



# Hygiene poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand

Soap For Society

Mahuru 2021

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## Foreword

Kia ora whānau

Life's little luxuries are always welcome after a long hard day, whether that be a shower, a face mask or just some good bog roll. However, for many Kiwis, it isn't possible to get their hands on some of life's basic toiletries. Soap For Society aims to encourage people, and those within the beauty community, to donate toiletries to those living in serious need in Aotearoa New Zealand.

It is with great joy and pride I am honoured to present to you Soap For Society's first ever research project into hygiene poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand. Hygiene poverty is a need that has had little research done on it in Aotearoa New Zealand until now. However, thanks to the City Missions, Business and Economic Research Ltd (BERL), and Newman's Own Foundation, who generously enabled us to do this research and more with a USD\$25,000 grant, we can now better understand what hygiene poverty looks like and who is affected by it in our community.

This is the third year we've worked with Wellington City Mission, and the second we're working with Auckland and Christchurch City Missions. Thanks to these organisations, we were able to gather data about what people need and how they're impacted by the challenges that come with not having soap, toothbrushes, and other bathroom essentials.

We've come a long way since this began in 2018. Now, we're a registered charity with four brilliant, enthusiastic trustees - myself, Anna, Jono, and Maureen - and we're hoping to make this year our best yet. We are excited to grow Soap For Society to help more in our communities and further research of hygiene poverty in Aotearoa.

Lucy Revill

Founder and 2021 Chair of Soap For Society



Bridget Child (Wellington City Mission) and Lucy Revill (Soap For Society)  
Soap For Society campaign



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## Introduction

This research was commissioned by Soap For Society because of the need to get boots-on-the-ground information about what ACTUALLY is the state of hygiene poverty for whānau in Aotearoa New Zealand, and what could be done better to help improve economic, social, and educational outcomes for all.

Soap For Society is a registered charity that was set up to help raise awareness of hygiene poverty in the community, and to supply personal care and hygiene essentials to people in Aotearoa who can't afford to be clean.

Established as a grass-roots movement to create change, it operates to collect toiletries and beauty products and distribute these to its charitable partners. In 2018 and 2019 Soap For Society partnered with Wellington City Mission, Auckland City Mission, and Christchurch City Mission.

Soap For Society does not judge or stigmatise people experiencing hygiene poverty. It supports all people, of all religions and ethnic denominations, and the LGBTQI+ community. Soap For Society welcomes support from social enterprises, laboratories, hotels, and consumer products companies.

More information is on [www.soapforsociety.org](http://www.soapforsociety.org).

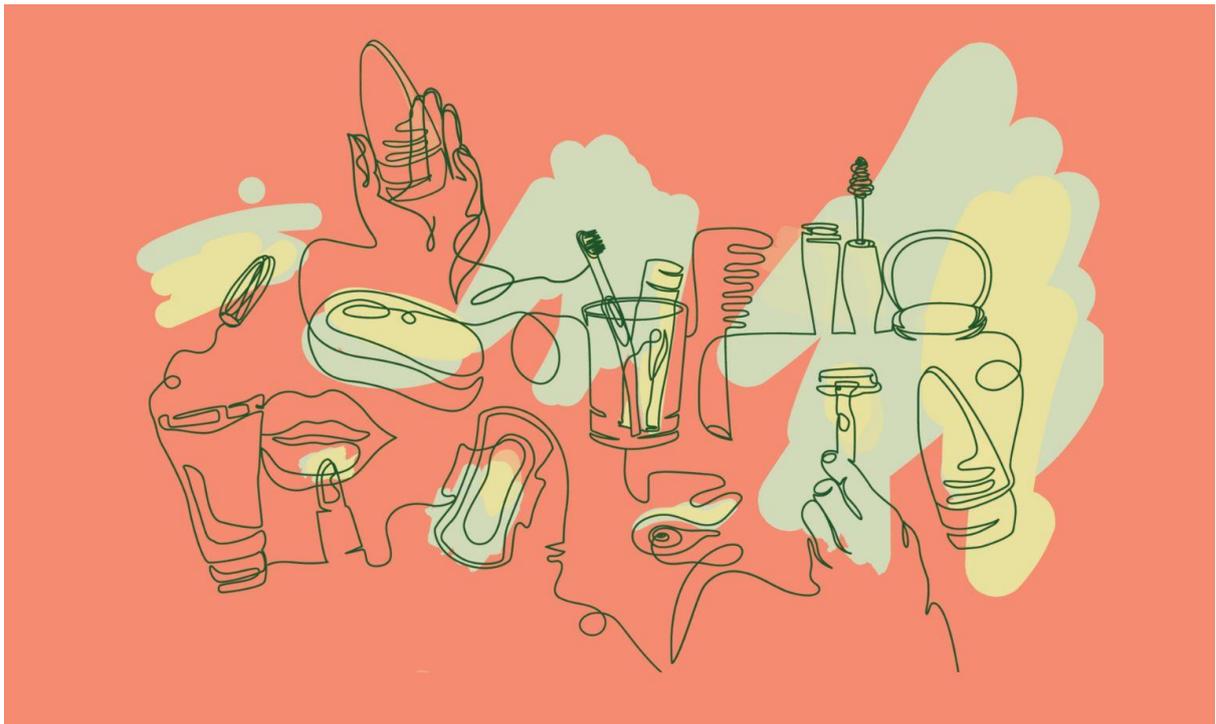


Image illustration: Maureen Placente/La Chapardeuse for Soap For Society

## Our key findings and recommendations

Hygiene poverty is the inability to afford essentials, such as shampoo, soap, deodorant, toothpaste and toothbrushes, period products, and baby products, such as nappies. Hygiene poverty has been described as a hidden epidemic in the developed world. This is because many people who experience it are either unaware of their condition or are too ashamed to speak out and seek help.

