

December 2021

DIVISION  
OF HEALTH  
PROMOTION



**JACKSON  
COUNTY**  
HEALTH  
DEPARTMENT

*BRIEF*

# **MENSTRUAL EQUITY IN EASTERN JACKSON COUNTY**

# PERIOD POVERTY AND MENSTRUAL EQUITY

## SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH AFFECTED

Lack of access to menstrual or period products, commonly referred to as period poverty, disrupts the lives of millions around the world each year. Half of the population will experience monthly menstruation at some point in their lives. Similar to other bodily functions, care for periods is a routine part of hygiene. Those who experience period poverty are unable to purchase safe, hygienic menstrual products to meet their needs.

Lack of period products is often considered an issue impacting women and girls in developing nations; however, period poverty also exists in the United States. A 2019 study of U.S. college students found that 14.2% of women had experienced period poverty within the year. Of the women who experienced period poverty, 10% reported they experienced it every month (Cardoso et al., 2021). Another study of 183 low-income women in St. Louis found that 64% could not afford needed period products in the previous year, and 21% experienced this monthly (Kuhlmann et al., 2019). In Missouri, feminine hygiene products, including pads, tampons, liners, and cups are not considered “essential goods” and are taxed at a rate of 4.2 percent, as opposed to food which is taxed at a 1.2 percent rate (Obrodovic, 2020). This tax is commonly referred to as “The Pink Tax.”

Menstrual equity acknowledges that millions of menstruating people in the world lack access to affordable, safe products and education. In her 2019 book, *Periods Gone Public*, Jennifer Weiss-Wolf wrote, “To ensure that society is fully equitable and participatory, laws and policies must provide a place where safe and affordable products are available for those who need them,” (Weiss-Wolf, J. 2019).

Period poverty does not just impact adults. A national study found that one in five teens (20%) reported struggling to afford period products or not being able to purchase them at all. Eighty-four percent of teens reported missing class time or knowing a classmate who missed class time because they did not have access to period products (*State of the Period*).



ECONOMIC STABILITY



EDUCATION



HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE



NEIGHBORHOOD AND BUILT ENVIRONMENT



SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT



## PERIOD POVERTY RISKS

For students unable to access period products, the time they spend outside of class can quickly accumulate. According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists Committee on Adolescent Health Care (2015), menstrual cycles can last between two to seven days. If students are unable to attend school during that timeframe, they risk missing 50 or more days during an academic school year. This is valuable learning time that can put them academically behind other students.

