brands, and other period product preferences. In addition to product ordering, the monthly survey included a number of questions aimed at gathering feedback and personal insights to better understand participants' experiences related to period and/or hygiene needs.

Separately, Hope & Comfort conducted one-on-one conversations with a diverse group of 20 youth menstruators receiving basic needs services from fellow nonprofit partner and peer organizations across Greater Boston. These in-depth and deeply personal discussions amplified the authentic voices of youth's lived experiences, needs, and challenges. While the surveys provided a strong monthly baseline of data and insights, the interviews painted a more intimate picture of the hygiene insecurity and period poverty experiences of youth in Greater Boston. The combined results of these surveys and interviews form the basis of this report's findings and inform our analysis as outlined in the proceeding sections.

A Key Element of the Pilot Program Structure: Addressing Overall Hygiene Insecurity Alongside Period Poverty

Though this report focuses heavily on the issue of period poverty, it is critical to note in the context of describing the program structure that it was the marriage of hygiene and period product distribution that made this program so effective on a monthly basis. By addressing period poverty and hygiene insecurity in tandem, and by providing a comprehensive suite of products to each participant, their unique monthly needs were met comprehensively in a *one-stop-shop* fashion.

What is Hygiene Insecurity?

Hygiene insecurity is the inability to afford and/or access everyday hygiene products such as toothpaste, soap, and shampoo. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits do not cover hygiene products. This makes obtaining these essential items a challenge for low-income populations. They are expensive, and buying them shifts money away from other urgent needs.

Hope & Comfort's Core Mission

Hope and Comfort's core mission is to provide essential hygiene products to support and improve the health, self-esteem, and hygiene education of school-aged children and young adults in need within Greater Boston. Hope & Comfort works with more than 100 youth-serving and community organizations to provide hygiene products, distributing over one million hygiene products in 2020 alone.



Adapting the Pilot Structure in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic



In March 2020, the Waltham Boys and Girls Club had to abruptly close its doors to in-person client services due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the declared state of emergency in Massachusetts. At that time, Hope & Comfort worked closely with our partners to: 1) Ensure the youth served through our pilot program did not experience gaps in their hygiene and menstrual product supply due to the temporary closure of BGCW, and 2) Prevent anything more than a minor disruption to our data collection process.

Product Distribution During COVID-19: As part of Hope & Comfort’s distribution plan, we supplied our partners with an emergency inventory of menstrual and hygiene products to ensure that they could respond to fluctuating hygiene or menstrual needs of our youth participants. This emergency supply was put to effective use in March 2020 when the BGCW was abruptly forced to close due to COVID-19. Pilot participants were able to take home sufficient hygiene and menstrual supplies for the month of March from the emergency inventory. In the months that followed, while BGCW remained closed, Hope & Comfort continued to provide a monthly supply of hygiene and menstrual products to all participants by coordinating the contactless delivery of products to youth at their homes. We give significant credit for our seamless distributions during the pandemic to our partners at BGCW, who brought Hope & Comfort’s products the ‘last mile,’ recognized the great – and growing – need due to the pandemic, and saw tremendous value in Hope & Comfort’s solutions.

Products for Families: Throughout the pandemic, Hope & Comfort supplemented standard menstrual and hygiene product distributions to our youth participants by providing extra supplies of all products to ensure that the participants’ family members also had access to necessary hygiene supplies during the pandemic. We also supplied each participant with a reusable cloth face mask. Hope & Comfort has continued to deliver menstrual and hygiene products to our pilot youth participants in July 2020 to ensure no gaps in their hygiene needs between the June 30th end of Phase One of the pilot and the August 1st start of Phase Two of the pilot.

Data Collection During COVID-19: We were unable to conduct client surveys in March 2020 due to the closure of the BGCW facilities. Throughout March we collected contact information for the youth participating in our surveys and 1:1 interviews and worked to set up alternative, virtual communications. By April 2020, we had fully adapted our survey and interview processes to virtual formats. Utilizing Zoom, FaceTime, texting platforms, and phone calls, we were able to complete the planned surveys and interviews from April-June 2020 without disruption remotely. From April through June 2020, we augmented our surveys to also include questions about the impact of the pandemic on participants’ hygiene and menstrual insecurity. Our COVID-19-related findings are discussed in a subsequent section below.

Addressing the ‘Stigma Factor,’ Up Front

89% of participants felt there was stigma surrounding periods – that periods are seen as shameful or taboo.