No statistical survey or tool used to inform policy currently measures hygiene poverty – this increases the invisibility of the issue and the likelihood it will continue to be an issue for the most vulnerable. To better understand what the scale of hygiene poverty may be, we looked at the experiences of people who use City Mission Services, national statistical data on poverty, and overseas research.

### Our findings

For many who live in poverty, hygiene poverty is an everyday experience that has a persistent impact on their wellbeing. The consequences of hygiene poverty and poor hygiene include:

- Shame about not being able to afford hygiene products, lowered self-esteem and self-confidence, exclusion, and worsened mental health outcomes
- Being forced to make difficult, and undignified, choices, including borrowing or stealing products, or going without.

In looking at the data on income adequacy and children experiencing hardship, we can see some themes:

- Over half of the households in Aotearoa New Zealand earn less than the median average income – and around 40 percent of these households have not enough or only just enough income to meet their everyday needs
- Thousands of children live in material hardship (11 percent of all children or 125,200) or in relative poverty (18.2 percent or 208,400) with a lack of essentials. Thirty eight percent of sole parent families experience material hardship, and are at the highest risk of experiencing poverty.

### Our recommendations:

- Questions on hygiene poverty, including period poverty, need to be included in Government survey tools measuring poverty and hardship, such as the DEP-17 and the Material Wellbeing Index
- Products that promote sanitation, such as masks, hand sanitiser, and household cleaning products are vital for public health in the midst of a pandemic, but they are not affordable for everyone. Affordability and equitable access need to be considered in the overall public health response
- While awareness of and support for period poverty for those at school is vital, it is just the tip of the iceberg. More work needs to be done to enhance the dignity of people of all ages who have periods, particularly those who do not benefit from the Government initiative in schools and kura
- Goods and Services Tax (GST) needs to be removed from tampons, sanitary pads, and related reusable period products, to remove barriers to access
- Community agencies, such as the City Missions and food banks, are overstretched and under-resourced when it comes to combating hygiene poverty. They need increased funding to provide hygiene products to those who most need them.



## Access to hygiene products is about mana and dignity

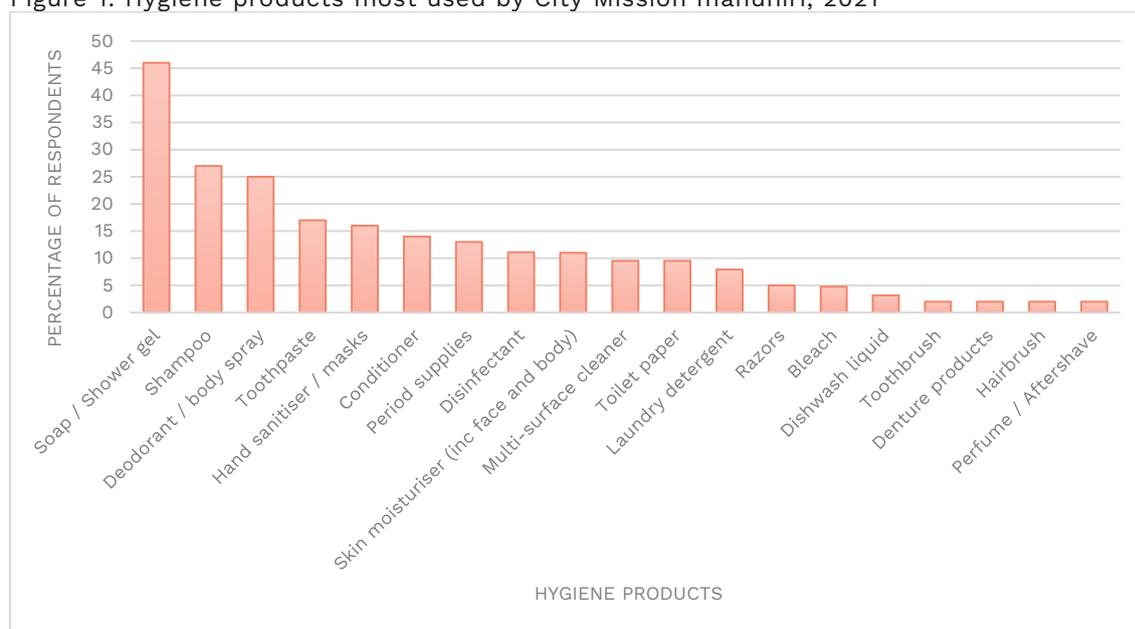
To better understand what hygiene poverty looks like for those who experience it, we undertook primary data collection with Auckland City Mission and Wellington City Mission.

Over a two week period in August 2021, staff at the two City Missions surveyed people who accessed their services (known within

services as manuhiri). This section describes the results of this data collection.

Manuhiri were asked about their most important hygiene products, what strategies they used when they could not afford these products, and what it meant to them to have these products when they needed them.

Figure 1: Hygiene products most used by City Mission manuhiri, 2021



Source: BERL analysis

### What are the most important hygiene products for manuhiri?

By far the most necessary hygiene item was soap or shower gel (46 percent), followed by shampoo (27 percent) and deodorant or body spray (25 percent) (Figure 1). The presence of hand sanitiser and masks (16 percent) is a sign of the times, and these product were more likely to be considered necessary by those over 50 years of age.

