



Canada's First
Hygiene Poverty
Survey



Understanding the Causes, Impacts, and Experiences of Hygiene Poverty

Abstract

Hygiene poverty, the inability to afford essential personal care products, is a hidden impact of poverty that affects numerous vulnerable individuals and families. This study explores the causes, impacts, and experiences of hygiene poverty through a comprehensive survey of 47 Community Facilities. Findings reveal that financial insecurity and cost of living are primary contributors, with significant physical, mental, and social consequences. The study underscores the importance of increased awareness, and enhanced support networks to address hygiene poverty. The results also highlight the critical role of organizations like Soap for Hope Canada in providing hygiene products and advocating for systemic change.

1. Introduction

Background

Hygiene poverty is defined as the inability to afford basic personal care products such as soap, toothpaste, deodorant, and period supplies, among others.

Dr. Joe Whelan of Trinity University, Dublin, Ireland, explains:

“Hygiene poverty occurs when people are forced to go without or cut back on essential personal care products. Living without access to basic hygiene items can have a profound negative impact on a person’s life, dignity, physical and mental health.” (2023).

The consequences of hygiene poverty are far-reaching, affecting physical health, mental well-being, and social inclusion. Vulnerable populations, particularly those experiencing financial hardship, are disproportionately affected.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Identify the key factors contributing to hygiene poverty.
2. Understand the impacts of hygiene poverty on physical, mental, and social well-being.
3. Raise awareness of hygiene poverty in Canada.
4. Provide data-driven insights to improve Soap for Hope Canada's support program for people experiencing hygiene poverty.

2. Methodology

Survey Design

The study was sponsored by Soap for Hope Canada. While the organization provides support to Community Facilities that serve individuals experiencing hygiene poverty, a key focus of its efforts is non-profit to non-profit. Therefore, this study focuses on the experiences and opinions of individuals working in Community Facilities, rather than on collecting direct experiences.

A mixed-methods survey was designed to gather both qualitative and quantitative responses on topics including the perceived causes of hygiene poverty; observed personal impacts; perceived service needs and frequency; awareness of Soap for Hope Canada; and recommendations for service improvements, as well as demographic information on participants.

Participants and Data Collection Methods

The sampling frame consisted of a total of 838 Community Facilities in BC and Alberta which are part of Soap for Hope Canada's program database, including Shelters, Transitional Homes, Street Outreach Services, Food Banks, Schools, Low Income Senior Facilities, Indigenous Communities, Refugee Centres, and Emergency Centres assisting people fleeing from fires and floods, among others.

Although this was a sample of convenience, because Soap for Hope Canada provides products to a large variety of services across multiple provinces, it was deemed sufficient for an exploratory understanding of a facet of poverty that is vastly under-researched.

Surveys were distributed via email over a 2-week period. Responses were collected anonymously to encourage candid feedback. A total of 47 staff from Community Facilities responded, for a response rate of 5.6%.

Data Analysis

Quantitatively data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies) using Microsoft Excel. Qualitative data were analyzed using generative AI (Chat GPT, Claude, and Microsoft Copilot) to identify themes and patterns.

3. Results

- **Causes of Hygiene Poverty**

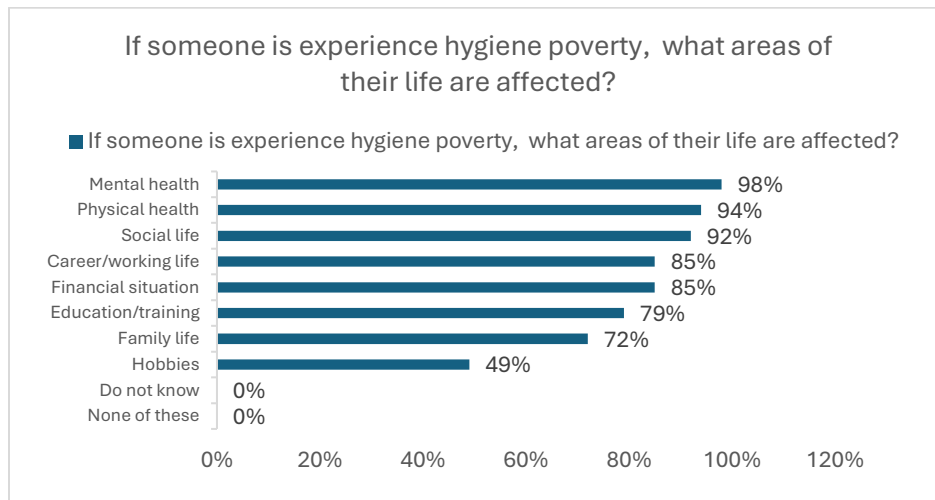
The majority (72%) of respondents identified financial insecurity as the main cause of hygiene poverty; 58% also indicated that a lack of access to hygiene facilities was a major contributor, especially for the unhoused, who experience barriers to accessing facilities such as showers, sinks, and laundry services. Even when hygiene products are available, individuals may struggle to use them due to a lack of private, secure, and accessible facilities. Additionally, some are barred from accessing public facilities due to intoxication or stigma or cannot access facilities due to the inability to leave their belongings unattended.

Most (81%) of respondents indicated that they had clients who had to choose between food/shelter and hygiene products in the last year, with 42% directly attributing conflicting priorities as a cause of hygiene poverty. Low income, high living cost, and insufficient social support mean that hygiene products become a lower priority despite their essential role in health and dignity. Some respondents noted that parents in particular may forgo personal hygiene items to ensure their children have better access to necessities. Respondents also noted that even clients receiving government assistance or living on pensions experience difficulty affording basic hygiene necessities.

