

---

Examining School Leader  
Perspectives on Hygiene Poverty  
within Australian Schools

Exploratory analysis  
August 2023

# We have to do more



Insight report

percapita

---

---

Examining School Leader  
Perspectives on Hygiene Poverty  
within Australian Schools

---

Exploratory analysis  
August 2023

---

# We have to do more



Insight report

A report commissioned by  
the Hygiene Poverty Project  
lead organisation, Pinchapoo

---

# Foreword

## Statement from Kate Austin



It is with great concern and a sense of urgency that I introduce this research report focusing on the critical issue of hygiene poverty within Australian schools. Hygiene poverty is not merely a localized problem; it has escalated into a national crisis, affecting the lives and well-being of countless students across the country.

---

As we delve into the findings of this report, we are compelled to confront the harsh reality that many young Australians are denied access to basic hygiene necessities, leading to severe consequences for their physical health, emotional well-being, and educational outcomes.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the dedicated researchers who have undertaken this important study. Their tireless efforts have shed light on an issue that has remained largely invisible, opening the doors to a much-needed conversation about the urgent action required to address hygiene poverty in our schools.

---

By meticulously examining the data, conducting interviews, and listening to the voices of those directly affected, the researchers have provided us with a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of this crisis. This is something that I have observed first hand, and the data paints a concerning picture.

This report not only uncovers the distressing prevalence of hygiene poverty but also emphasizes the need for systems thinking in developing effective and sustainable solutions. The problem at hand cannot be tackled in isolation; it requires a holistic approach that considers the interconnectedness of factors such as socio-economic disparities, inadequate support systems, and the impact on mental health. We must acknowledge that hygiene poverty is not an isolated issue but rather a symptom of deeper structural inequalities within our society. Only by comprehensively addressing these underlying factors can we hope to create lasting change.

Furthermore, this report calls for a considered response to this national crisis. It is no longer sufficient to view hygiene poverty as an unfortunate consequence of economic disadvantage. We must recognize it as a significant barrier to education, a violation of basic human rights, and an impediment to social mobility. By reframing the issue through this lens, we can mobilize key stakeholders, including government bodies, educators, community organizations, and concerned citizens, to collaborate on innovative and sustainable solutions.

While the findings of this research report may be disheartening, they also provide us with an opportunity to effect meaningful change.

---

By shining a spotlight on hygiene poverty in Australian schools, we have the chance to initiate an important dialogue that can challenge existing policies, rally support, and drive transformative action. I hope this report serves as a catalyst for discussions at all levels of society, inspiring individuals and institutions to come together and prioritize the well-being of our nation's students.

---

In closing, I invite you to read this report with an open mind and a determination to act. Let us seize this moment to advocate for systemic change, demand equitable access to basic hygiene facilities and products, and ensure that no child in Australia is left behind due to hygiene poverty. Together, we can create a future where every student can thrive and reach their full potential.

Thank you.

**Kate Austin**  
Pinchapoo CEO



This report is a concise summary of the report. To access the full report visit [percapita.org.au](http://percapita.org.au)



---

## Introduction

While childhood poverty is pervasive and highly concerning no singular definition of childhood poverty abounds. Poverty is multi-faceted and may take many different shapes and forms within different family units and in different regions. McLoyd (1998) notes that research consistently reports that persistent poverty has more detrimental effects on IQ, school achievement, and socioemotional functioning than transitory poverty, with children experiencing both types of poverty generally doing less well than never-poor children. Poorer academic-readiness skills, also appear to contribute to lower levels of school achievement among poor children (Ibid, 1998).

The link between socioeconomic disadvantage and children's socioemotional functioning has been explored extensively within the literature on childhood poverty. Elevated exposure to acute and chronic stressors, is identified as significant to a child's future socioemotional functioning. Once such stressor identified within the literature is hygiene poverty. Hygiene poverty is perhaps best understood as a specific subset of period poverty. It may sometimes be transient, and episodic or an enduring feature of family life. And yet there remains little by way of systematic response to this pervasive challenge and even less by way of research. Inarguably, this dearth of research and policy consideration is concerning.