A quarter of females identified period supplies as important, and they were all 30 to 50 years of age, highlighting a needs gap in the Government's period poverty programme where access is focused only on schools and kura.

The most commonly requested household hygiene product was disinfectant (11 percent), followed by multi-surface cleaner and toilet paper (10 percent). It is telling that females 30 to 50 years old with children were more likely to choose household hygiene items than personal hygiene items as being their most essential products. They were also more likely to name multiple household items, with multi-surface cleaner, disinfectant, and bleach being the most common combination.





Manuhiri were also asked what it meant for them to have the hygiene products they needed, when they needed them. Our word cloud of responses, where the more a word was said, the bigger and bolder it appears, tells a compelling story. Manuhiri overwhelming described what it meant for them to feel clean and to have clean homes. Cleanliness was talked about as a necessity or being essential; people felt good, healthy, and hygienic. And they felt like they had dignity.

They talked about what this dignity meant on a personal level. One manuhiri said, “To me it means I am able to maintain my cleanliness, and feel good and safe in society”. Another said it meant “pride in my appearance, self-respect”.

Manuhiri also expressed how important it was for them to have a clean home, “When I have these [products], it means my house is clean and my children have a healthy environment to play and sleep in”.

The relationship between body and mind was mentioned by many – “clean where, clean mind”, “hygiene and cleanliness mean everything to me, affects mental and emotional health”, and “magic, absolutely magic - it takes the worry off the mind, I feel”.

Gratitude, sanity, and a blessing – access to hygiene products, both personal and household, is key to wellbeing on all levels for all people.

### Notes from the front line

We spoke with staff from the Wellington City Mission, who were able to give their own perspective of hygiene poverty. They said that manuhiri don't think to ask for hygiene products, and that they were often whakamā/ashamed when they did.

In the Social Supermarket, people have the dignity of choice in how they spend their points. Haircare, soap, period supplies, deodorant, razors and shaving cream, toilet paper, and household hygiene products are the most needed non-food products. Hand sanitiser is increasingly in demand.

Some manuhiri have said they use shampoo for everything. They also described leaving products behind or losing them when they were in unstable housing or in a shared environment.

Mission staff say many manuhiri are socially isolated and estranged from family/whānau, and their birthday or Christmas is often not acknowledged or celebrated. Staff really value having wrapped or boxed sets of perfume/aftershave, moisturiser, makeup, and other beauty products to give manuhiri as gifts. Manuhiri will often refer to having received these gifts later, expressing how happy this made them. But the Missions don't often have a good supply of items donated for special occasions.

### What does the research tell us?

These findings support the overseas research - for many who live in poverty, hygiene poverty is an everyday experience that has a persistent impact on their wellbeing. Many are ashamed to speak about not being able to afford hygiene products, they often give up purchasing these products where they can't afford them, and are forced to make difficult, and undignified, choices.

Poor hygiene leads to lowered self-esteem and self-confidence, exclusion, and worsened mental health outcomes. Conversely, access to hygiene products contributes to self-respect, participation in society, and dignity of choice.

Community organisations, such as the City Missions, are crucial in supporting people with personal and household hygiene essentials. This research only looked at a small sample of manuhiri seeking services from two organisations in two locations. Given the level of poverty identified, and the lack of consideration of access to hygiene products in measures of hardship and wellbeing, further research is needed to understand the scale of the issue.



## Who shared their stories with us?

Across Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland and Te Whanganui-a-Tara /Wellington, sixty three manuhiri participated in the research. Many represented larger households with children and other whānau/family members. Half were female (51 percent), 46 percent male, and three percent non-binary. The largest age group represented was 30 to 50 year olds (44 percent), followed by under 20 year olds (22 percent). Seventeen percent were between 20 and 30 years, 11 percent between 50 and 65 years, and five percent over 65 years of age.

We thank each and every one for their open, honest, and humbling contributions to this research.



A sample of donated hygiene products  
Soap For Society campaign 2019



## Hygiene poverty is a human rights issue

Eliminating poverty, universal access to sanitation and hygiene, and reducing inequalities are human rights enshrined in goals one, six, and ten of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (Figure 3).<sup>1</sup> According to the World Health Organization, this can only be achieved if countries monitor and address the affordability of and accessibility to hygiene products. When people are unable to access hygiene services and products, they incur health, time, and social costs, most of which are borne by women and children.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 3: 2030 Sustainable Development Goals



Source: United Nations

According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory, physiological needs such as food, water, clothing, and health are the necessary foundation required to fulfil higher level needs such as self-esteem and self-confidence (Figure 4). We rarely think of basic hygiene products such as toothpaste and shampoo as being high on our list of things that boost our self-confidence. For most of us, a life without these products is unimaginable. However, for many people who live in poverty, it is an everyday experience that has a persistent impact on their wellbeing.

