

The Complexity of Ethical Community-Engaged Research

Learning Outcomes:

- * Learn about the complexity of societal problems and develop ability to recognize complexity in context (LO2).
- * Develop skills to foster a democratic and culturally aware approach to tackling an issue (LO3)

Secondary Outcomes:

- * Develop an understanding of players, systems, relationships, and power dynamics when tackling a societal issue (LO2a).
- * Develop skills for naming and framing issues in ways that empower communities (LO3e)

SMALL GROUP EXERCISE: To begin, read the scenario described below. Then, as a group, evaluate the scenario using the following questions. **Choose someone to present your assessment to the class.**

- What issue(s) are presented and what members of the community are involved/impacted?
- What systems are involved and is there a relationship between systems and players?
- Is anyone in positions of power, explain the position and the type of power?
- Whose voices are elevated?
- Can you think of any additional approaches to tackling this issue that the research team didn't consider or have time to incorporate? (e.g., alerting media, town hall meeting, alerting local, state, or federal legislator, alerting local, state, or federal agency, etc.)
- Attempt to draw a figure to represent the systems, players, and relationships involved in the issue (see Figure 3 for overview of systems, players, and relationships)
- Lastly, based on what you know, did the researchers use a civic and democratic approach to tackling the issue? (See Figure 1)

	OUTSIDE EXPERT MINDSET	DEMOCRATIC MINDSET
MOTIVATION	Altruistic service	Co-creation, Joint problem solving
WHO IS IN CHARGE?	Experts	Community members, both professionals and amateurs
GOAL	To fix problems	To empower marginalized and underrepresented community members, tackle issues and build community ties
METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH	Expert intervention	Catalyze public participation across diverse stakeholders, Facilitate constructive dialogue, Recognize community assets.
APPROACH TO TEACHING & LEARNING	Didactic (expert teaches community members)	Apprenticeship, joint learning
SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE	Abstract theory, book learning	Local community members, sponsoring organization staff, impacted individuals, and book learning
KEY ROLE OF STUDENT/ PROFESSIONAL RESEARCHERS	Service providers	Learner, catalyst, helper

Figure 1. Comparison of methodological approach from an outside “expert” mindset and a “democratic” mindset. Adapted from Harry Boyte, *The Citizen Solution: How You Can Make a Difference* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008), as cited in Nicholas Longo, *Practicing Democracy: A Toolkit for Educating Civic Professionals* (2023).

Project Topic: PERIOD POVERTY AND THE IMPACT ON MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

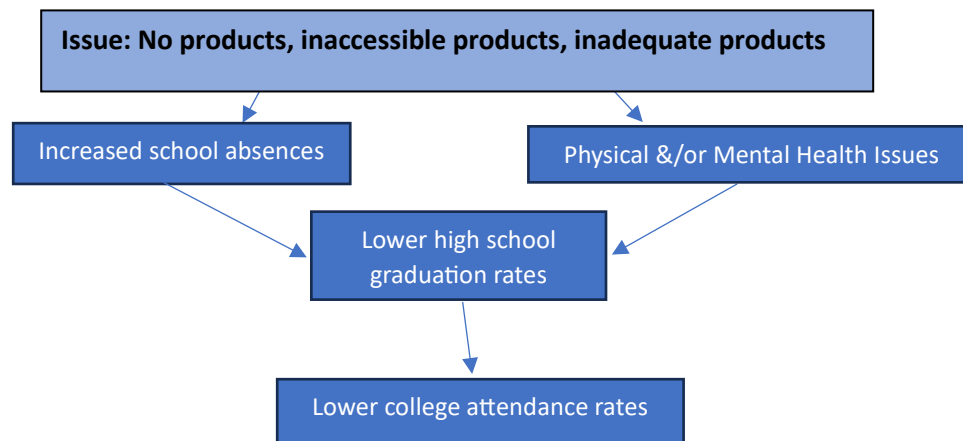


Figure 2: image depicting period poverty and impacts

Scenario Overview¹ (see figure 2): Period poverty, insufficient access to menstrual products and hygienic facilities, is worsened by the stigma and cultural taboos associated with periods. Approximately 500M women face period poverty worldwide. Across the United States, 11.3M people struggle with period poverty (Michel et al., 2022). Period poverty can lead to physical symptoms including severe pain, headaches, swelling, and fatigue; and mental health challenges including severe depression (Cardoso et al., 2021). Moreover, period poverty can have long-term implications for menstruators as lack of access to menstrual products increases school absences which leads to higher high school drop-out rates and lower college attendance.

Project goal: to understand the impacts of period poverty on students in Massachusetts and to identify effective strategies to alleviate these impacts for State Senator Robyn Kennedy.

