

Period Poverty in Canada: The Case for Action

Period poverty is a social determinant of health. It affects whether a student can stay in class, take part in sport, and manage a basic bodily need with dignity. This brief brings together Canadian evidence in one place, with every statistic tied to its source.

Prepared for a youth led initiative in Ontario that sells a \$5 backpack pin and uses the proceeds to buy period products for schools across Canada.

All sources accessed October 2026. Canadian spelling is used throughout.

Executive summary: the need in eight numbers

1 in 6

Canadians who menstruate have personally experienced period poverty: 17 percent overall.
[1][12]

1 in 4

Canadian women said they had chosen between buying menstrual products and paying for essentials such as food or rent in the past year.
[1]

Up to \$6,000

Spent over a lifetime on period products alone, not counting pain relief or other extras.
[2]

1 in 7

Canadian girls have missed school because of a lack of menstrual products.
[8][9]

15%

Said inability to afford products held them back from daily activities such as sports, school, or work.
[2]

45%

Of girls in a 2025 eastern Ontario survey said products were rarely or never available at their school.
[4]

22%

Ration or use products longer than they should because they cannot afford more.
[3]

52%

Feel the need to hide that they have their period. Stigma is still part of the problem.
[5]

The message behind the numbers: I understand. You are not alone. We are here to help, and it is essential that we ask for help. A student should never have to choose between food, rent, and period products, or between staying home and going to school without what she needs.

How many Canadians are affected: it is common, not rare

Period poverty means being unable to afford or access menstrual products, education, hygiene facilities, or safe ways to manage menstruation. In Canada, it is measured in national surveys, not only in anecdotes.

One in six, or 17 percent, of Canadians who menstruate have personally experienced period poverty. In households earning less than \$40,000 a year, the share rises to one in four, or 25 percent. ^{[1][12]} The gap by income matters. It shows that period poverty follows household resources, not individual behaviour.

Other national measures point in the same direction. One in five, or 21 percent, of girls, women, and people who menstruate in Canada struggle to afford menstrual products for themselves or their dependents. ^[3] One in five, or 20 percent, who menstruate say they may not be able to afford period products at some point in the next 12 months. ^{[1][2]} More than four in five, or 83 percent, who menstruate believe period products are too expensive. ^[3]

For many households, the trade off is direct. One in four Canadian women said they had chosen between buying menstrual products and paying for essentials such as food or rent in the past year. ^[1] That is not a matter of preference. It is a basic needs decision repeated every month.

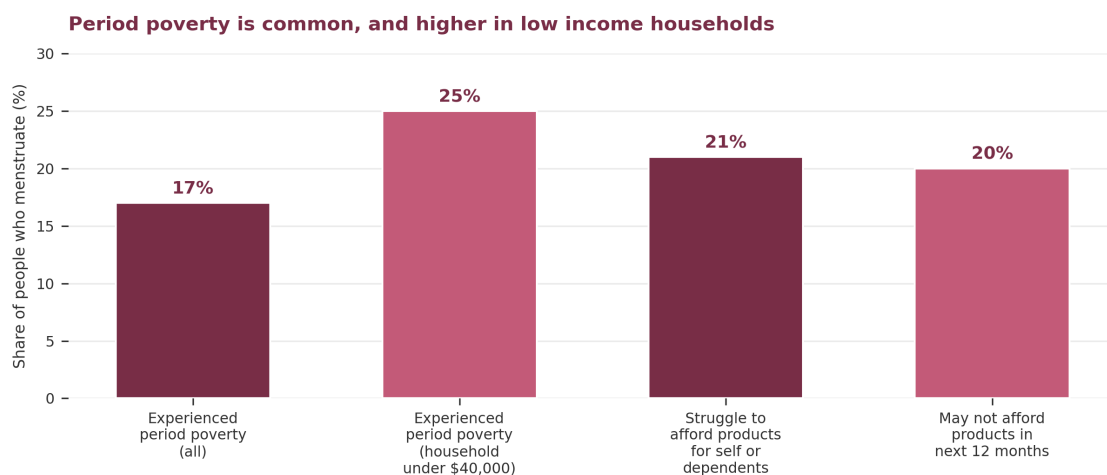


Figure 1: Prevalence in Canada. Sources: Environics Research for Women and Gender Equality Canada, 2023 ^{[1][12]}, and Plan International Canada survey, 2022, cited in ^[3].