Figure 4: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs



<sup>1</sup> [www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals](http://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals)

<sup>2</sup> [www.who.int/news/item/03-05-2021-affordability-of-wash-must-be-defined-and-tracked-if-2030-global-goals-are-to-be-met-new-report](http://www.who.int/news/item/03-05-2021-affordability-of-wash-must-be-defined-and-tracked-if-2030-global-goals-are-to-be-met-new-report)

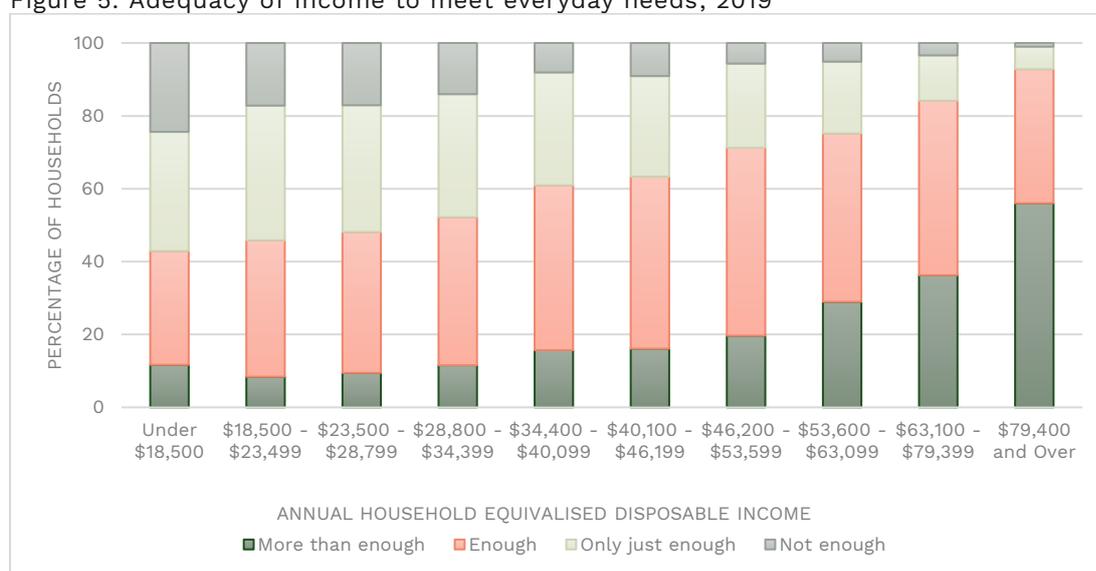


## Impacts of poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand

Hygiene poverty is not currently measured by any statistical survey or tool administered by Government agencies. To better understand the potential scale of hygiene poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand, we looked at statistics on poverty more broadly, including income adequacy, hardship and relative poverty, and households accessing foodbanks or community support. This national data on poverty gives us an idea of the scale of poverty and hardship, and who might be at risk from hygiene poverty. While Soap For Society currently only operates in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch, based on the following data about poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand, there is a clear need for wider campaigning and advocacy across the country.

### Income adequacy

Figure 5: Adequacy of income to meet everyday needs, 2019



Source: Statistics New Zealand

2019 standard of living data showed 57 percent of those with annual income under \$18,500 had, at most, just enough income to meet their everyday needs (Figure 5). For those with annual incomes between \$18,500 and \$28,800, a little over half had just enough income to meet daily needs. Overall 37 percent of households had at most just enough income to meet everyday needs. Of the lowest three income groups we can see that:

- The largest population group was over 65 years of age, so is likely largely retired people on superannuation
- Around 30 to 40 percent of these groups were under 40 years of age

- Around 50 percent either had no qualifications or level 1 to 3 qualifications
- Over 50 percent were not in the labour force, and most of those in the labour force were employed part-time.

In June 2021, the median weekly income from all sources was \$770 per week, or \$40,040.<sup>3</sup> Those on wages and salaries had the highest median annual income of \$56,836, while those receiving benefits, superannuation, Working for Families, and other government support had the lowest at \$19,292 per annum.

<sup>3</sup> [www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/labour-market-statistics-income-june-2021-quarter](http://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/labour-market-statistics-income-june-2021-quarter)



Table 1: Percentage of households in each region by income decile, 2019

Regions	Annual household equivalised disposable income decile									
	Under \$18,500	\$18,500 - \$23,499	\$23,500 - \$28,799	\$28,800 - \$34,399	\$34,400 - \$40,099	\$40,100 - \$46,199	\$46,200 - \$53,599	\$53,600 - \$63,099	\$63,100 - \$79,399	\$79,400 and Over
Northland	14.7	16.9	12.6	9.8	8.1	8.4	9.1	5.6	8.2	6.6
Auckland	11.3	9.5	8.6	8.5	8.6	9.2	9.2	9.7	11.7	13.6
Waikato	13.0	14.0	10.3	9.0	8.2	8.9	9.7	9.6	9.5	7.8
Bay of Plenty	10.6	15.6	12.1	9.3	10.3	9.0	9.2	10.0	7.3	6.7
Gisborne/Hawke's Bay	9.9	16.1	14.6	10.3	10.3	10.2	7.7	8.7	7.0	5.3
Taranaki	9.2	16.9	11.8	11.0	9.4	10.1	6.8	10.1	7.0	7.7
Manawatū-Whanganui	13.3	16.3	11.2	11.1	7.9	9.7	8.6	9.1	6.3	6.5
Wellington	12.7	10.4	8.2	7.2	8.6	8.5	9.7	9.2	11.2	14.3
Top of the South	10.2	18.2	11.7	8.8	11.0	8.9	8.3	8.5	8.1	6.4
Canterbury	9.2	12.3	9.2	8.5	9.2	9.2	11.6	11.1	10.4	9.2
Otago	14.0	14.2	10.3	8.3	6.4	10.9	8.9	9.0	9.2	9.0
Southland	10.6	18.0	8.2	8.5	10.3	11.6	8.5	9.8	6.7	7.7

Source: Statistics New Zealand

If we look at how income was spread across the regions in 2019:

- Over 60 percent of households in Northland and Gisborne/Hawke's Bay earned less than \$40,100 per annum
- In Auckland, Wellington, and Canterbury, just under 50 percent of households earned less than \$40,100 per annum
- 44 percent of Northland households were in the lowest three income groups, while around 40 percent of households in Gisborne/Hawke's Bay, Manawatū-Whanganui, and Top of the South earned less than \$28,800.