This is perhaps because arguably the most pressing concern for policy makers and civil sector organisations in the wake

of increasing rates of poverty are more readily identifiable subsistence needs, and essential provisions, food, medical care, shelter. Yet hygiene poverty has significant implications for health and wellbeing, notwithstanding the significant implications for mental welfare. These matters were considered in recent research exploring hygiene poverty within schools. The research noted the significant mental harm, absenteeism and presenteeism consequences of hygiene poverty (D'Rosario et al 2022). Children were found to be both less present and more absent than their never-poor peers (Ibid, 2022). Children were also found to be less engaged with their peers, and respondents commented on the role of hygiene in establishing confidence to pursue friendships as children mature (Ibid, 2022).

Hygiene poverty is emerging as a significant crisis not just for low-income countries, but also high-income OECD countries in the wake of significant inflationary conditions and the impact of the pandemic. Concerningly, evidence suggests that the crisis predates these events, given the steady and significant demand for hygiene products from peak hygiene charities. Understanding the complex issue of hygiene poverty is essential, to establish a critical evidence base to inform proactive policy. Moreover, understanding the implications of hygiene poverty given the dual threats of inflation and the pandemic is equally critical to formulating a viable policy response.

Educators within school settings have emphasized the significant impact of hygiene poverty on children. They have highlighted the importance of hygiene in building students' confidence and fostering positive relationships with their peers. Research supports this view, demonstrating the connection between hygiene and self-efficacy, where poorer hygiene is associated with diminished confidence and efficacy. A recent study using the same dataset as the present research found that students experiencing hygiene poverty had significantly higher absenteeism rates, missing more than 13 additional days of school compared to their peers. These students also showed lower engagement in co-curricular and extracurricular activities. These findings underscore the detrimental effects of hygiene poverty on overall well-being and educational experiences.

Teachers play a critical role in supporting the needs of their students, often going beyond their official responsibilities. Research consistently highlights the significance of teacher-student relationships in students' self-esteem, well-being, school engagement, learning, and achievement. Educators in early childhood education have been found to demonstrate significant empathy, recognizing that empathy, trust, and time are key in addressing barriers faced by families in accessing education. Similarly, primary and secondary level educators strive to create caring, supportive, and nurturing environments. The benefits of such care-based relationships are significant, as evidenced by studies linking students' perception of their teacher's care with self-esteem, well-being, and school engagement. However, while teachers show commendable care and empathy, they often lack the mechanisms and material resources to respond effectively to the high levels of hygiene poverty they observe within schools.

To estimate the extent of hygiene poverty in Australian schools, data collected by Per Capita provides valuable insights.

---

Previous estimates at the national level identified approximately 301,027 school-aged children experiencing hygiene poverty, accounting for around 7% of the school-attending population. However, broader poverty indicators suggest that the actual figure may be even higher, potentially double that level.

---

The distribution of hygiene poverty aligns with patterns of poverty and inequality observed in SEIFA-Q metrics when analyzed spatially. Surprisingly, there is significant demand for hygiene products in areas that traditionally do not face significant socio-economic challenges, including regions with income levels at or above the national averages. This suggests that hygiene poverty affects communities beyond the expected areas of socio-economic hardship.



---

Understanding the perspectives of educators is crucial in addressing hygiene poverty effectively. Educators have a strong propensity to care for their students' success beyond academic aspects, and they possess a deep understanding of their students' broader needs, including their socio-economic status. The survey conducted as part of the National Schools Hygiene Program revealed that the majority of educators expressed moderate to high levels of concern about their school cohorts' capacity to meet their hygiene needs. This suggests that educators believe their students lack the means, whether familial or personal, to adequately address their basic hygiene needs. Concerns about the health and mental well-being of students experiencing hygiene poverty were also prevalent among educators. This places educators in a challenging position, as they have limited capacity and resources to support their students, often relying on their own funds or relief packages from charitable partners.

---

Moreover, a significant number of educators reported using their personal finances to purchase hygiene products for their students. This act of generosity demonstrates their commitment, but it also highlights the unfair burden placed on educators, especially considering the rising cost of living pressures they face. No educator should bear such a financial burden, and the potential psychosocial risks associated with these interactions and provisions should be taken into consideration.