- **Impacts of Hygiene Poverty**

Figure 1 indicates that respondents saw a breadth of health and social impacts to clients as a result of hygiene poverty (multiple selections were possible).

Figure 1



Many (78%) participants reported seeing at least six impacts of poverty hygiene on their clients; 40% of respondents saw impacts in all areas.

The majority (94%) of respondents reported physical health issues among their clients due to poor hygiene. Open-ended responses described health concerns that included skin infections, infestations (e.g., lice, scabies), dental decay, and untreated wounds. The contributory effect of poor hygiene to the spread of diseases such as cold, flu, and bacterial infections was also mentioned. Without access to proper hygiene, minor medical issues can escalate into severe conditions, escalating healthcare burdens.

Almost all (98%) respondents reported that their clients experienced negative mental health outcomes including stress, anxiety, and depression; 92% indicated their clients experienced impacts to their social life; and 72% reported negative impacts on clients' family life. Qualitative comments described social stigma, exclusion, and discrimination as a result of poor hygiene. Embarrassment and shame were frequently mentioned mental health consequences of poor hygiene, as was social isolation: respondents reported that their clients experienced reduced social contact; participated less in hobbies and leisure; and missed job interviews, work, or school because of poor hygiene. Indeed, 85% of respondents noticed negative impacts to careers/working life among their clients, which

exacerbate poverty conditions that lead to poor hygiene in the first place, creating a cycle that serves to keep people in poverty.

Respondents also indicated in qualitative responses that some clients experiencing hygiene poverty avoid seeking help because of their fear of stigma. They relayed stories from clients of being treated unfairly by service providers, employers, and the general public due to visible signs of poor hygiene. The resultant social withdrawal makes it harder for clients to access support networks, participate in community life, or seek employment.

The data strongly suggests that hygiene poverty is not just a material deprivation issue but a complex social problem with far-reaching implications for physical health, mental well-being, and social participation. It has systemic effects on individuals

- **Access to Hygiene Products:**

The majority of respondents (81%) (see Figure 2) indicated that they had clients who had to choose between paying for food and/or housing and buying hygiene products in the last year. Most (65%) of respondents reported that they had clients who went without hygiene products between six and ten times in the past year (see Figure 3). Only 4% of respondents indicated their clients had gone without hygiene products “just once”, and no respondents indicated that their clients never went without hygiene products.