Overall, 37 percent of households (598,900 households) earned under \$28,800 and 55 percent (908,700 households) earned less than \$40,100. These households are at risk of income inadequacy and hygiene poverty.



## Children experiencing hardship

Sometimes material hardship indicators are more useful than incomes at communicating the scale of poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand. Material hardship measures access to items most of us would consider essential through the DEP-17, an index focusing on forced lack of essentials.<sup>4,5</sup> It includes access to:

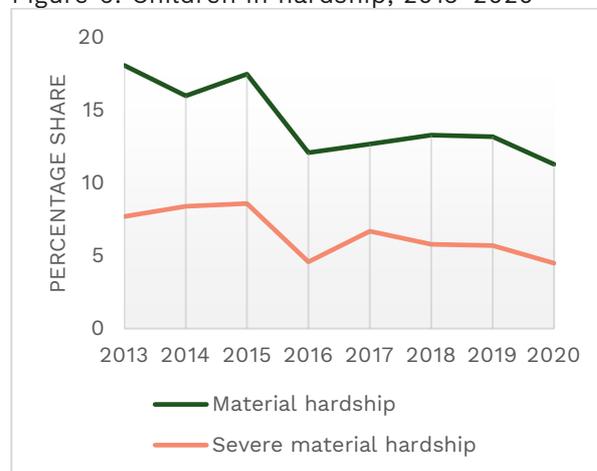
- Regular meals with meat, fish, or chicken (or vegetarian equivalent, without having to buy cheaper or less meat)
- Good shoes and suitable clothes
- The ability to give gifts
- Home contents insurance
- Fresh fruit or vegetables
- A warm home and being able to pay utilities
- Doctor's and dentist's visits
- Being able to take local trips, and being able to pay for car expenses
- Replacing/repairing appliances.

In the measures of child poverty being reported to the Government, material hardship is defined as lacking six or more items (out of 17), while severe material hardship is lacking nine or more. The percentage of children living in households experiencing material hardship decreased from 2013 to 2020 (Figure 6). In 2020, one-in-nine children (11 percent or 125,200) lived in material hardship, with five percent living in severe material hardship.

One-in-seven children (14.6 percent or 167,100) lived in relative poverty (before-housing-costs). Relative poverty is when a household has a disposable income (before housing costs) that is less than 50 percent of the median income. These are the three lowest income households in Figure 5 and Table 1. When housing costs were accounted

for, this figure jumped to 18.2 percent of all children (208,400). Of note, 38 percent of sole parent families experienced material hardship.

Figure 6: Children in hardship, 2013-2020



Source: Statistics New Zealand

## Material Wellbeing Index

The Material Wellbeing Index (MWI) is a measure of material wellbeing developed by the Ministry for Social Development.<sup>6</sup> The MWI is made up of 24 items on day-to-day living conditions that households experience. The index looks at many of the same items as the DEP-17, including access to basic necessities like food, clothes, electricity, accommodation, transport, keeping warm and dry, and maintaining working household appliances. It also includes the ability of households to purchase and consume non-essentials like holidays, a good bed, hobbies, and new clothes.

The results for material hardship are comparable with the DEP-17. While both indices are incredibly valuable at describing hardship in Aotearoa New Zealand, **access to hygiene products is not considered in either index.** They miss the important reality of hygiene poverty, which remains invisible to those who have the privilege to afford hygiene products.

<sup>4</sup> [www.stats.govt.nz/methods/measuring-child-poverty-material-hardship](http://www.stats.govt.nz/methods/measuring-child-poverty-material-hardship)

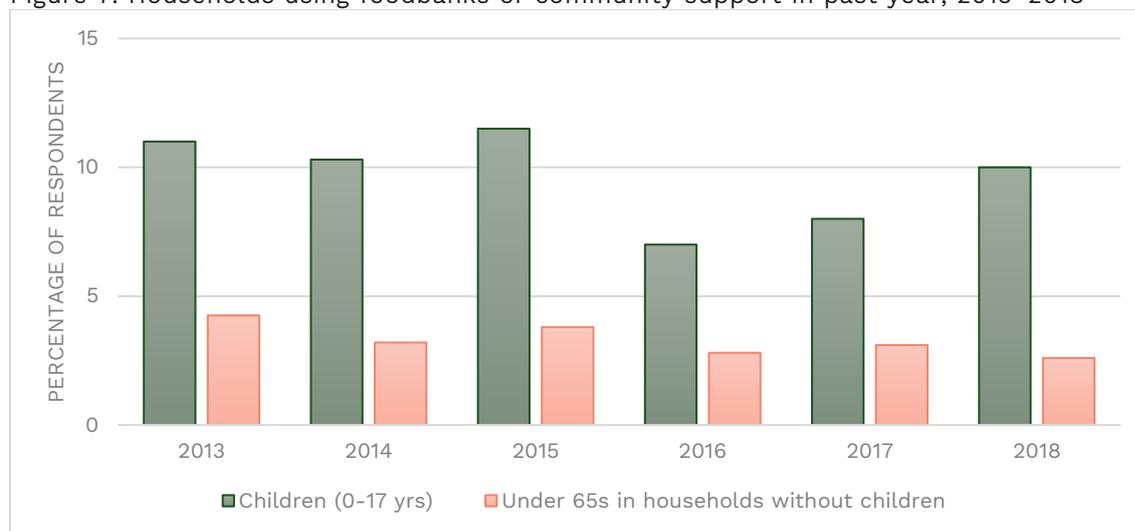
<sup>5</sup> [www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/monitoring/household-income-report/2017/incomes-report-overview.pdf](http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/monitoring/household-income-report/2017/incomes-report-overview.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/research/child-poverty-in-nz/child-poverty-full-report.docx](http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/research/child-poverty-in-nz/child-poverty-full-report.docx)