---

In light of the changing landscape of education, with the integration of computer-based learning and smart technologies, it is essential to address the basic needs of all children. Many students struggle to access even the most fundamental necessities, rendering technological advancements inconsequential to their educational progress. Additionally, the ongoing pandemic has further exacerbated the challenges faced by young people in maintaining proper hygiene, with a significant number struggling to access essential hygiene products.

Hygiene poverty is not only linked to adverse health outcomes and increased susceptibility to infectious diseases, but it is also associated with a higher risk of bullying victimization. This connection highlights the interplay between poor hygiene and bullying, which are often viewed as individual or interpersonal issues but are influenced by broader structural factors. Recognizing this, schools have a legal and moral obligation to prevent bullying and ensure the well-being of their students. Implementing policies such as school uniform requirements, zero-tolerance approaches to bullying, and student counselling can address the socio-ecological factors that significantly impact students' well-being.

To address hygiene poverty and its associated challenges (self exclusion, bullying, absenteeism), a holistic approach is necessary. This requires comprehensive policy changes, support systems within schools, and a broader understanding of the structural dynamics that contribute to these issues. By considering the broader context and adopting a multifaceted approach, we can create inclusive environments that protect students from the physical and psychological harm associated with hygiene poverty, ultimately striving for equal opportunities and well-being for all students.



The report outlines a number of pertinent findings pertaining to the perception of Australian school educators regarding their learner's experiences of hygiene poverty.

- 
- i **96.9%** 96.9% of Educators expressed moderate to high level concerns about the capacity of their school cohorts to adequately address their own hygiene poverty needs.

---

  - ii **87.8%** 87.8% of educators and principals expressed moderate to high levels of concern regarding the health of their students experiencing hygiene poverty.

---

  - iii **48.9%** 48.9% of the respondents asserted that they were extremely concerned regarding the mental welfare of their learners experiencing hygiene poverty.

---

  - iv **97.0%** 97% of respondents expressed either extreme or moderate concern regarding the mental welfare of students experiencing hygiene poverty. Only 3% of respondents asserted that they were either neutral or not concerned about the mental wellbeing of their students experiencing hygiene poverty.

---

  - v **72.7%** 72.7% of respondents noted that they had purchased hygiene products to support their students. 9.09% of educators did this on a regular basis.

---

## Recommendations

1

### Critical program funding

It is crucial to prioritize substantial investment in organizations dedicated to addressing hygiene poverty. Existing school-based delivery programs, supported by charitable organizations, have proven to be effective in alleviating hygiene poverty among student populations. However, the success of these programs is contingent upon providing viable funding to these entities.

2

### Essential partner investment

Adequate funding must be allocated to charitable entities engaged in hygiene poverty relief to enable the expansion of hygiene relief programs into rural and regional Australia, where hygiene poverty is most severe. This targeted funding will ensure that support reaches those areas with the greatest need, addressing the specific challenges faced by these communities.

3

### Ecosystem support

We must recognize and actively support the remarkable benefits of the ecosystem intermediary model, which has demonstrated significant impact. This model entails direct collaboration with welfare and relief agencies, working within the school environment alongside school leaders and welfare officers. It serves as a viable framework for broader deployment. Leveraging existing welfare officers' programs and chaplaincy programs as partners in scaling up this initiative is crucial. The school-based approach of this model is both cost-effective and highly impactful. By adopting this approach, we can potentially reduce the stigma and risk of exclusion associated with hygiene poverty, while also minimizing the costs involved in distributing hygiene products.

These recommendations underscore the urgent need to prioritize critical investment, funding, and collaborative models to tackle hygiene poverty in Australian schools. By taking decisive action, we can make a profound and lasting difference in the lives of our students, ensuring their well-being, dignity, and equal access to education.







For a list of references and detailed findings and recommendations access the full report. To access the full report visit [percapita.org.au](http://percapita.org.au)



## Contact

Inquiries pertaining to this report may be directed to Dr. Michael D’Rosario, at [m.d’rosario@percapita.org.au](mailto:m.d’rosario@percapita.org.au)

## Report authors



Dr. Michael D’Rosario



Emma Dawson



Dr. John Falzon



Sam Ibrahim