When asked what one change would make having a period easier, the overwhelming answer provided by participants was “open communication.” For many, it took years to understand that each person's experience with their period was unique and that it was okay to ask for help. For example, one youth noted: “I didn’t know about the severity of symptoms that could come up for people so when I would cramp I didn’t know

In Their Words

“Socially my biggest problem was around the stigma. This stigma can lead to feelings of shame and embarrassment. They [health educators] should tell you that it [a period] is something that everyone has and you shouldn’t feel ashamed to get it each month. This way, when you do get your period you’re willing to ask for help.”

if it was normal pain. Plus all the stereotypes about a period really reduced my ability to separate what was healthy and what was not.” The lack of openness surrounding this topic can largely be attributed to prevailing social stigma and cultural taboos surrounding menstruation that have existed for centuries.³ This stigma casts a shadow on open dialogue surrounding periods. Based on the conversations and surveys carried out throughout the pilot, and as evidenced in the results below, open dialogue would be beneficial and welcome in the eyes of menstruators as a way to break down the barriers around what society too-often sees as an ‘awkward’ or ‘inappropriate’ topic.

Pilot Program Findings and Discussion

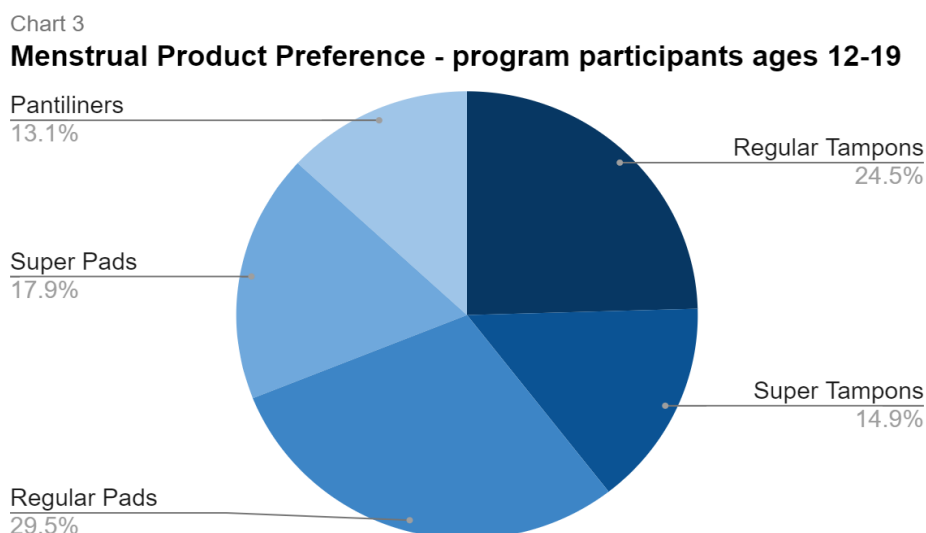
I. Understanding Product Preferences

30% of participants preferred regular pads, and 25% of participants preferred regular tampons.

The program we offered to pilot participants was only going to be a useful intervention so long as the products delivered met the needs and specifications of those being served. Too often, well-meaning charities deliver products to client populations in need without asking essential questions of beneficiaries around: *Is this needed? Does this represent a dignified offering in your eyes? Will you use this?* To ensure our pilot program addressed exactly what participants needed, we first sought detailed information to learn about product preferences.

Between 30 to 35 youth were surveyed each month to gather information on their experience as well as to order hygiene and period products. For period products, each participant could select up to two options from the following: regular tampons (with or without an applicator), super tampons (with or without an applicator), regular pads, super/overnight pads, and/or pantliners. Over half of all participants selected regular pads, regular tampons, or both (see Chart 3). Pantliners were the least common preference among participants. Interestingly, nobody throughout the course of the pilot ever requested tampons without an applicator. Brand names were always preferred for all products types. Based on these findings, future programs supplying menstrual products to this age group should always ask their clients questions about product preferences when stocking inventory and planning supply chains.

In Phase Two (discussed in a subsequent section), Hope & Comfort will continue to survey participants for preferences to confirm and ensure the relevance of our intervention. Similarly, we will focus on building our inventory and vendor/sourcing relationships around the most-requested products.



II. Issues of Access

• The Cost Barrier

100% of participants stated that the burden of affording period products on a monthly basis causes them and/or their families financial stress.