## Households accessing community support

Figure 7: Households using foodbanks or community support in past year, 2013-2018



Source: Statistics New Zealand

In 2018, the percentage of households (with children) who accessed foodbanks or community services at least once that year, returned to 2013-15 levels after dropping in 2016 and 2017. That year, 21 percent of 0-17 year olds lived in low-income households, while 20 percent of 18-24 years olds also lived in low-income households. For older age groups the percentage in low-income households was just above 10 percent.

The poverty risk ratio (PRR), which is the ratio of the poverty rate of a household type to that of the population as a whole, for sole parents is the highest of any household type. A PRR above one indicates over-representation of poverty, and sole parent households have had a PRR of 3.0 since the early 1990s. The PRR for households with children with more than one other working adult decreased from above one to around 0.75 from 1992 to 2018, while the PRR for one-person households (under 65 years old) increased from 1.2 to 2.75 over that same time.

### Period poverty is an additional hygiene poverty experience for people who menstruate

A number of factors make people who menstruate disproportionately vulnerable to the negative consequences that come with hygiene poverty. Apart from the burden of not being able to afford basics, such as soap, shampoo, and deodorant, people who menstruate and are from low income households also experience period poverty. Period poverty is experienced by those who are unable to access period supplies due to financial barriers. Those who are unable to access period supplies, often use make-shift products out of rags, newspaper, toilet paper, and even socks. Some even use period products longer than recommended to reduce the financial burden, which puts them at risk of toxic shock syndrome, a life-threatening infection.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/period-equity-what-is-it-why-does-it-matter-202106012473>



As of January 2021, over 90,000 students in Aotearoa New Zealand missed school due to inadequate access to period products.<sup>8</sup> In 2020, 19 percent of rangatahi Māori experienced period poverty, and 16 percent missed school as a direct consequence.<sup>9</sup> Period poverty also isolates people who menstruate from sports and other social activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the issue of period poverty for some. Many depended on institutions like schools, community centres, and sometimes even work, to access period supplies. In a survey of students from the United States of America, 27 percent reported that being back at school would make it easier for them to access period products.<sup>10</sup> In the United Kingdom, 36 percent of people who menstruate between the ages of 14 and 21 could not access period supplies during lockdown, with half of them using folded toilet paper as an alternative.<sup>11</sup>

In a survey of schools in Aotearoa New Zealand, 72 percent said that access to period supplies allowed people who menstruate to stay in school and reduced absenteeism.<sup>12</sup> Eighty seven percent of schools reported a boost in students' self-esteem, while 69

percent felt the ability of people who menstruate to participate in sports improved.

In 2020, the Government announced they would begin providing free period products in schools and kura, starting in the Waikato and expanding throughout the country in 2021.<sup>13</sup> Continuation of access was ensured in the 2021 Budget, with additional funding until 2024.

Previous to this, there were a number of social enterprises, community organisations, and citizen-led groups providing schools and kura with period products.<sup>14</sup> With the expansion of the Government programme, these initiatives can now focus on providing period products to food banks and other community supports serving people who menstruate.

One way of easing the burden of period poverty, would be to remove taxes on period supplies. The high cost of period products impacts those on a lower income the most. Households are already under pressure to choose between food and other essential hygiene products. Canada removed taxes for period products in 2015, with Australia following suit in 2018. It's time for Aotearoa New Zealand to step up too.

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<sup>8</sup> [www.globalwomen.org.nz/uncategorised/period-poverty-in-aotearoa/](http://www.globalwomen.org.nz/uncategorised/period-poverty-in-aotearoa/)

<sup>9</sup> [www.auckland.ac.nz/en/news/2020/02/20/period-poverty-contributing-to-inequity-in-nz.html](http://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/news/2020/02/20/period-poverty-contributing-to-inequity-in-nz.html)

<sup>10</sup> [www.forbes.com/sites/alicebroster/2021/05/20/almost-a-quarter-of-students-struggle-to-access-period-products-new-study-finds/?sh=a3d1bf649dec](http://www.forbes.com/sites/alicebroster/2021/05/20/almost-a-quarter-of-students-struggle-to-access-period-products-new-study-finds/?sh=a3d1bf649dec)

<sup>11</sup> [plan-uk.org/media-centre/menstrual-health-day-global-period-poverty-and-stigma-getting-worse-under-lockdown](http://plan-uk.org/media-centre/menstrual-health-day-global-period-poverty-and-stigma-getting-worse-under-lockdown)

<sup>12</sup> [www.dignitynz.com/period-poverty](http://www.dignitynz.com/period-poverty)

<sup>13</sup> [www.beehive.govt.nz/release/free-period-products-schools-combat-poverty](http://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/free-period-products-schools-combat-poverty)

<sup>14</sup> [www.dignitynz.com/positive-periods-nz](http://www.dignitynz.com/positive-periods-nz)