Figure 2

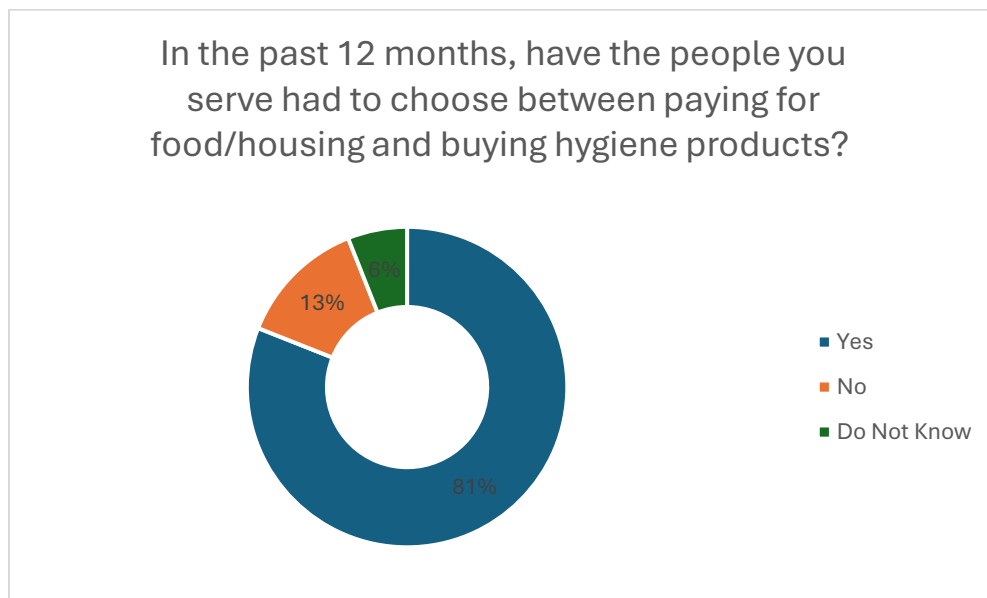
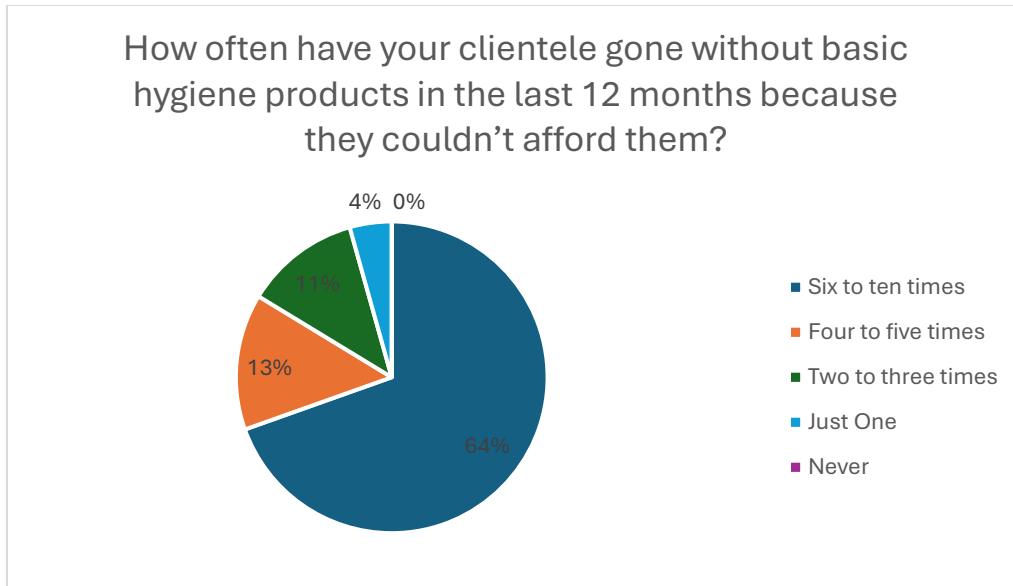
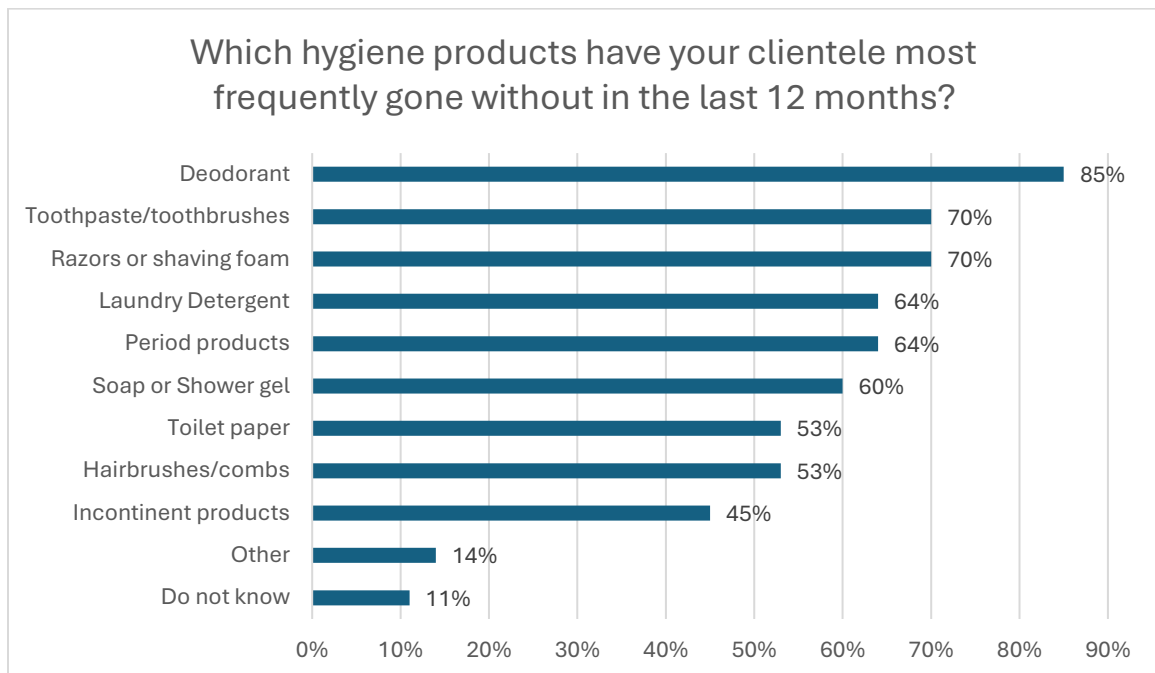


Figure 3



Commonly lacked items included deodorant (identified by 85% of respondents); toothpaste and brushes (75%); razors or shaving foam (70%); period products (64%); and laundry detergent (64%; see Figure 4). Qualitative comments also highlighted a need for clean bedding, shower access, nailcare supplies, and skincare products.

Figure 4



A significant number of Community Facilities report financial barriers in obtaining hygiene products. A common theme in qualitative comments was that respondents' organizations face financial limitations that prevent them from consistently providing hygiene products to their clients. As non-profits, these organizations typically operate on tight budgets and rely on donations. This makes it particularly difficult to source products that must be purchased. Rising costs and economic challenges among donors exacerbate this strain.

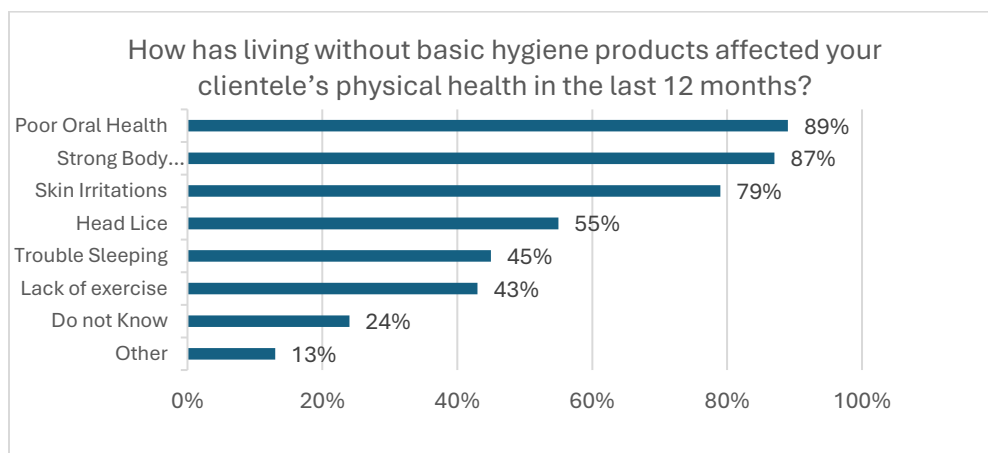
Further, facilities cannot rely on a consistent supply of donated hygiene products. Many organizations report a lack of hygiene product donations, making it difficult to maintain inventory. The demand for products, particularly single-use and specific hygiene items (e.g., toothpaste, deodorant, razors), outpaces supply.

