How Can the Menstrual Health of Women & Teens in Homeless Shelters be Improved?

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Abstract

Purpose: For the average woman, menstrual cycles and the associated cramps, mood swings, and body aches are already a routine hardship. However, for women and teenagers living on the streets and in shelters, these hardships are exponentially harsher. With a scarce supply of products, unsanitary facilities, and no access to close supervision, the menstrual health of women experiencing homelessness must be improved.

Methods: In Seattle, WA alone, 40% of the homeless population is comprised of menstruating women, and their health must become a priority. Researchers conducted interviews with shelter staff and conducted an online survey to understand the menstrual health needs of local homeless women. Additionally, a virtual interview with Amanda Webber, the co-founder of Seattle T2P2 (a non-profit organization that hosts tampon and pad drives) was also conducted.

Results: The major findings from the survey and the interview helped quantify the problem locally, identify the best ways for the general public to contribute, and emphasize what has worked well in the past to meet current needs. The data reveals that the supply of menstrual products for many shelters is unsteady, at least 50% of women aren’t adequately equipped for their monthly cycles, social media and education are very effective at raising awareness about menstruation, and much more.

Conclusion: In order to improve menstrual health, shelters must have a steady supply of products, or else women resort to poor hygienic habits. Since the menstrual needs of homeless women are overlooked, increasing awareness will contribute to stabilizing donations and destigmatizing menstruation.

Methods

1) Target Population: Women and teens in local homeless shelters of Washington’s large cities (Kirkland, Tacoma, Seattle & more)

2) Data Collection: Surveys were emailed to staff members working at local homeless shelters which house women & teenagers in Washington.

Reasons for Online Surveys:
- Cost & time efficient
- Reaches a wide variety of people
- Increased participation & engagement

A supplementary interview with the co-founder of T2P2 was conducted to receive insights from someone who has experience in improving the menstrual health of homeless women.

Types of Survey & Interview Questions: Close & open-ended, Likert scale, & list. Questions weren’t double-barreled or emotionally charged.

3) Analysis of Data:
- Quantitative data analyzed via a cross-tabulation table and visual graphs
- Qualitative data analyzed via text analysis
- Interview data analyzed by reviewing transcripts for notable quotes

4) Sharing of Data: As well as through quotes and anecdotes from experts & staff at shelters

5) Possible Biases & Error: Respondents may have provided socially desirable answers that they believe the researcher wants to hear. This is random error not systematic error. For example, some responses may be based on the respondent’s mood or the day’s events.

Results

Emphasizing the Problem in Local Shelters:

When asked how many menstrual products are provided to women at each shelter:
- The housing manager at You-Belong in Woodinville, said they have "enough for 1" woman each month.
- Jessica Heck from Network Tacoma, reported they have products to help women "1-2 times per year."
- Kimberly Jackson, the executive director of Mamma’s Hands in Bellevue, stated "Sometimes, we can provide a box of tampons or pads, and other months we may not have any."

When asked how many menstrual products are donated to the shelter each year:
- The housing specialist at Korean Women’s Association, said that "0-1 products" are donated each year.

Analysis of Data:

- Increased participation & engagement
- Questions weren’t double-barreled or emotionally charged.

Fig 1.1: Key Piece of Survey Data Collected

Rate how well women at your shelter are equipped with feminine hygiene products on a scale from #1 (not equipped at all) to #5 (adequately equipped for the entire month).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 1.2: Suggestions from Survey Respondents to Improve Menstrual Health

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monetary donations</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donations of undergarments</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donations of sanitation products</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donations of menstrual products</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spreading the word via social media</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational programs on menstrual preparations</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interview with Amanda Webber revealed that:
- 44,000 menstrual products have already been donated to T2P2 in 2021 alone.
- Despite this, 60,000 women are still in need of these products.
- Fortunately, T2P2’s digital donation drives and occasional in-person drives have been a huge success.
- Regarding future steps, Webber claimed there should be a way for women in WIC (The Women, Infants, and Children Nutrition Program) to apply for a supply of menstrual products.

The survey & interview results matter because they:
- Shed light on possible solutions for solving an overlooked yet critical problem
  - "What you’re doing as far as raising awareness in school is wonderful. This is a topic that doesn’t have much attention as far as the homeless crisis goes" - Ellen Penticost
  - "Collection of data about...how people struggle to meet their needs is an excellent start" - Annesley DeHaven

Highlighting Possible Solutions:

What would you say to the public to improve the menstrual health of women at your shelter?

1. “Treat it like food. We will always need it” - Ashley Haley
2. “Education on options/access to a variety of free products...open discussions, destigmatize the topic, don’t incentivize, partners with product providers” - Jessica Heck
3. “Individually wrapped products are much better than bulk products” - Chelsey Bell
4. “The bigger family shelters tend to get most of the donations including menstrual products. It would be nice to have a network where it was shared across the board” - Candace Lowe.

Relevance of Findings to the Community:

Menstrual Hygiene Day. Global Washington. (2020, October 20). Menstrual poverty needs to be better addressed because the needs of every woman must be met, including those on the streets & in shelters, especially during the pandemic in which access to products and financial support is even more lacking.

Acknowledgements

A huge thanks to those who provided insightful responses in this study:
- Amanda Webber, co-founder of Seattle T2P2
- Anne-Marie Schwerin, executive director of WYCA
- Annesley DeHaven, program manager of Hospitality House
- Ashley Haley, volunteer coordinator of the New Bethlehem Project
- Candace Lowe, program supervisor of Oakridge Youth Shelter
- Charlene Mitchell, program manager of Compass Housing Alliance
- Chelsea Bell, adult shelter director of Yakima Union Gospel Mission
- Elizabeth Heatstcok, assistant executive director of Burien Burbank Home
- Jeannette Mihala, housing coordinator of Korean Women's Association
- Jessica Heck, social worker at Network Tacoma
- Kimberly Jackson, executive director of Mamma’s Hands
- Leona Flowers, program manager of Volunteers of America
- Megan Duncan, community engagement coordinator
- Miranda Morris, program director of Skagit DVSAS
- The housing and care manager at You-Belong
- The housing program specialist of Korean Women's Association
- The program support administrator at Seattle's Union Gospel Mission

References


Conclusion

Justification of Research Question: Menstrual poverty needs to be better addressed because the needs of every woman must be met, including those on the streets & in shelters, especially during the pandemic in which access to products and financial support is even more lacking.

Relevance of Findings to the Community:
1) Donate to Improve Hygiene: When shelters have inadequate supplies, women resort to using contaminated materials that may lead to sepsis and urinary tract infections. To avoid this, shelters must be able to regularly supply menstrual products.
2) Destigmatize: Many women don’t ask for help because of the stigma that menstruation is disgusting or a sign of weakness. Destigmatization must be a major step in our culture so that women are comfortable seeking help.
3) Raise Awareness: Most respondents mentioned social media in their survey, so promoting donations for medication, leak protection, undergarments and more on online platforms is clearly effective. Also, educating homeless women on options and hygiene is crucial in protecting their health. “Including it into current curriculum for our education and prevention program” (Morris) would benefit everyone.

Results are conclusive because they consist of first-hand evidence directly derived from staff members of homeless shelters.