The cost burden: a monthly cost that adds up for a lifetime

Canadians spend between \$83 and \$230 per year on period products. ^{[5][6]} Over a lifetime, someone who menstruates may spend up to \$6,000 on period products alone, not counting pain relief or other extras. ^[2]

The cost is also rising. The cost of pads, tampons, and other personal care items has risen more than 20 percent over five years, according to the Consumer Price Index. ^[5] When household budgets tighten, period products are among the essentials that families are forced to reconsider, even though menstruation does not pause.

Where a person lives changes the price. In rural and Indigenous communities, costs can be double the national average. A single box of tampons can cost as much as \$45 on some remote First Nations reserves. ^[7] The same product, at two or more times the price, in the places where incomes and supply are already most constrained, is an equity problem in itself.

Impact on education: missing class for a basic need

For a school based initiative, education is where period poverty becomes most visible. A student who does not have a pad or tampon when she needs one has three choices, none of them good: ask around and risk embarrassment, improvise, or go home.

One in seven Canadian girls have missed school because of a lack of menstrual products. [8][9] In national data, 15 percent of people in Canada who menstruate said their inability to afford menstrual products held them back from participating in daily activities such as sports, school, or work. [2]

The pattern begins early and it is broad. Among women in Canada, 68 percent felt their period prevented full participation in an activity. Over 50 percent have missed school, work, or social activities because of their period, rising to 70 percent among women under 25. [9] Younger students are therefore not a side group in this data. They are the group most likely to withdraw.

What students reported in Nova Scotia

Among adolescents in Nova Scotia, two thirds reported difficulty affording products and about 40 percent had missed school, sports, or social activities as a result. [4] Difficulty affording products and missing activities appear together. When the first problem is present, the second follows often enough to affect learning, team participation, and confidence at school.

Why this matters for learning

Missing part of a day is still missing learning. It can mean a missed lesson, a missed test review, a lab that cannot be repeated easily, or a practice that keeps a student on a team. Repeated month after month, small absences compound. They also send a message to the student herself: that school is not set up for her body. A reliable supply of free products in school changes that message in a practical way. It keeps the student in the building, in the class, and in the activity she would otherwise miss.

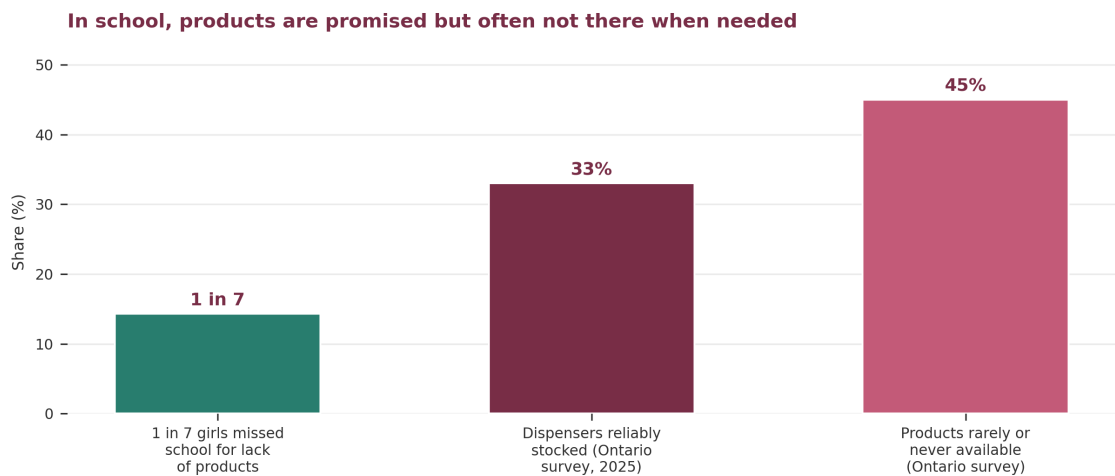


Figure 2: Education impact and school availability. Sources: Plan International Canada [8][9] and the 2025 eastern Ontario survey of 863 girls reported in [4]. The bar for 1 in 7 is shown at its proportion of the whole.