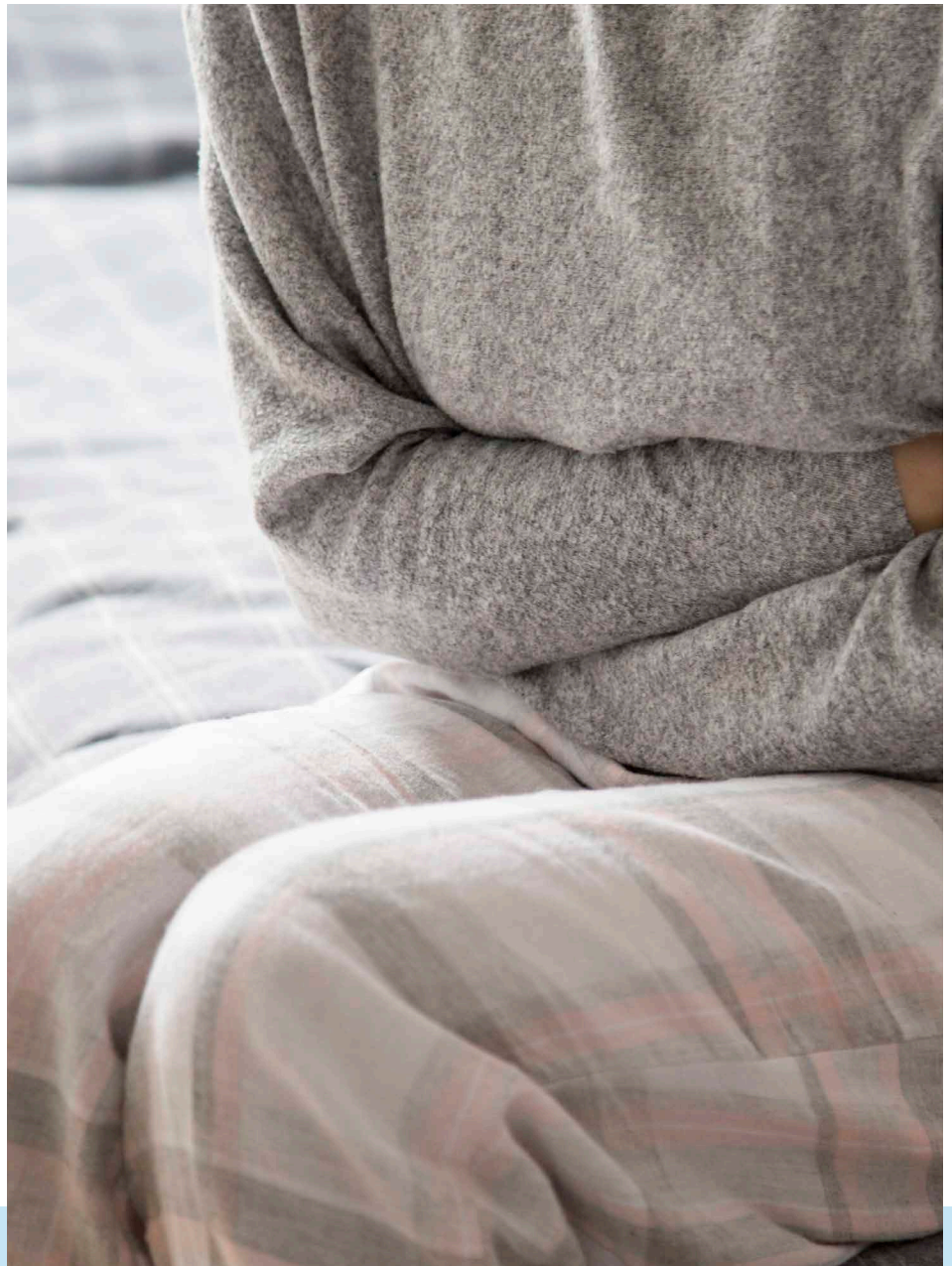
Additionally, periods can cause students mental and emotional stress. A national survey of teens found that 71% feel self-conscious while on their period, and 69% feel embarrassed they have to bring period products to the bathroom (*State of the Period*).

Students who experience period poverty or make do with homemade period products are more likely to experience depressive symptoms around their period. A study of U.S. college students found that 68% of women who experienced period poverty every month reported symptoms consistent with moderate or severe depression, compared to 61% of those who had experienced period poverty at some point in time, and 43% of those who had not experienced any period poverty (Cardoso et al., 2021).

While there is not enough research to say that period poverty alone increases rates of depression, it is important to note that having access to period products is a measure of being able to meet basic hygiene needs. Those who cannot access basic hygiene needs have higher instances of poor mental health (Geng, C, 2021).

Period poverty can not only affect mental health but also lead to physical consequences. Using alternative/homemade products or using products longer than intended can cause bacterial infections, such as urinary tract infections and toxic shock syndrome (Geng, C, 2021). Additionally, homemade or misused products may not provide adequate coverage, which could cause leakage and further negative feelings and shame around a period.

**Lack of period products is often considered an issue impacting women and girls in developing nations; however, period poverty also exists in the United States.**



## METHODS

Data was collected by surveying school district nurses. The Jackson County Health Department (JACOHD) contacted nine school districts – Blue Springs, Fort Osage, Grain Valley, Grandview, Independence, Lee’s Summit, Lone Jack, Oak Grove, and Raytown – in Eastern Jackson County (EJC). District administrators from eight of the nine districts responded. Fort Osage did not respond to the survey request. Each administrator from the other eight districts forwarded the survey, sent via SurveyMonkey, to school staff at elementary, middle, and high schools within their district.