- **Specific Impacts: Physical Health**

The survey results reveal that poor oral health (89%), strong body odor (87%), and skin irritations (79%) (See Figure 5) are the most common hygiene-related concerns affecting the people served by respondents. Head lice impact 55% of this population, while sleep issues and lack of exercise affect 43-45%. Notably, 75% of individuals experience all three top concerns together, indicating a strong connection between these issues. This overlap suggests that hygiene-related challenges do not occur in isolation but instead contribute to a broader impact on overall health and well-being.

Additionally, respondents reported secondary health complications among their clientele, including sinus infections, cardiac issues, and increased social isolation due to hygiene-related stigma. Difficulty maintaining clean clothing further exacerbates risks such as hypothermia. These findings highlight the need for comprehensive hygiene solutions that address multiple interconnected challenges rather than treating them separately.

Figure 5

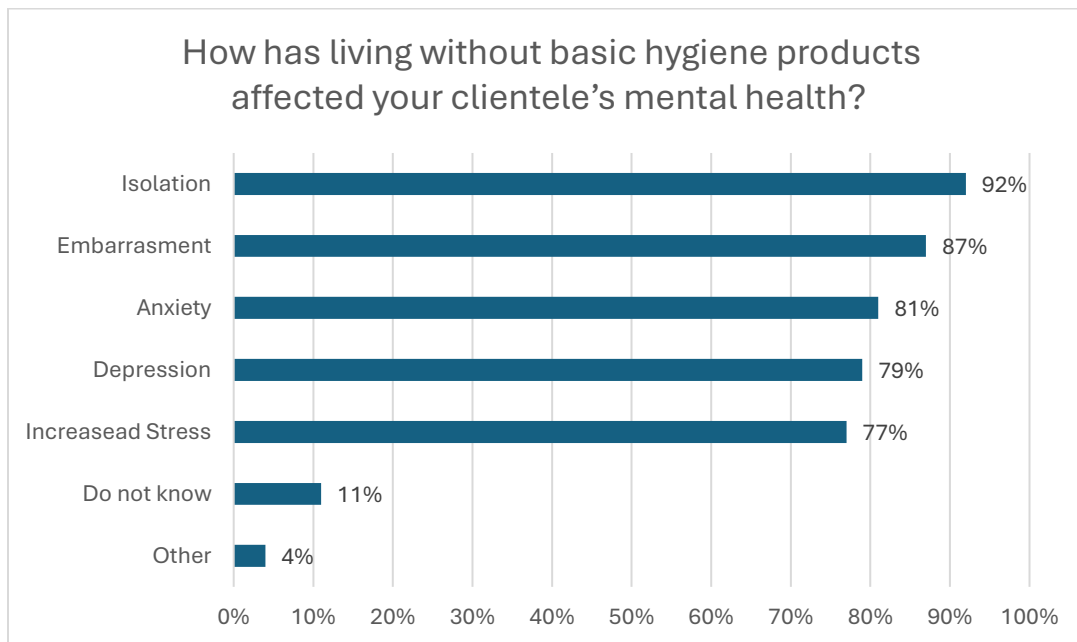


- **Specific Impacts: Mental Health**

The survey results indicate that embarrassment and isolation are the most frequently reported emotional impacts experienced by the clientele served by respondents, affecting over 87% of individuals (See Figure 6). Anxiety, depression, and increased stress are also highly prevalent, appearing in approximately 77-81% of cases.

Notably, these challenges often occur together, with the most common combination including all five symptoms. Anxiety and depression are particularly linked, co-occurring in 82% of cases, while isolation is almost always accompanied by embarrassment. This strong overlap suggests that these issues reinforce one another, leading to a more severe impact on mental health.