In Ontario schools, supply on paper does not always mean supply in the washroom

The most detailed recent school evidence in this brief comes from a 2025 survey of 863 girls in Grades 5 to 12 in a mid sized, mostly rural school board in eastern Ontario. ^[4]

- More than half had missed at least part of a school day because of their period. ^[4]
- About one third said they had been without pads or tampons when they needed them. ^[4]
- Only 33 percent said school dispensers were reliably stocked. ^[4]
- 45 percent said menstrual products were rarely or never available at their school. ^[4]

Read those four findings together. A policy or a donation can exist at the board or provincial level while the experience in a specific washroom, on a specific day, is still an empty dispenser.

That last mile problem is where community action helps: a named contact at each school, a predictable delivery, and a count of what was delivered and when.

Health consequences: rationing, infection risk, and stigma

When products cost too much, people stretch them. One in five, or 22 percent, ration or use products longer than they should because they cannot afford more. This rises to 33 percent in households under \$50,000 and to 48 percent among Indigenous respondents. ^[3]

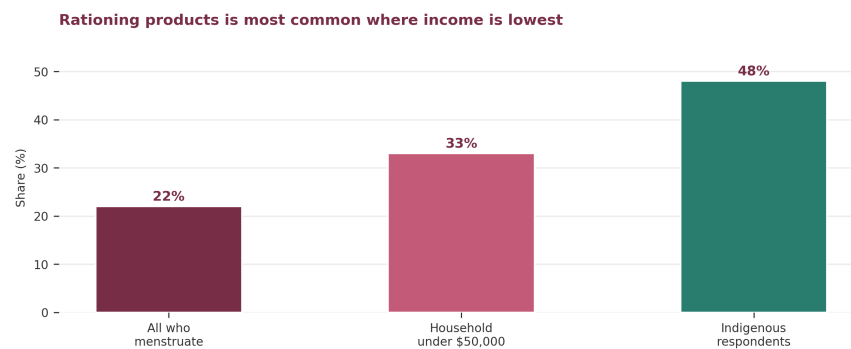


Figure 3: Rationing or using products longer than recommended, by group. Source: Plan International Canada survey, 2022, cited in [3].

Using products for too long raises the risk of infections, including bacterial vaginosis and, in the case of tampons, toxic shock syndrome, a potentially fatal condition. ^[2] Health guidance in Canada advises changing tampons every 4 to 8 hours and not using them overnight for this reason. Rationing puts that guidance out of reach.

Stigma compounds the health risk because it delays asking for help. 52 percent feel the need to hide that they have their period. ^[5] 74 percent feel compelled to hide menstrual products on the way to the washroom, and 66 percent do not let male peers or colleagues know when they have their period. ^[3] One in four Canadians agree periods are dirty or unclean, and one in five agree menstruation should not be publicly discussed. ^[2] A student who believes she must hide a normal bodily process is less likely to ask a teacher, a counsellor, or a friend for a product in time.

Who is hit hardest: the burden is not shared evenly

Group	What the evidence shows
Low income households	25 percent in households earning less than \$40,000 a year have experienced period poverty, compared with 17 percent overall. ^{[1][12]} Rationing rises to 33 percent in households under \$50,000. ^[3]
Indigenous people and communities	48 percent of Indigenous respondents ration products. ^[3] In rural and Indigenous communities, costs can be double the national average, and a box of tampons can cost as much as \$45 on some remote reserves. ^[7]
Rural, remote, and Northern communities	Higher prices, fewer stores, and supply that depends on shipments. Cost and physical access fail at the same time. ^{[3][7]}
Newcomers, trans and non binary people, and people experiencing homelessness	Named in the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women report as groups facing added barriers to products, facilities, and dignity. ^[3]
Students	One in seven girls has missed school for lack of products, and 70 percent of women under 25 have missed school, work, or social activities because of their period. ^{[8][9]}

For a youth led initiative that donates to schools, the student row is the starting point. The other rows are a reminder to choose recipient schools with need in mind, to listen to guidance staff about who is most affected, and to deliver without requiring any student to identify herself to receive help.