## RESULTS: CURRENT SITUATION IN EJC SCHOOLS

Results were compiled from the 65 EJC school employees who completed the survey. The survey asked staff several questions regarding period product distribution at their schools, their awareness of students’ access to adequate supplies, and disruptions of student learning because of periods.

Staff at all eight of the districts completed the survey, and represent 68% of all EJC public schools. Some staff indicated that they worked at a single school, while others were float staff that worked at multiple schools within their district. School nurses made up 88% of survey respondents.

The survey found the following:

### Period Product Distribution

- 92% of respondents report their school provides disposable pads
- 68% provide disposable liners
- 48% provide disposable tampons
- 77% provided generic products
- 60% provided name brand products

### Distribution Locations

When asked where students could access needed supplies:

- 98% responded at the nurses’ offices
- 74% responded at school health clinics
- 56% reported that period products were **not** available in restrooms

School counselors, teachers, and administrators provided supplies as well, though it was less common. Eighty-three percent of schools do not limit the number of products a student may take at one time.

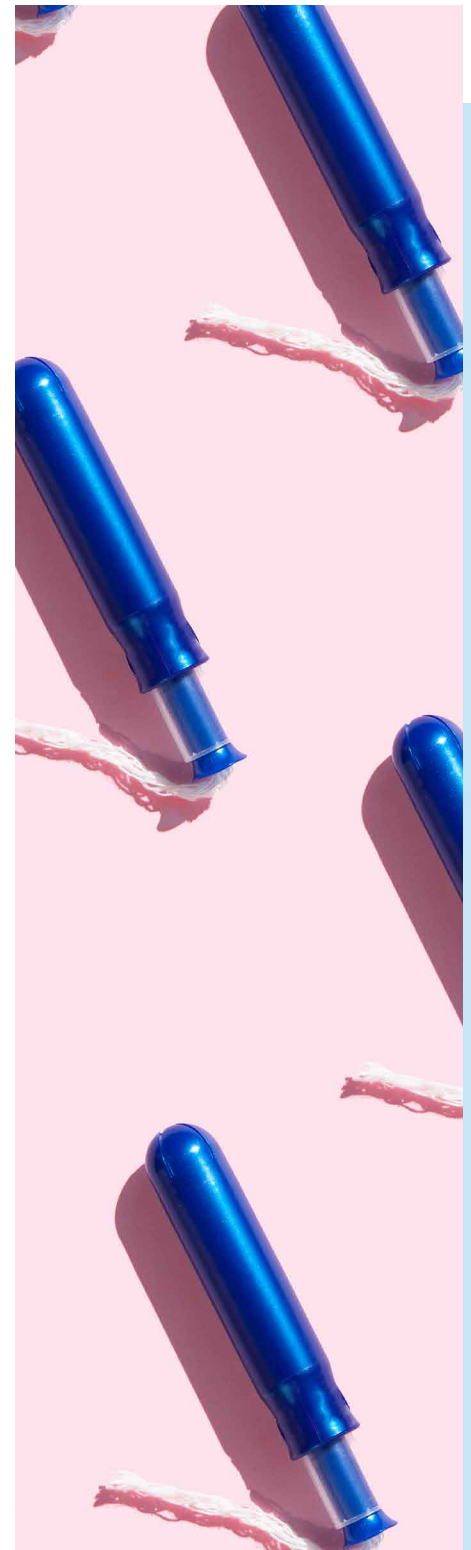
**56% reported period products were not available in restrooms**

### Period Product Funding

Respondents reported that districts procure period products using multiple budgets.