The high retail price tags on pads and tampons can be prohibitive for families living on limited means. Participants unanimously agreed that period products were too expensive, and that the cost of these items added up significantly over time. One youth exclaimed, “When my Dad found out it cost \$16 for 20 pads, he was so upset! That’s not fair. I don’t understand why necessities have such high value [cost].”

The high costs of menstrual products caused financial stress for menstruators and their families. Nearly half of participants found it challenging to pay for period products each month because families with constrained budgets had to allocate their funds to cover other essential needs such as housing and food, and did not have the means to purchase menstrual products each month. One participant articulated this significant trade-off by noting: “In my family, if we didn’t have to buy [period products] every month then we’d have more money for food.” Another youth stated that if they did not have to pay for pads, they could instead save money for their first car or first apartment. Yet another remarked, “I didn’t want to ask my mom to buy me pads because I knew they would be expensive. If I had a heavier period, I would feel guilty because I would know it was costing more money to buy more pads.” Clearly, the financial burden of purchasing expensive menstrual products each month puts a strain on families who need to allocate their money to other important necessities. However, of those participants who were provided products through Hope & Comfort, **100% felt that receiving free hygiene products each month reduced financial stress for them and their family.** Pilot program participants expressed how receiving products helped alleviate financial stress:

“It [this pilot] has allowed me to not worry about one financial need in my life.”

“[Receiving products from Hope & Comfort] made the financial needs easier on my family.”

“It has reduced a lot of stress on my life, I do not have to worry about not having enough money to get the [period] items I need.”

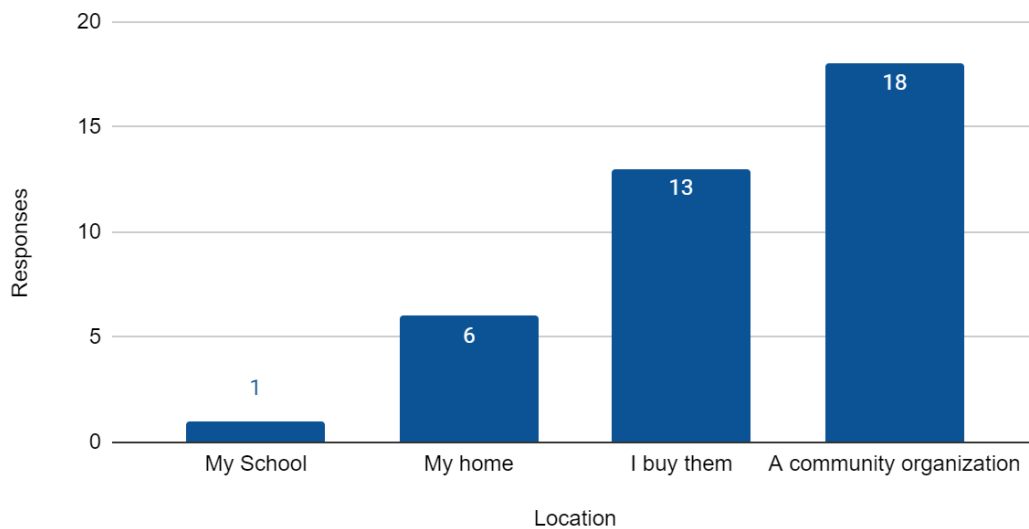
- **Unreliable Access Causes Stress**

9 out of 10 participants stated they were **more stressed** when they didn’t have the hygiene and period products they needed.

Six of 27 youth (22%) on a particular survey stated they received their period products from home, while three times as many (67%) stated they relied partially or fully on community organizations for their period products (see Chart 4). These statistics uphold the hypothesis that — for many — period products cannot be readily sourced through individual or familial means, but rather need to be obtained through community services like Hope & Comfort. With 68% of participants stating they regularly run out of period and/or hygiene products, clearly there is unmet need that is not addressed by existing supply.

Chart 4

Where participants receive monthly period products



For those who needed to purchase products, the greatest barrier noted as a part of this pilot in obtaining products was the retail cost. Whether the cost was incurred by participants' families or themselves, the high cost of these products was oftentimes insurmountable. For youth, not having enough products significantly impacted their stress level. One participant noted, **“Running out of [hygiene and period] products I need is something I feel really stressed about.”** Many participants agreed that one of their biggest fears around getting their period each month was running out of products for period management.