Figure 6



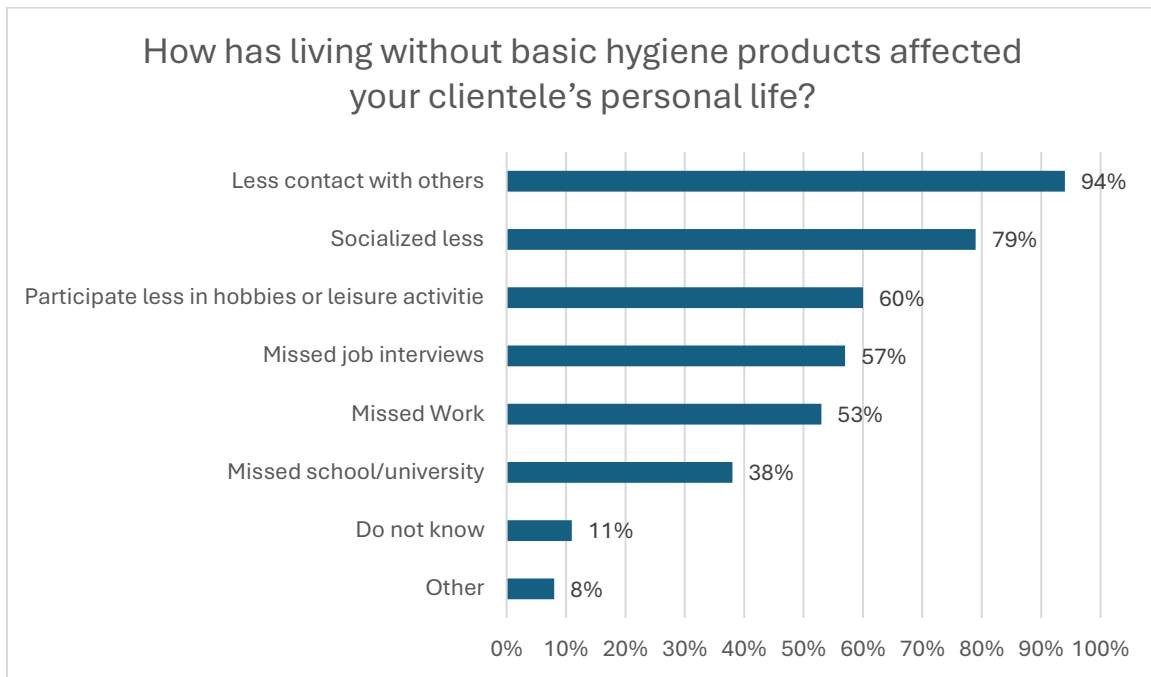
- **Specific Impacts: Personal Life**

The survey results reveal a significant decline in social interaction among the clientele served by respondents. Nearly all (94%) reported that those they support experienced less contact with others, with 79% noting a decrease in socialization. Additionally, 38% observed missed school, college, or university, further emphasizing the disruption to daily life (See Figure 7).

The strongest connection is between reduced contact and decreased socialization (79%), indicating that isolation manifests in multiple ways and reinforces itself. Economic impacts are also closely tied to social disconnection, with 57% reporting that their clientele

experienced both less contact with others and missed job interviews, while 53% noted missed work alongside reduced social engagement. These findings suggest a cycle where hygiene-related barriers limit job opportunities and financial stability, further deepening social isolation. Moreover, 59.6% of respondents indicated that those they serve participated in fewer hobbies and activities, highlighting a broader decline in overall well-being and life satisfaction.

Figure 7

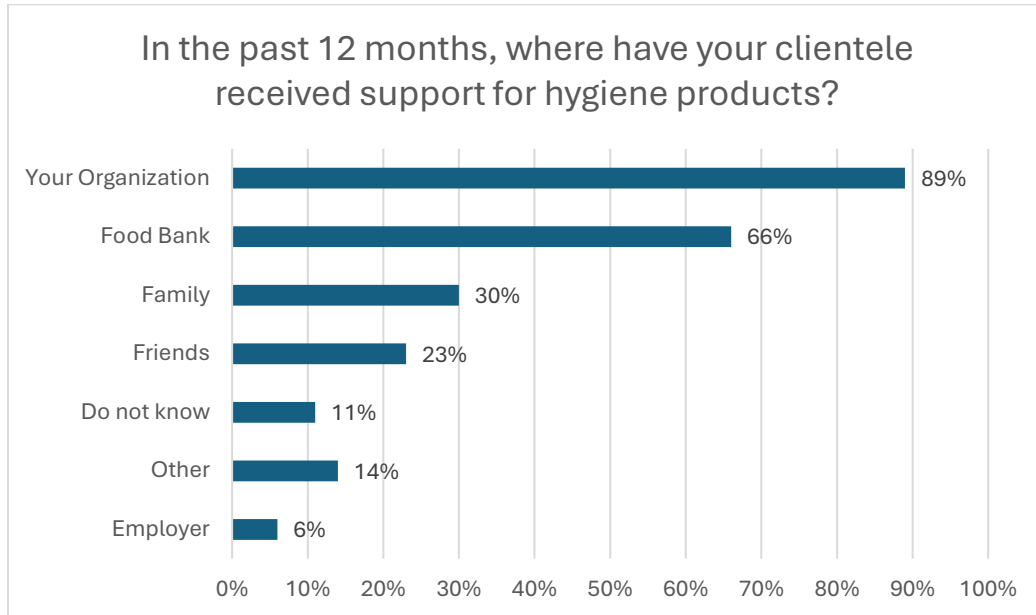


- **Support Networks**

The survey results indicate that themselves -**Your Organization**- is the primary support source for 89% of individuals, followed by food banks (66%). Secondary support networks include family (30%) and friends (24%), while employer assistance remains limited (6%). Notably, 24.4% of individuals access both Your Organization and food banks, while 17.8% rely solely on Your Organization (See Figure 8).

Mentions of other service providers, including **Soap for Hope Canada**, highlight a broader support ecosystem. These findings suggest a strong reliance on formal support systems, with organizations like **Soap for Hope Canada** playing a vital role in meeting essential hygiene and well-being needs.