- 54% indicated products were purchased or provided through some form of district spending
- 71% indicated products were provided by donations
- 21% indicated they purchased products with their own money

When asked if schools ever ran out of any products during the school year, 16% responded yes. Of those, 73% ran out of products only once or twice during the school year. Respondents in four different school districts indicated that their school procures period products solely from donations or staff purchases out of pocket. In an open answer section, 25% of respondents indicated that additional supplies or donations would benefit their school.





## Awareness of Student Ability to Access Supplies

- 62% reported tracking the number of students that request period products
- 95% were not aware of students at their school who reported COVID-19 as a barrier to acquiring period products when needed
- 92% were not aware of students who reported barriers to acquiring period products during extended school breaks
- 93% were not aware of students that managed their periods by making homemade pads or tampons out of toilet paper, rags, or any other absorbent materials
- 40% were aware of students that have reported an inability to purchase needed products

Of the respondents who were aware of students that have reported an inability to purchase needed products, most wrote that they encountered one to two students a month with this barrier, though one respondent had 30 students a month report an inability to purchase supplies. Fifteen percent of respondents indicated that take-home supplies or discreet kits students could carry would be beneficial in supporting students that may be experiencing period poverty.

**67% are aware of students that report missing school, leaving school early, or coming to school late because of their period**

**40% were aware of students that have reported an inability to purchase needed menstrual products**

## Student Absenteeism

- 67% were aware of students that report missing school, leaving school early, or coming to school late because of their period

Of those respondents, 11% reported that students indicated they missed school, left, or came to school late because of not having an adequate supply of products.

## Period Education

- 71% reported that their school provides education to students on managing periods and caring for personal hygiene needs during their periods
- 91% of respondents indicated that EJC students receive education on period care and personal hygiene in 5th grade
- 11% of respondents indicated that 7th graders receive period education
- 9% of respondents indicated 8th graders receive period education
- 4% indicated that students in 9th – 12th received period care and personal hygiene education

When respondents were asked how often students received education on how to manage and care for periods 100% responded one time a year.

## DISCUSSION

Findings from this survey show that EJC schools largely provide adequate period products and supplies to students. A majority of students that need supplies can receive them if they ask a staff member, but most cannot obtain products on their own in restrooms. Students benefit from taking multiple period products at once for use throughout the day and after school.

A majority of respondents reported that their school does not track the number of students that request period products, but 40% were aware of students who stated they could not purchase needed products at some point. This was found across all eight districts that responded to the survey. One respondent wrote, “Information regarding a student who might struggle with this difficulty is not always shared between services (counseling, nursing, administration). Awareness of student needs could help ensure needs are recognized more readily.” This finding indicates that there may be a greater need for period products than schools are aware of. Tracking numbers of students requesting supplies may provide better insight into the overall need within a school building.

One key takeaway from our survey was the need for schools to expand their health education on menstrual hygiene. While EJC schools provide education on period management and personal hygiene care, a majority of respondents reported students receive this education only once in 5th grade. For many adolescents, this is two to three years before beginning their first period. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists Committee on Adolescent Health Care (2015) recommends “adolescent girls should understand that menstru-

ation is a normal part of development and should be instructed on the use of feminine products and on what is considered normal menstrual flow.”

While most EJC schools are able to provide a supply when needed for students, students still report missing school because of their period. Expanding education will lessen the shame and stigma associated with periods and ensure that students fully understand their body’s development. Period products, management, and education are biological needs for young girls and adolescents.



*I believe talking about it more frequently to make it more normal for young girls will help them be more comfortable and knowledgeable about their menstrual cycles.*

— SURVEY RESPONDENT

Furthermore, in the St. Louis study, low-income women from the focus groups suggested that schools provide more menstrual hygiene education (Kuhlmann et al., 2019). Our findings also suggest that education may help lessen student absenteeism and learning loss.