Through this pilot, participants were given sufficient quantities and types of hygiene and period products each month for the duration of the program. **When asked how receiving consistent products impacted their lives, 46% found they had less stress, and another 19% said they had more confidence** (see Chart 5). A number of participants stated:

“I feel good knowing I don’t have to stress over how I will get these items”

“It has made it easier on me because I know each month I am receiving what I need.”

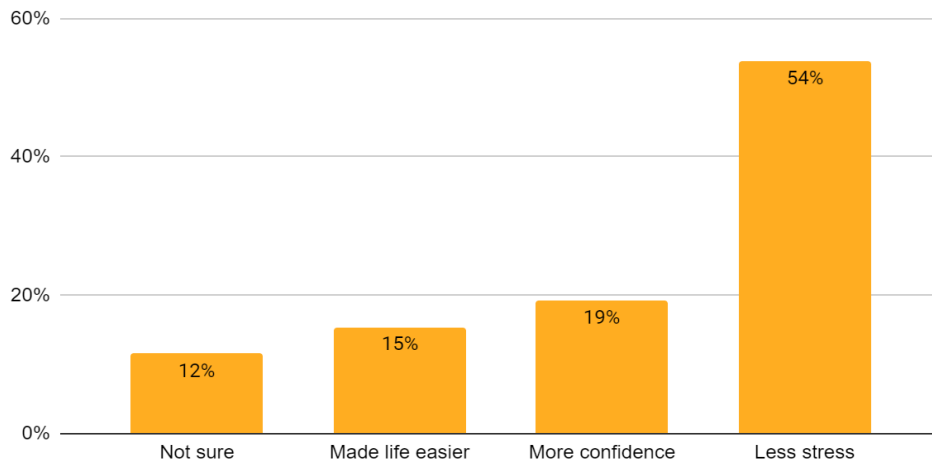
“I feel more confident in myself not having to worry about how I am getting products I need monthly.”

“Receiving these items monthly from Hope & Comfort really helps empower me because I don't have to worry about if I'm not going to receive items.”

The benefits of receiving free and reliable hygiene and period products on the quality of life for young menstruators is remarkable — a trend that emphasizes the need for more services that supply these essential goods. See Chart 5, below.

Chart 5

The impact of receiving free period/hygiene products monthly



- ***With Limited Access, Menstruators Adopt Makeshift Solutions***

In cases when access to traditional period products was not a possibility, menstruators were forced to consider inadequate and/or undignified solutions. In some cases, **participants discussed using paper towel or toilet paper in place of a pad, despite embarrassment about having to deploy this solution.** Hope & Comfort’s research outside of this pilot has also revealed that menstruators in extreme cases may consider newspaper, fabric (such as a bandana or a sock), or simply wearing disposable menstrual products for longer than is recommended to avoid more frequent product replacement. These solutions, while resourceful, are not dignified and may even pose a threat to users’ health. Of makeshift solutions due to lack of access to traditional products, pilot participants recounted:

“I won’t go to gym class because you have to change in stalls that don’t have curtains and it’s embarrassing because I have toilet paper stuck in my pants due to not having pads.”

“Sticking toilet paper in your underwear is EMBARRASSING.”

“I had my period really heavy but my mom was away and I didn’t have anything except toilet paper.”

“I feel bad about stuffing toilet paper in my underwear to prevent bleeding through.”

Hygiene Product Access + Period Product Access = A Comprehensive Combination, with Results

As discussed on page 7, a key component of the pilot program structure was pairing monthly period product distribution with comprehensive hygiene products, including soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, shampoo, deodorant, a rotating 'comfort item' (such as lip balm, floss, and more), as well as other products as requested. Together, access to all of these products packaged together in a consistent, reliable, and dignified fashion created significant value and multiplied the impact of our intervention.

Pilot Program Components Related to Overall Hygiene

68% of pilot participants stated that they regularly run out of everyday hygiene products such as soap, toothpaste, or deodorant. All 35 youth at the Waltham Boys and Girls Club were provided a comprehensive kit of hygiene products monthly in addition of period products monthly. Participants were given great choice over customizing their product choices and needs. Over **200 total kits** were packed and distributed throughout the course of this pilot, each of which included at least one of each of the following hygiene products: soap, shampoo, deodorant, toothpaste and toothbrushes, plus additional rotating products as available.