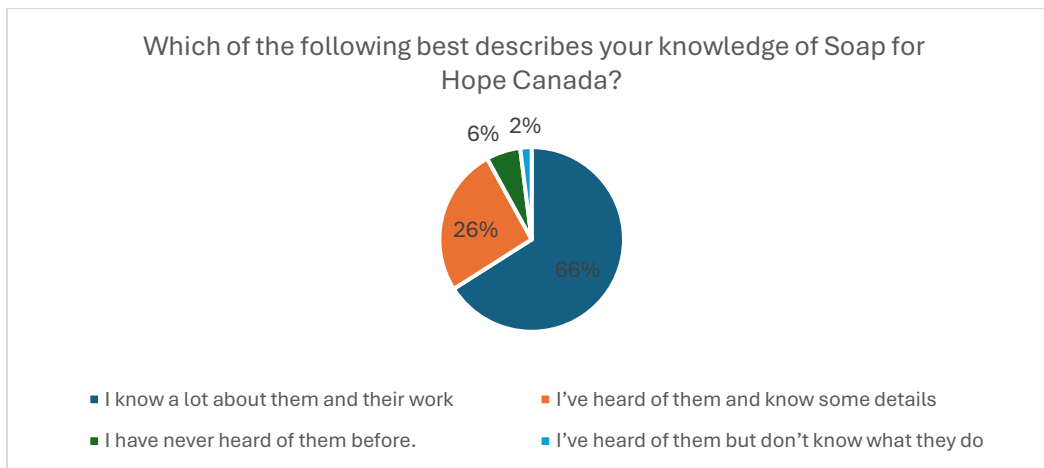
Figure 8



- **Role of Soap for Hope Canada:**

The survey results indicate a high level of awareness about Soap for Hope Canada, with approximately 70% of respondents demonstrating in-depth knowledge of the organization and its work. Another 20% have partial knowledge, while 2% have only basic recognition. However, 7% report no recognition of Soap for Hope Canada, despite the survey being sent to an existing database. These findings highlight strong brand recognition and community presence but also suggest an opportunity to enhance outreach and engagement efforts to reach those with limited awareness (See Figure 9)

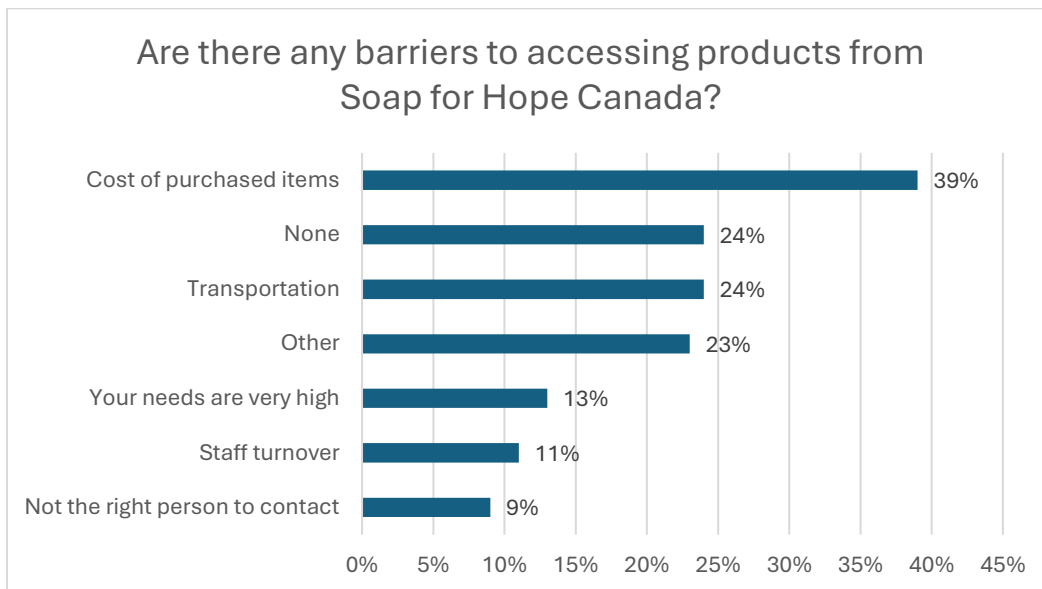
Figure 9



The majority (76%) of respondents recognized Soap for Hope Canada’s critical role in providing hygiene products, but indicated a need for more services, calling for expanded distribution and more product variety.

The findings indicate that financial barriers are the most significant challenge for those engaging with **Soap for Hope Canada**, with 39% struggling with the cost of purchased items. Transportation follows as the second major barrier (24%), compounding accessibility issues. Additional challenges include high needs (13%), staff turnover (11%), and difficulty reaching the correct contact person (9%). These insights emphasize that financial and logistical barriers are the most pressing issues. (See Figure 10).

Figure 10



From the people surveyed, 62% reported that the facilities they serve received donations from **Soap for Hope Canada**. However, 21% said they did not, and 17% were unsure, suggesting there may be communication or tracking gaps that need addressing. The majority over half (55%) report high fulfillment rates, receiving 76-100% of their requested products. However, nearly one-third (32%) experience very low fulfillment rates, and only 13% report receiving 51-75% of their requested items.

These findings suggest two distinct client experiences: a "well-served" group receiving most of what they need, and an "underserved" group with limited fulfillment. The high fulfillment rates for the majority indicate efficient service for many, but the low rates for some highlight areas for improvement.

How Is Soap for Hope Canada perceived:

The responses to the question, "In your own words, what is the main purpose of Soap for Hope Canada?" reveal several key themes:

Providing Hygiene Products to Those in Need: 76% of respondents highlighted that **Soap for Hope Canada** is widely recognized as an organization focused on providing essential hygiene products to individuals facing hygiene poverty. It is viewed as a critical player in improving the well-being of vulnerable populations by ensuring access to basic hygiene essentials, while also enhancing dignity and self-esteem.

Environmental Sustainability and Waste Reduction: 32% of respondents acknowledged **Soap for Hope Canada's** significant contribution to environmental sustainability. The organization is recognized for its efforts in repurposing hygiene products from hotels and other sources, thus preventing waste from ending up in landfills while simultaneously meeting the hygiene needs of communities.

Providing Dignity and Hope to Vulnerable Populations: 28% of responses emphasized that **Soap for Hope Canada** goes beyond simply providing hygiene products. It is seen as fostering dignity, self-esteem, and hope for those experiencing hygiene poverty. Many respondents recognize that access to hygiene products positively impacts not only physical health but also mental and emotional well-being, contributing to a sense of hope and empowerment for those in need.