Project Objectives & Methods

1. *Understand the impacts of period poverty on students and level of awareness within schools,*
 - a. Interviewed nursing staff at three large public high schools, surveyed 22 public school nurses throughout the state.
2. *Identify successful strategies used by organizations to combat period poverty within Massachusetts (interviews with organizations).* All struggle with limited funding and personnel.
 - a. Interviewed people from six nonprofit organizations (Girls Inc., YWCA, Dignity Matters, Fihri, Alliance for Period Supplies, and Hope & Comfort).
 - b. Interviewed two private companies and two period poverty researchers.
 - c. Innovations identified from above interviews: pads on a roll, reusable period discs, place menstrual products in each stall of bathroom
3. *Examine Massachusetts and other legislative efforts aimed at tackling period poverty*
 - a. Conducted online research and interviews with MA state legislators.
 - b. Examined international laws and 26 pieces of legislation in the United States at the local, state, and federal level.
4. *Develop recommendations*

¹ Based on Melekote et al., *Addressing Period Poverty and Enhancing Student Life* (2024). Some facts were changed for simplicity of exercise.

Findings

F1: Language barriers impact accessibility of menstrual products

F2: Stigma around menstruation prevents students from asking for help

F3: Nonprofit organizations help tackle period poverty with toolkits and period packs

F4: Free menstrual products are frequently uncomfortable, only in one size, and unsustainable

F5: Public Schools underestimate the severity of the problem due to underuse of inadequate products.

Recommendations

R1: Nonprofit organizations should use social media and period tracker apps to raise awareness of period poverty.

R2: The Massachusetts Department of Education (DoE) should organize workshops on menstrual health for parents and students.

R3: The Massachusetts state legislature should incorporate funding into period poverty legislation to support non-profit organizations tackling period poverty.

R4: Additional research should be done on the economic impact of period poverty

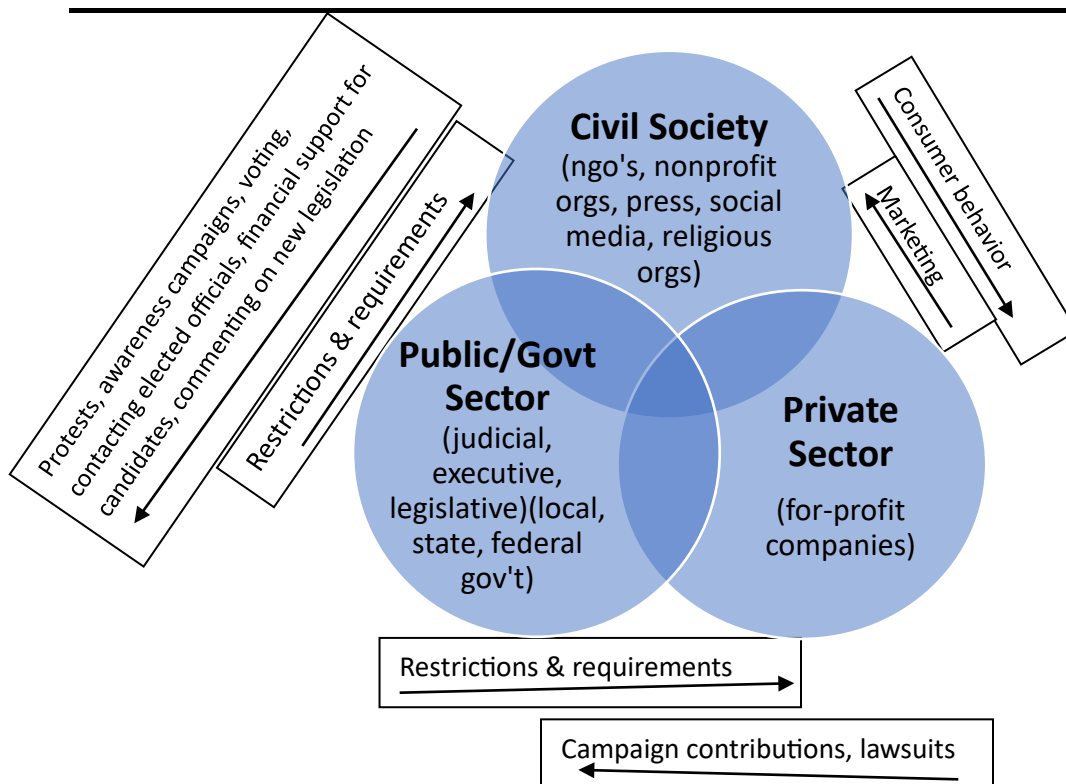


Figure 3: Sectors in society & relationships/influences. The arrows indicate pressure/influence of one sector on another. Adapted from, Ningsih, I. K., Ingram, V., & Savilaakso, S. (2020). Voluntary sustainability certification and state regulations: Paths to promote the conservation of ecosystem services? Experiences in Indonesia. *Forests*, 11(5), 503.