The Impact

Feedback from the participants in the pilot was remarkable, with 100% of participants noting an improvement in their overall health and sense of wellbeing when they received free hygiene products on a regular basis in addition to the period products discussed throughout this report. Of the hygiene products, they said:

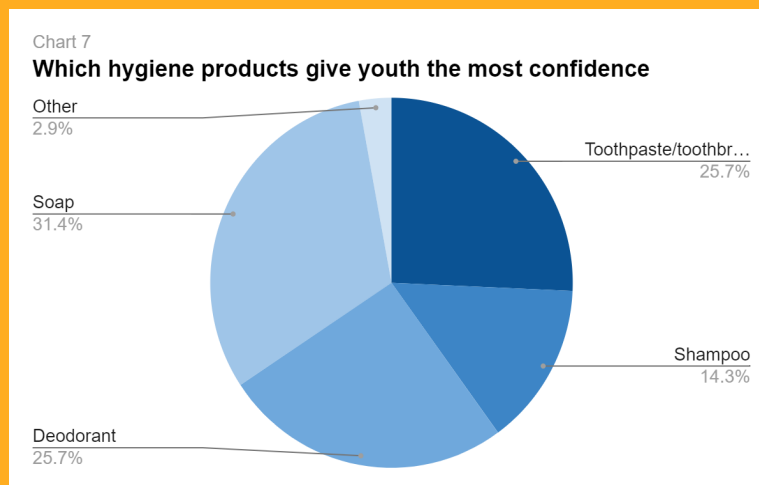
"Receiving the [hygiene] items monthly from Hope & Comfort really helps empower me because I don't have to worry about if I'm not going to receive items each month."

"I love when I receive gel deodorant, it keeps me smelling good all day."

"Receiving a toothbrush & toothpaste helps build my confidence because I have clean breath and white teeth."

"Dove soap keeps me feeling confident. It's nice to see my skin looking healthy."

"I feel confident because I don't have to worry about running out of hygiene things."



III. Impacts on Emotional and Physical Health

- *Effect on Self-Esteem*

100% said that receiving free hygiene and period products each month has improved their self-esteem.

A common emotional impact that many self-reported right before and/or during monthly periods was a noticeable drop in self-esteem. Research tells us that the hormonal changes that come with menstruating can lead to low serotonin levels and may even lower self-confidence.² This biological fluctuation, along with the socio-cultural influences that make menstruation feel ‘taboo’ or ‘shameful,’ may exacerbate a feeling of lower self-esteem during menstruation. Half of all participants stated that when they were on their periods they had negative feelings about their body. Many participants expressed that they simply do not feel good about themselves during their period.

It is clear the emotional and physical impacts of menstruation lead to added stress every month. The burden is heightened for those who have an unreliable source of period products or who cannot get the specific products they need. However, **100% of participants felt that receiving free hygiene products each month through Hope & Comfort helped to reduce their stress and lessen the emotional impact that went along with menstruation.** Participants share how receiving hygiene products helped them feel better about themselves:

“Hope & Comfort helps supply products to me each month and all their products make me feel good about myself.”

“Everything I have received [in the hygiene kits] has made me feel good about myself.”

“I don't worry about running out of essentials and that makes me feel more confident.”

- *Physical and Emotional Discomfort*

72% stated their period made them feel physically and/or emotionally uncomfortable.

Managing a period can be emotionally and/or physically taxing. A common frustration expressed among all 20 interviewees was how unprepared they felt in managing the physical and emotional symptoms of their period. Some felt that period education in schools lacked comprehensive information - for example, that students were taught about the biological process of menstruation, but not the possible symptoms that came along with experiencing monthly periods. One participant highlighted a lack of comprehensive

support from trusted adults: “[At school] they never made it a point in sex education that if you have any questions to come to us [the teachers]. They just said, if you need a pad come to us. Who do I go to if I have a question?” Another also noted the lack of support at school: “I wish there was some sort of counselor to help prepare you for period symptoms. But I guess it’s more of a live and learn sort of thing.” With an array of symptoms and severities - from cramps and headaches, to mood swings and acne - many felt confused about their symptoms and lost as to whether what they were experiencing was considered ‘normal.’