Improvement Opportunities

The responses to the question, "How could Soap for Hope Canada enhance its services or programs to more effectively address hygiene needs in individuals/communities you serve?" reveal several important suggestions:

Expanding Product Accessibility and Distribution: 48% of respondents emphasized the need for **Soap for Hope Canada** to improve product accessibility and distribution. Challenges such as inconsistent supply, high shipping costs, and limited access to hygiene products in certain regions were noted. Many respondents suggested expanding distribution networks, establishing local warehouses, and offering direct product deliveries to community facilities to ensure products are more readily available and accessible to those in need.

Increasing Product Variety and Availability: 32% of responses indicated a desire for greater product variety and availability. Respondents highlighted the need for specific hygiene products such as menstrual items, deodorant, and gender-diverse products. Additionally,

there was interest in eco-friendly options and larger-sized hygiene products to cater to a broader range of needs within their communities. This feedback suggests a growing demand for diverse product offerings to better support individuals' unique hygiene requirements.

5. Conclusion

The findings from this survey underscore the widespread and multifaceted impact of hygiene poverty across Canada. Financial insecurity remains the primary driver, with many individuals forced to prioritize essential needs such as food and housing over hygiene products. The consequences of this crisis extend beyond personal discomfort, significantly affecting physical health, mental well-being, and social participation. High rates of skin infections, dental issues, anxiety, depression, and social isolation highlight the urgent need for systemic intervention.

Support networks, including food banks, shelters, and organizations like Soap for Hope Canada, play a vital role in addressing hygiene poverty. However, barriers such as inconsistent product availability, funding constraints, and access difficulties limit the effectiveness of existing support structures. The survey data indicates a pressing need for expanded distribution efforts, increased funding, and enhanced public awareness to bridge these gaps.

Addressing hygiene poverty requires a multi-pronged approach involving government policies, corporate partnerships, and community-driven initiatives. Advocacy for policy changes, including subsidized hygiene products and increased funding for support organizations, can help alleviate the burden on vulnerable populations. Additionally, increased collaboration between non-profits, businesses, and policymakers can drive sustainable solutions that ensure hygiene products are accessible and affordable for all.

Soap for Hope Canada has demonstrated its critical role in alleviating hygiene poverty by distributing essential products and advocating for systemic change. However, to meet the growing demand, further expansion of its programs and support networks is essential. By leveraging data-driven insights, fostering strategic partnerships, and amplifying public awareness, stakeholders can work together to dismantle the barriers that perpetuate hygiene poverty and uphold the dignity and well-being of individuals in need.

6. References

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7. Acknowledgements

Soap for Hope Canada extends a heartfelt gratitude to the Community Facilities that participated in the survey. Your dedication to providing essential services is a cornerstone of support for those experiencing hygiene poverty. In the face of ongoing challenges, collaboration is the best way to create a future where everyone has access to the dignity of hygiene and care.

With Special Thanks to:

Steve Harris, Volunteer & GenAI Consultant – for his invaluable expertise in processing the qualitative data from the survey using Generative AI. His dedication and innovative approach have helped transform complex insights into meaningful findings, strengthening our understanding of hygiene poverty and its impact on communities.

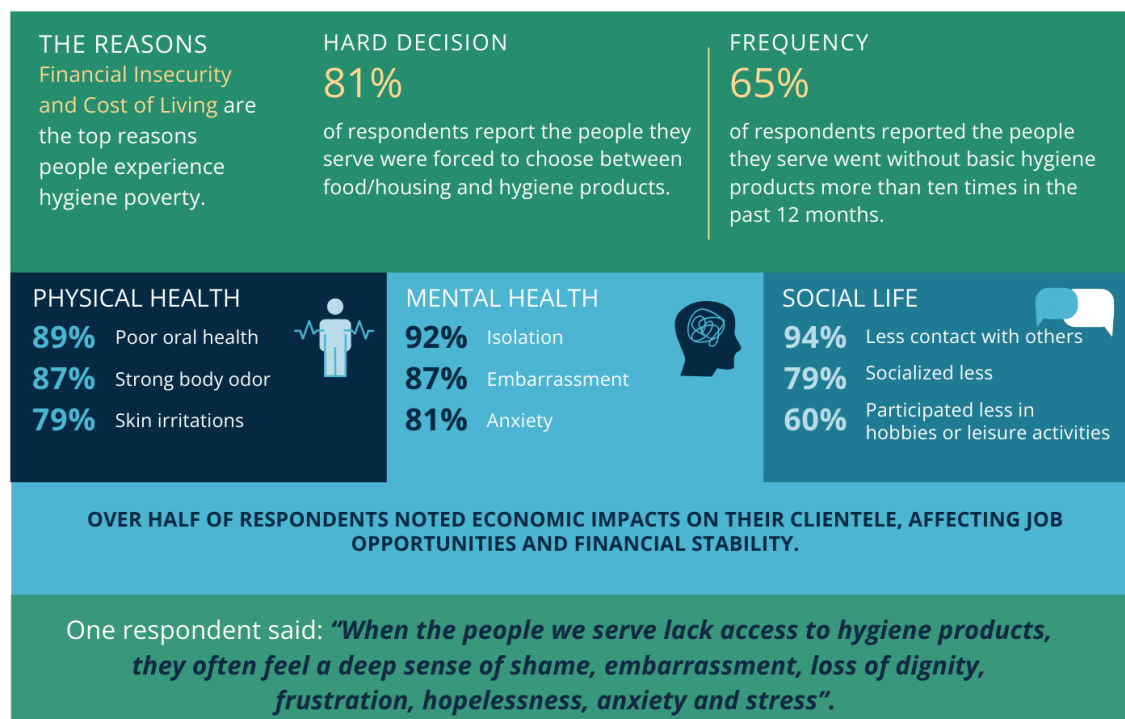
Appendix 1 : Infographic

Canada's First Hygiene Poverty Survey

"Hygiene poverty occurs when people are forced to go without or cut back on essential personal care products. Living without access to basic hygiene items can have a profound negative impact on a person's life, dignity, physical and mental health."