What governments have done, and where the gap remains

Governments in Canada have recognised period poverty and have taken real steps. The record matters because it shows both progress and the limit of large programmes when they reach a school washroom.

- **December 2023, federal workplaces:** Federally regulated workplaces, covering about 1.2 million employees, must provide free menstrual products under the Canada Labour Code. ^[10]
- **2026, federal investment through food banks:** A \$60 million federal investment in menstrual equity is being delivered through Food Banks Canada, reaching every province and territory. ^[1]
- **Manitoba, 2026:** Manitoba became the first province to mandate free menstrual products in all workplaces. ^[11]
- **Ontario schools:** The provincial Menstrual Equity Initiative supplied 23 million products and 1,380 dispensers to school washrooms, renewed in 2024. The 2026 to 2027 school year is the final year of that three year supply. ^[4]

The Ontario gap: the supply ends, the need does not

Even during the Ontario programme, the 2025 eastern Ontario survey found that 45 percent of students said products were rarely or never available at their school, with only 33 percent saying dispensers were reliably stocked. ^[4]

That finding reframes the question for 2026 and 2027. It is not only whether a provincial supply exists. It is whether a student, in her school, on the day she needs a product, finds one without having to leave class to search, ask in embarrassment, or go home. When the provincial supply ends after the 2026 to 2027 school year, schools will need community led solutions to keep that basic supply in place. ^[4]

Call to action for schools and supporters: Keep the supply local, visible, and counted. Support a model where every \$5 pin sold is a public act of contribution, and where the proceeds buy products that go directly into schools, with totals published openly: pins sold, dollars raised, products bought, and schools reached.

What good delivery looks like for a school donation model

- Start with a named contact in guidance or the main office, so delivery is expected and stored properly.
- Deliver a mix of pads and tampons in sizes students actually request, and record the count for every drop off.
- Return on a predictable schedule, and ask the school contact what ran out first.
- Publish the running totals. Transparency is how a youth led initiative earns trust with schools, parents, and buyers.
- Use the website stats page to keep one focused one pager per topic: cost, education, health, and the Ontario school gap. Clean, light, and focused, one area at a time.

None of this requires a large bureaucracy. It requires consistency, honest accounting, and the willingness of students to help other students. That is a strength, not a limitation, when the helpers and the people being helped share the same hallways and the same understanding of what it feels like to be caught without a product at school.

Closing note. The evidence in this brief points to a simple, durable model: sell a designed backpack pin for \$5 as a visible sign that the buyer supports the cause, is honoured to contribute, and has contributed, then use the proceeds to buy period products and donate them to schools across Canada, starting locally and growing school by school. Every pin on a backpack builds awareness and influence, every delivery puts products where students need them, and every published total shows that youth led action, grounded in Canadian evidence, can close a gap that large programmes alone have not closed.

REFERENCES

Sources

All sources accessed October 2026. Statistics in the text are tied to the numbered source that follows each claim. Full URLs are given so any reader, school, or supporter can check the original.

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12. Women and Gender Equality Canada. Attitudes and Awareness of Menstrual Equity and Period Poverty Among Canadians, Environics Research report (PDF). https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2023/feqc-wage/SW21-189-2023-eng.pdf

How to use this brief

Schools may share this brief with staff, parent councils, and student leaders. Supporters may quote any statistic above provided the source number is kept with it. For the website, each section can become a single focused one pager: keep it clean, light, and focused on one area, with the same source numbers attached.

Note on language: This brief uses the language of its sources, including girls, women, and people who menstruate, because period poverty affects students and community members in all of those groups. Delivery to schools should always protect privacy and dignity, with no student required to explain her need to receive a product.