When participants were asked what advice they had for youth who are soon to get their period, many wanted their peers to recognize that each person’s experience with their period is unique. One participant explained: “It’s important to know that everyone’s different because when you get your period the first thing most teenage girls do is go [consult with] their friends, and if their friends don’t have the same experience as them then they may feel weird or different.” This diversity of needs, period education levels, and period-related symptoms made it hard for youth to connect and support each other as they navigated their periods.

Many interviewees did find ways to manage the physical symptoms of their period — whether via pain medication, hot packs, or rest, for example — by the time they reached late high school. However, the emotional turbulence that many faced remains a continuous and varied struggle to confront each month. One participant stated: “I feel like when my mood is down because of my period, I just don’t feel motivated to do anything.” Some found their self-esteem was lower during their period, while others felt sad, depressed, or easily agitated. One participant shared that their struggles with depression would worsen at certain times each month, and that it took time for them to discover that their period may be related. They said: “There was no discussion [at school or at home] about why I would go to a dark place around the time of my period. I wasn’t aware of how my period impacted my mental health.”

In Their Words

“Sometimes I’ll look in the mirror and wonder why my body looks like this. I don’t like the way clothes look on me and I feel like it’s only when I’m on my period that I feel this way.”

“My period affects my self-esteem. I don’t feel pretty, I don’t feel good about myself. I’ll look at myself in the mirror and think...that’s disgusting.”

IV. Effects on School and Academic Life

- **School Attendance**

9 out of 10 participants said they have missed one or more days of school due to their period.

Not having access to menstrual products may force some youth to miss classes or even full school days. One youth shared her experience of getting her period in the morning but not having menstrual products to last throughout the day. Without access to products, she felt she had no other option but to stay home and miss the entire school day. Some have missed class or a full school day because they didn't have pads or tampons. Here are a few of their stories:

"I had to miss school because I couldn't afford to get tampons or pads."

"I didn't have the right type of pads because I couldn't get them, so I skipped a day of school so I wouldn't bleed through [my clothing]."

"I stayed home from school. Jules [a Waltham Boys & Girls Club staffer] dropped a bag of [period] stuff off to me at home so I could go to school the next day."

"I didn't have any tampons or any money to get some. I didn't want to bleed through my pants, so I decided not to go [to school]."

Another common school interrupter of note for pilot participants was cramping. Some participants felt they could not talk to their teachers about having cramps or easily explain why they needed to see the nurse. Others were so consumed by the pain it was impossible to pay attention in class. For example, "Listening to what the teacher is saying was hard, especially during the first two days of my period when I'm cramping." Some have even missed classes or full school days because of cramps, noting, "I've missed days of school because I couldn't get out of bed because of cramps. It's so uncomfortable to tell teachers about why you stayed home. I hate missing class but I don't have a choice." Although not the focus of this report, cramps consistently came up in the interviews as one of the biggest challenges participants faced in regards to their period. This is a reminder that menstruation poses a wide variety of challenges for youth, and that helping to alleviate barriers and open the dialogue has the potential to create an instrumental impact in lessening the overall burden of periods and period-related symptoms.

• **Class Engagement**

92% of participants said they may become distracted in class due to their period.

Pilot participants ranged in age from 12-26 years old, with the vast majority of participants currently in high school. The rigor of a high school class schedule can be trying for many young menstruators as they navigate the responsibilities of their period. One noted, "At school I constantly worry about having to change my pad or tampon, it's very distracting." Nearly all of those interviewed claimed an inability to focus in class because their period was always on their mind or their symptoms were too severe. Another

noted, “I don’t know how I made it through in high school. Periods were on my mind a lot and it was very distracting.”

- **School Performance**

70% of participants said their school performance is more likely to suffer when they don’t have the hygiene/period products they need.

For those who lack consistent access to products, managing a period during school is anxiety-provoking and can have an impact on performance. Pilot participants said:

“It’s stressful being at school when you don’t have the stuff [hygiene/period products] you need. It makes my anxiety worse because I think about it all day long.”

“When I don’t have pads I tend to stress about it a lot, making that my main focus, neglecting my school priorities.”

“I didn’t have any more products to change into but had to finish my midterm, I felt stressed the whole time that I was going to leak [blood].”

When youth are faced with an inability to meet basic hygiene needs, school inevitably takes a backseat. The pilot found that youth who do not have the period products they need each month are more likely to be distracted in class, miss class, or miss a school day entirely. Providing free and reliable hygiene and period products to youth is a clear way of strengthening school engagement and attendance.