DR. JOE WHELAN, TRINITY UNIVERSITY, IRELAND

47 Community Facilities, serving 110,272 vulnerable people, participated in this initiative. The results expose the severity of the issue and the profound impact of hygienic poverty on the lives of an increasing number of Canadians.




Eradicating Hygiene Poverty Through Sustainability

Our innovative approach not only reduces waste but also provides access to the dignity and improved health that hygiene offers.



We collect new and gently used hygiene products, linens and lost & found, preventing them from ending up in the landfill.



We process these items in our warehouse. They are sorted, squeezed, filled, washed or folded, extending their usable life.



We deliver repurposed items to Community Facilities, providing health, hope, and dignity to vulnerable people.



To know more go to: www.soapforhopecanada.ca/whyhygiene

Appendix 2 : Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your invaluable insights will shed light on hygiene poverty and help shape future initiatives to better serve your community.

What is Hygiene Poverty?

Hygiene poverty occurs when individuals are forced to go without or cut back on essential personal care products. Living without access to basic hygiene items can profoundly impact a person's life, dignity, and physical and mental health.

—Dr. Joe Whelan, Trinity University, Dublin, Ireland

Survey Details:

- **Estimated Time:** 20–30 minutes
- **Incentive:** Enter for a chance to win one of 8 \$25 gift cards.
- **Deadline:** Please complete the survey by **January 24, 2025**.

Section 1: Causes of Hygiene Poverty

1. **What are the top three reasons people you serve experience hygiene poverty?**
2. **What is the most important underlying reason you believe hygiene poverty exists?** Please be specific and explain why you think this reason is significant.

Section 2: Impacts of Hygiene Poverty

1. **What are the three major impacts of hygiene poverty on the people you serve?**
2. **If someone is experiencing hygiene poverty, what areas of their life are affected?**

Select all that apply:

- Mental health
- Social life
- Physical health
- Financial situation
- Family life
- Hobbies

- Career/working life
- Education/training
- None of these
- Don't know

3. Describe how the people you serve feel when they do not have access to hygiene products.

Section 3: Experiences and Support Access

1. In the past 12 months, have the people you serve had to choose between paying for food/housing and buying hygiene products?

- Yes
- No

2. How often have your clientele gone without basic hygiene products in the last 12 months because they couldn't afford them?

- Never
- Just once
- Two to three times
- Four to five times
- Six to ten times
- More than ten times

3. Which hygiene products have your clientele most frequently gone without in the last 12 months?

Select all that apply:

- Razors or shaving foam
- Laundry detergent
- Deodorant
- Shampoo/conditioner
- Toothpaste/toothbrushes
- Soap or shower gel
- Toilet paper
- Hairbrushes/combs
- Period products (pads/tampons)
- Don't know

4. What are the primary challenges your organization faces when accessing hygiene products for the people you serve?

Section 4: Specific Impacts

1. How has living without basic hygiene products affected your clientele's physical health in the last 12 months?

Select all that apply:

- Trouble sleeping

- Strong body odor
- Skin irritations (e.g., infections, rashes)
- Poor oral health (e.g., tooth decay)
- Lack of exercise
- Head lice
- Other (please specify): _____
- Don't know

2. How has living without basic hygiene products affected your clientele's mental health?

Select all that apply:

- Embarrassment
- Depression
- Increased stress
- Anxiety
- Isolation
- Other (please specify): _____
- Don't know

3. How has living without basic hygiene products affected your clientele's personal life?

Select all that apply:

- Less contact with others
- Socialized less
- Participated less in hobbies or leisure activities
- Missed work
- Missed job interviews

- Missed school/college/university
- Other (please specify): _____
- Don't know

4. what additional insights would you like to share about the impact of hygiene poverty and its implications? (Optional)

Section 5: Support Networks

1. In the past 12 months, where have your clientele received support for hygiene products?

Select all that apply:

- Food Bank
- Family
- Friends
- Your Organization
- Employer
- Other (please specify): _____
- Don't know

Section 6: Awareness and Engagement with Soap for Hope Canada

1. Which of the following best describes your knowledge of Soap for Hope Canada?

- I know a lot about them and their work.
- I've heard of them and know some details.
- I've heard of them but don't know what they do.
- I have never heard of them before.

2. In your own words, what is the main purpose of Soap for Hope Canada?

3. How would Soap for Hope Canada enhance its services or programs to more effectively address hygiene needs in individuals/communities you serve? Please list any specific services or areas of improvement.

4. Are there any barriers to accessing products from Soap for Hope Canada?

- Cost of purchased items
- Transportation

- Your needs are very high
- Not the right person to contact
- Staff turnover
- Other
- None

4. In the past 12 months, has your facility received donations or items from Soap for Hope Canada?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

5. If 'Yes,' please list the items your facility received:

6. In the past 12 months, what percentage of your requested hygiene products from Soap for Hope Canada were fulfilled?

- 0% - 25%
- 25% - 50%
- 50% - 75%
- 75% - 100%

Demographic Information (Optional)

1. What is your role in the Community Facility?

Staff member

Volunteer

Manager

Other (please specify): _____

2. How long have you been in this role?

Less than 1 year

1-3 years

4-5 years

5+ years

Thank you!

We deeply appreciate your time and effort in completing this survey. Your insights are invaluable in helping us serve communities better.