## Hygiene poverty internationally

Research shows many people stopped buying toiletries before they began visiting a food bank, which suggests that they did not seek immediate help and also gave up on purchasing hygiene essentials long before food.<sup>15</sup> Unsurprisingly, many people in vulnerable positions are hesitant to speak out about not being able to brush their teeth, shower, or using rags as alternatives to tampons or pads. People working at charities that provide hygiene products even report to have witnessed cases where mothers reused disposable nappies, leading to nappy rash.<sup>16</sup>

Individuals and families who are in a financial predicament have to make the difficult choice between paying for food, utilities like heating and rent, and keeping clean. Food, rent, and utility payments take precedence over hygiene products such as soap, shampoo, razors, and even period products. With these products out of reach, people are forced to substitute cheaper cleaners such as dishwashing liquid in place of shampoo, laundry detergent, and face wash.<sup>17</sup> In the United Kingdom (UK), over 50 percent of people who visited foodbanks could not afford hygiene products.<sup>18</sup>

Outward appearances not only affect how others view us, but also how we view ourselves. Poor hygiene often leads to lowered self-esteem, loss of a sense of dignity, exclusion from education and work, and worsened mental health outcomes. Many adults were unable to find employment because they could not portray themselves with confidence at job interviews as a result of poor hygiene. Chronic illnesses can be made worse by poor hygiene practices. Poor hygiene during childhood can also have lifelong effects on self-worth and confidence.<sup>19</sup> Apart from inducing psychological distress and social isolation,

hygiene poverty also has enormous economic effects.

### **Toilet paper, soap, and hair care are the most requested products, but period supplies and nappies are close behind**

In a survey of foodbanks conducted by the Trussell Trust, respondents stated that the most requested products were toilet paper, shampoo/conditioner, and soap.<sup>20</sup> The stigma surrounding period poverty was also highlighted by respondents. Period supplies were the second least requested items, but these were provided ten times more often when a foodbank volunteer specifically asked an individual if they needed them.

Across the developed world, there are a number of community organisations that work towards alleviating hygiene poverty. The Hygiene Bank, which operates in the UK and Ireland,<sup>21</sup> is a community initiative that provides hygiene, personal care, and household cleaning products to those who cannot access them. In 2019 alone, the group managed to distribute nearly 50,000kg of products to 586 community partners, who ranged from local authorities, voluntary groups, and a variety of charities. The group has 132 projects all over the UK.

Beauty Banks is another community organisation based in the UK.<sup>22</sup> They supply personal care and hygiene essentials to people who cannot afford these products. Beauty Banks operates like a foodbank, but accepts donations for hygiene products. They receive donations for baby products, cleaning products, deodorant, towels, etc., from the public and partner organisations, such as retailers. These donations are then sent to a number of charities all over the UK.

<sup>15</sup> [borgenproject.org/tag/the-hygiene-bank/](https://borgenproject.org/tag/the-hygiene-bank/)

<sup>16</sup> [www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2019/04/228669/hygiene-poverty-cant-afford-toiletries](https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2019/04/228669/hygiene-poverty-cant-afford-toiletries)

<sup>17</sup> [thehygienebank.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Hygiene-Bank-Impact-Report-2019.pdf](https://thehygienebank.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Hygiene-Bank-Impact-Report-2019.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> [www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/07/OU\\_Report\\_final\\_01\\_08\\_online2.pdf](https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/07/OU_Report_final_01_08_online2.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> [www.povertyimpactnetwork.com/blog/hygiene-poverty/what-is-hygiene-poverty](https://www.povertyimpactnetwork.com/blog/hygiene-poverty/what-is-hygiene-poverty)

<sup>20</sup> [www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/12/Non-food-provision-in-The-Trussell-Trust-Network-in-Scotland.pdf](https://www.trusselltrust.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/12/Non-food-provision-in-The-Trussell-Trust-Network-in-Scotland.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> [thehygienebank.com/](https://thehygienebank.com/)

<sup>22</sup> [www.beautybanks.org.uk/](https://www.beautybanks.org.uk/)



In Kind Direct, a charity based in the UK, provided consumer goods donated by nearly 1,125 companies to charities across the UK. The products they received and distributed included toiletries and laundry supplies, nappies, wipes, cleaning supplies, and period supplies. Between March and August 2020, they were able to distribute 1.9 million period products, 223,000 nappies and pull-up pants to 55,000 babies, and 178,000 bottles of hand wash. In 2019, they provided products worth over £200 million to partner charities. In a survey of receiving organisations, 96 percent reported that they relied on products from In Kind Direct to combat poverty and respond to crises, while 94 percent said the donated products directly contributed to improved wellbeing within their communities.<sup>23</sup>

The Diaper Bank, an organisation based in Connecticut, United States of America (USA), provided 417 disposable nappies, per baby (spread across 2,960 households) in 2016 alone. In addition to nappies, they also provided other hygiene and health products to families in need, equalling a total contribution of US\$173 per household over the year.

### **Community organisations are crucial in addressing hygiene poverty**

The above examples of community organisations fighting to combat hygiene poverty highlight the enormous value they add to society. Many people living in poverty rely on such organisations to mobilise and distribute hygiene products, which in turn results in improved community wellbeing, reduction of financial pressures on recipients, and improved mental health outcomes. Since hygiene poverty is not often widely talked about in the developed world, these community organisations are often underfunded, limited in the help they can provide, and suffer from capacity constraints. This leaves many of those who could not afford to purchase these products themselves, stuck without any avenues to seek public help.