V. Social and Extracurricular Activities, Interrupted

Half of respondents stated that they were more likely to miss social activities when they did not have the hygiene and period products they needed.

Just as periods interrupt school life, they also interrupt youth’s social lives. Half of all participants reported that they were more likely to miss social and extracurricular activities when they did not have the hygiene and period products they need. In particular, participation in sports was a struggle because of a lack of access to period products, period cramps, or feelings of apathy:

“When I didn’t have the products I needed I would skip soccer practices because I wouldn’t be able to play comfortably.”

“There were times when my cramps were too unbearable so I skipped soccer practice.”

“It was hard to find the motivation at sports practice to participate.”

When young menstruators do not feel well physically or emotionally due to their period, oftentimes they may isolate from peers and/or miss activities they otherwise enjoy. Some were nervous about how they would come across socially with peers during their periods. Said one youth, “I’m more reluctant to hang out with people when I’m on my period. I’m usually feeling down and want to be alone.” Another expressed, “My period will make me feel less motivated. I have to take care of my period so I don’t do fun stuff.”

It is clear that for these young adults, periods infringed upon school and social life, especially when access to products is a challenge. This lack of access is a weight that can prevent one from attending events with friends such as pool parties and basketball games, and can be such a distraction in class. These challenges have a substantial impact on the social and educational success of youth. Without measures in place to address hygiene insecurity and period poverty, these impacts will continue to disrupt the lives of many.

100% of participants said they would feel more **confident** around their peers if they always had access to the hygiene and period products they need.

VI. Greater Challenges Due to COVID-19

96% stated it was harder, if not impossible, to get the hygiene and/or period products they needed during COVID-19.

As detailed on page 8, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed both the pilot program structure, as well as exacerbated the challenges and barriers to hygiene access experienced by participants. Primarily, the stress of accessing and affording period products has been heightened due in large part to job loss and school closures (see Chart 6). 87% of participants noted that family hardships were worsened due to a parent or guardian losing some or all of their employment as a result of COVID-19-related changes. One participant said: “It is a financial stress on my family. If we could get [hygiene and period] products for free it would be easier, especially during COVID.”

Another 67% of participants noted they are utilizing a meal distribution site or food pantry instead of getting meals from school. Because schools transitioned to online learning as a way to mitigate the exposure risks

Chart 6

Direct impact of COVID-19 on participants and their families

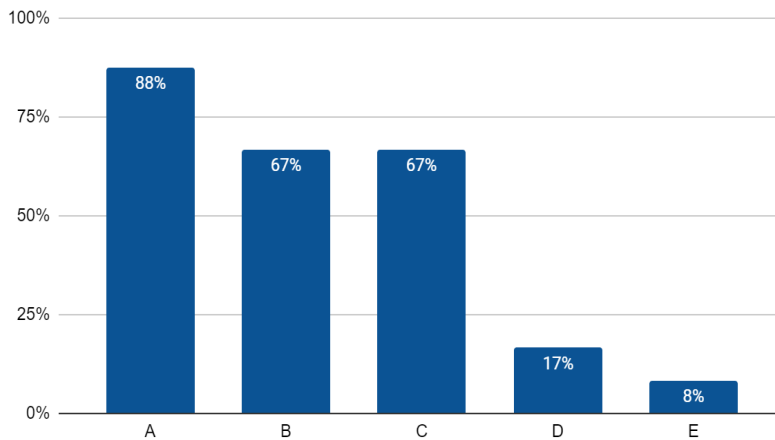


Chart 6 key:

- (A) My parent/ guardian has lost some or all of their employment.
- (B) I am using meal distribution sites instead of getting my meals at school.
- (C) My family and/or I are relying on a food pantry or other food service for groceries.
- (D) My family and/or I are more worried than usual about meeting our basic needs.
- (E) A family member and/or I are having difficulty accessing the routine health care we need.

associated with COVID-19, some families had to put even more money towards food costs since family members required all meals from home. Many youth depend on free breakfast and lunch at school, and free dinner at community organizations like the Boys and Girls Club. With community organizations closed and school operating remotely, many youth lost access to the services and safety nets they and their family depended on. One participant noted: “The cost of the things we need has gone up because we’re eating more meals at home. In our family, all 3 of our [daily] meals usually come from school or the Boys and Girls Club so the grocery bill now is really high.”