To achieve menstrual equity Missouri should prioritize passing policies at a statewide level. Missouri has already made great strides in menstrual equity through passing Senate Bill 53 which required that feminine hygiene products be provided free to inmates in prisons and jails in Missouri, which was signed into law in the summer of 2021 (Missouri Appleseed, 2021). This law provides dignity to incarcerated women throughout the state. However, a Missouri House bill — which would have ensured all Missouri public and charter school districts provide free period products in the restrooms of buildings serving middle and high

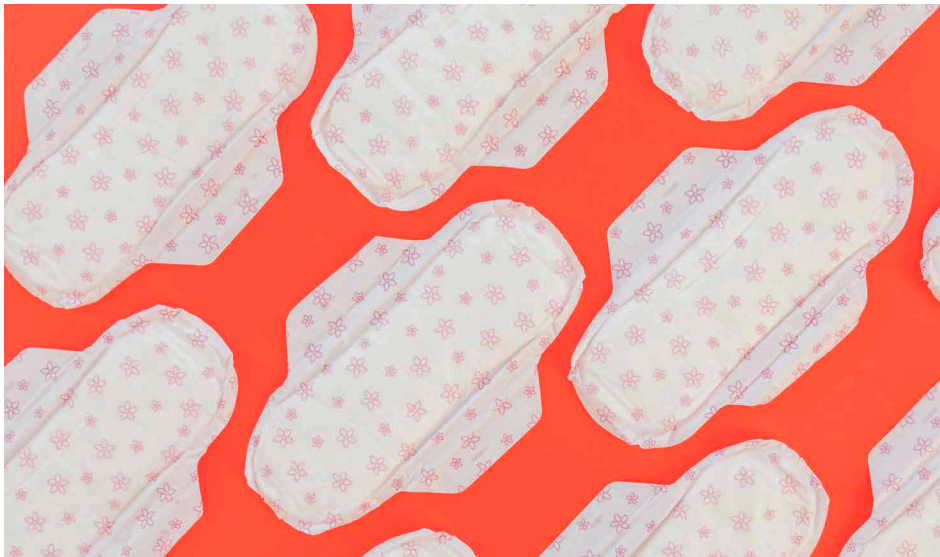
school students — failed to move past committee in both 2020 and 2021 (Missouri House of Representatives, 2021). EJC schools are fortunate to have partnerships with nonprofit organizations such as Giving the Basics, a local nonprofit that provides basic hygiene and cleaning products. Organizations like this provide a valuable service to schools and districts by alleviating a budget item through donations.

A reliance on private donations may limit the quantity, types, and brands of the products available to schools throughout the year. Multiple survey respondents wrote in that better quality products, and products other than pads would be beneficial for their students. As our survey found, 16% of respondents experienced being out of stock at least once during the school year. Statewide policies that direct districts to include line items for period products in their budget would alleviate those barriers and level the playing field across all districts and schools.

Finally, to achieve menstrual equity, Missouri should classify feminine hygiene products as “essential goods,” and subject them to a lower tax rate, or completely end all taxation on feminine products. Twenty three states do not tax feminine hygiene products (Period Equity, 2021). Since 2016 a Missouri House bill has been introduced every year to change tax laws on feminine hygiene products and diapers. The bill has bipartisan support, but has not gained traction (Obradovic, 2020). Continuing to tax essential hygiene and health needs at nearly four times higher than the rate of other essential needs continues a cycle of discriminatory taxation and burden on women.

## LIMITATIONS

The survey of EJC schools was conducted in August of 2021 and distributed to staff by school district administrators at their discretion. The voluntary survey asked respondents about their knowledge and awareness of student period product needs however 50% respondents worked at elementary schools only, where the majority of students do not need access to period products. A majority of the respondents were nurses, who may have less contact with most students on a regular basis. A further analysis of school environments including a comprehensive review of all school staff knowledge of period product availability and a review of health education standards would provide a fuller picture of period product and students experiencing period poverty realities within schools. Additionally, students were not surveyed for this brief. To better understand student experiences, additional student surveys or interviews should be conducted.



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