### **The economic, health, and social costs of hygiene poverty are wide ranging**

Hygiene poverty in the USA affects the health outcomes of millions of Americans. It also hinders the capacity of people to succeed at school and work.<sup>24</sup> Families often cannot afford to buy basics, such as diapers, laundry detergents, and period supplies, amongst other items we consider hygiene necessities.

A study conducted by the Connecticut Center for Economic Analysis found that providing free disposable nappies to low-wage families had several economic benefits.<sup>25</sup> Most of the families that received aid experienced in-work poverty. 56 percent of parents reported to have missed work, on average four days a month, because of a lack of disposable nappies. Receiving clean disposable nappies relieved families of preventable medical expenses to the tune of \$4.3 million.

The economic benefits of clean baby products was undeniably significant. For every US\$10,000 of aid provided to vulnerable families with young babies, the collective personal income of recipients went up by US\$114,000. In other words, every dollar invested raised the collective income of recipients by over US\$11. These products allowed parents to leave young children with caretakers and participate in education and the labour market more freely.

School children are particularly susceptible to the social effects of hygiene poverty. Children may be bullied at school if they smell or have greasy hair. Consequently many decide to skip school to avoid the shame and stigma attached with limited access to hygiene products. Evidence from the USA shows that poor dental health amongst children affects their performance in school and psychosocial wellbeing.<sup>26</sup> Children with poor dental hygiene are more likely to miss school and lag behind their peers in schoolwork. Poor dental hygiene is also associated with poor mental health, such as feelings of unhappiness and worthlessness. Dental health is important for the social development of children. Children who suffer

<sup>23</sup> [wcdn.inkinddirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019-Impact-Report.pdf](https://wcdn.inkinddirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019-Impact-Report.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> [tcf.org/content/commentary/americas-unspoken-hygiene-crisis/?agreed=1](https://tcf.org/content/commentary/americas-unspoken-hygiene-crisis/?agreed=1)

<sup>25</sup> [ceea.uconn.edu/2018/05/05/better-health-of-children-the-social-and-economic-impacts-of-the-connecticut-diaper-bank/#](https://ceea.uconn.edu/2018/05/05/better-health-of-children-the-social-and-economic-impacts-of-the-connecticut-diaper-bank/#)

<sup>26</sup> [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3459270/](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3459270/)



from poor dental hygiene find it harder to approach people, and are more likely to be unhappy and experience feelings of isolation.

Many children often skip going to school as a result of limited access to clean clothes.<sup>27</sup> Lack of access to basic necessities, including clean clothes or hygiene products, affects the ability of children to focus in school and regulate their emotions. Chronic absenteeism resulting from hygiene poverty affects the academic performance of students, potentially leading to lifelong economic disparities. In 2015, Whirlpool created the CareCounts™ programme to provide school children with laundry access. Since its inception, the programme has contributed to massive reductions in chronic absenteeism. In 2019-20 alone, 73 percent of participating high-risk students who were chronically absent built up good attendance records.

Like in the case of hygiene poverty in general, period poverty has been shown to be linked to worsened mental health outcomes. Research from the USA has found that 68 percent of women who consistently experience period poverty reported experiencing moderate to severe depression, compared to 43 percent of women who could access period supplies.

## Hygiene poverty has long lasting effects and impacts

All of these outcomes perpetuate inequality and deepen vulnerabilities. Regular disruptions to the education of children can influence economic and social outcomes throughout their lives. Limited access to hygiene products is linked to unfavourable financial and physical and mental health outcomes, even in the developed world.

Providing access to hygiene products contributes towards building self-confidence and restoring the dignity of those living without these essential items. Shedding light on this issue is also a vital step in addressing the stigma shrouding hygiene poverty, and ensuring that those who need help have the confidence to come forward and ask for it.

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<sup>27</sup> [www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/whirlpool-brands-care-counts-program-delivers-essential-care-as-students-face-more-learning-barriers-this-school-year-301128550.html](http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/whirlpool-brands-care-counts-program-delivers-essential-care-as-students-face-more-learning-barriers-this-school-year-301128550.html)



## What has to change?

In Aotearoa New Zealand the prevalence of hygiene poverty is an underexplored area of research with little indication that it is on the policy radar. This report has shown the effects of hygiene poverty with our research with the City Missions, and the magnitude of income inadequacy and hardship experienced by families/whānau. Our literature scan also shows the longer-term social, health, and economic impacts experienced overseas by the most vulnerable community members, when they cannot access the hygiene products they need.

Hygiene poverty is an issue of dignity and mana. It is an issue that is largely invisible to those who are not experiencing it or supporting those affected by it. It is an issue that is growing, and needs to be properly understood and resourced.

### **Our recommendations to Government agencies are:**

- **To include questions on hygiene poverty, including period poverty, in Government survey tools measuring poverty and hardship**, such as the DEP-17 and the Material Wellbeing Index
- **To consider affordability and equitable access in the overall public health response to COVID-19.** Products that promote sanitation, such as masks, hand sanitiser, and household cleaning products are vital for public health in the midst of a pandemic, but they are not affordable for everyone
- **To consider the impact of period poverty on all people who menstruate.** While awareness of and support for period poverty for those at school is vital, it is just the tip of the iceberg and more work needs to be done to enhance the dignity of people of all ages who have periods
- **Goods and Services Tax (GST) needs to be removed from tampons, sanitary pads, and related reusable period products**, to remove barriers to access
- **To provide additional funding to community agencies, such as the City Missions and food banks, who are overstretched and under-resourced** when it comes to combating hygiene poverty. These agencies need to be resourced adequately in order to provide hygiene products to those who most need them.