Thus, a number of participants noted that with less money to meet other essential needs, it was even harder to get the hygiene products they needed like soap, shampoo, pads, and tampons. Hope & Comfort’s provision of essential products to the BGCW youth gave families great relief during this uncertain and challenging time. Participants noted:

“I want to thank you for supporting myself and all my friends [fellow pilot participants] during this difficult time. It has been hard but thank you [Hope & Comfort] and the [Boys and Girls] Club for your support.”

“It has been hard, but thanks to the support of the [Boys and Girls] Club and Hope & Comfort I am able to meet my basic needs, so thank you.”

“Thank you for helping us in this time of need.”

Recommendations and Next Steps

100% of participants felt that receiving free hygiene and period products improved their self-esteem, confidence, and health, as well as reduced the financial stress felt by their family unit.

This pilot took a deep dive into the experiences of 55 youth in Greater Boston as a way of understanding how to better address period poverty and hygiene insecurity for low-income youth being served by community organizations in the area. The commitment of program participants and partners allowed this pilot program to be a success. Hope & Comfort gathered an abundance of data and insights to inform existing and future programs that support youth hygiene and menstrual needs.

For many participants in this pilot, obtaining soap, deodorant, shampoo, and menstrual products has been transformative in reducing their stress, lessening the financial burden, allowing them to focus on school and activities they enjoy, and more. Here are a few of their final reflections:

"I don't worry about running out of essentials and that makes me feel more confident."

"All these products have been so helpful for me at school and my sister at home. [There was] no stress or panic that we would run out which has been great."

"Receiving these items monthly from Hope & Comfort really helped empower me because I don't have to worry about if I'm not going to receive items or not."

"Thank you so much! I really appreciate all the support you guys give us! Without your help, I struggle each month."

"It has been hard, but thanks to the support of the [Boys and Girls] Club and Hope & Comfort I am able to meet my basic needs, so thank you."

For youth who don't have access to a bar of soap to feel clean or a pad to manage menstruation, they face challenges that ripple throughout their lives. This pilot has shown that when youth are faced with hygiene insecurity and period poverty, it often can lead to significant impacts on their social life, academic performance, stress level and self-esteem. The anecdotal information Hope & Comfort gathered has highlighted the issue of lack of access to essential products and the cascading implications it has on the lives of youth. Given the positive impact of this program on participants, it is important that steps be taken

today to alleviate the burdens that exists for those who lack the hygiene products they need by providing free, reliable, and comprehensive access to period and hygiene products to underserved populations.

It is also critical to note the importance of providing both hygiene and period products together. One without the other does not serve the community in a comprehensive way. The results of this program show that the benefits of providing both are instrumental in bettering the lives of youth. For 100% of participants, receiving both hygiene and period products on a monthly basis increased their self-esteem, decreased their stress, and improved their overall health. There is still much work to be done to dismantle the stigma and normalize the topic of periods. When society is able to communicate openly about the needs and challenges that come along with periods, youth will presumably feel even greater support and control around managing monthly menstruation.

The next step for Hope & Comfort is to continue to provide products to youth in the Boston area at a greater scale to help to fill the gap in access. The lessons learned through the pilot program about how to support youth's hygiene needs in a dignified manner will be incorporated into the subsequent program year supported again by The Miriam Fund. The goal of Phase 2 is to reach more menstruators through expanded distribution of hygiene and period products to over 100 youth, in partnership with Greater Boston-based service and partner organizations. The pilot program year informed us of the needs and preferences of young menstruators including: product and ordering preferences, distribution needs, familial needs, and ways to empower youth through dignified deliveries. In Phase 2, Hope & Comfort will continue to use monthly surveys to solicit valuable insights surrounding menstrual topics to engage in continuous learning and improve future programming.

In Their Words

"Thank you thank you thank you. You have no idea how much this has helped me. I was sleeping on people's couches, working part time jobs and now I'm finally going to college. Without this help from you [Hope & Comfort] and the [Boys and Girls] Club I don't know where I would be or how I would be getting by. Thank you so much."

The major takeaways from the pilot surround the often-ignored issue of access to hygiene and period products. For those youth who are unable to reliably source the products necessary to maintain their health, they face major challenges related to increased stress, financial strain, school and social interruptions, and lower self-esteem. **It is essential that community organizations prioritize and support programs that address this issue at its core, by providing easy, reliable, timely and dignified access to essential hygiene products.**

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