

Roundtable summary

Washington D.C, 25 June 2024

Lack of inclusive hygiene in public washrooms: a health risk quietly impacting millions



Every day, many people go about their daily lives, socialising and working while quietly facing a hidden struggle in one of the busiest spaces: the public washroom. Maintaining good hygiene is extremely challenging without hygienic public washrooms.

This is because many people face visible and invisible barriers, like cognitive conditions or changes with age or circumstances, that affect how they experience public washrooms. More often than not, public washrooms are not equipped to accommodate their needs. As a result, more people than you may realise face barriers that hinder them from comfortably accessing proper hygiene when at work or in public. In fact, our recent research shows that 44%¹ of people feel anxious about using public washrooms when leaving their home.

This is an urgent issue that requires public awareness. The impact on public and private sector organisations alike is high if left unaddressed.

This alarming reality was underscored during a recent event Tork co-hosted with the Global Handwashing Partnership (GHP) where we convened advocates and experts in Washington, D.C. to discuss how hygiene in public washrooms can be improved and made more inclusive for users. Attendees represented government, healthcare, academia and advocates of impacted groups. Everyone had one thing in common: their passion to bring awareness to the issue and make hygiene more inclusive in public washrooms.

Our key learnings from the discussion are outlined below.

The need for improved hygiene in public washrooms affects a surprising portion of the population

Our conversations made it clear that this is a pervasive public health challenge affecting a wide range of people. For example, for those with skin sensitivities like eczema, a condition affecting 31.6 million people in the US, the issue is that the soap in washrooms can severely irritate their skin. For people with paruresis – a condition up to 16% of people struggle with, also known as Shy Bladder Syndrome – the issue is the lack of

privacy in public washrooms. For some with a condition or who are in a certain phase for life – like being a new parent or struggling with arthritis – it is inadequately designed washrooms and a lack of appropriate products and equipment available that simply do not meet their needs. And for those with OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) or who may have a phobia or fear of viruses or bacteria, it is the likelihood of having to use an unclean washroom – an experience we have all probably faced before.

No matter the circumstances, what all these individuals have in common is this: if they don't feel comfortable using a public washroom, they will make significant changes to their daily routine to avoid using one – and in effect are likely to avoid visiting business establishments or even find a new job that can accommodate their washroom needs.

In fact, we recently surveyed more than 6,000 individuals in five countries and found that 38% of respondents avoid eating or drinking while they are away from home to limit their use of public washrooms and 26% avoid a social event because of concerns around access to public washrooms. One in six people have even left a job because of a poor washroom.¹

This data and our roundtable discussion revealed, for example, that restaurant patrons may avoid purchasing food and drinks and may not return, remote office workers may become reluctant to “return to office”, shoppers may spend less time in shops and more. **Simply put, public washroom experiences that don't prioritise inclusive hygiene and cleanliness impact a business' reputation and potential revenue. Providing inclusive hygiene in public washrooms is good for a business and its visitors, customers, employees and cleaning staff.**



Of course, there is also the pervasive issue of limited access to public washrooms in America that continues to be a barrier. On average, the US has only eight public toilets per 100,000 people². This has forced citizens to take matters into their own hands, such as creating crowdsourced Google maps of where public washrooms are available in the state that they are in – something that, with no surprise, has gained viral popularity on social media in recent years. To respond to this problem, innovation solutions have been developed, such as Throne Labs, a Washington, D.C.-based start-up which provides portable bathrooms called Thrones that are built on today's advanced technology with the goal of increasing access to clean washrooms for everyone, including families, mobile workers and more.

The journey to driving change and making an impact

Tork and Global Handwashing Partnership are welcoming other stakeholders on the journey to champion inclusive hygiene in public washrooms and explore and solve for how hygiene in public washrooms can be improved.

The first step in this journey is to raise awareness of the issue and create a common language for “inclusive hygiene” that everyone can understand and get behind. This idea that hygiene in public washrooms needs to be inclusive of all types of people is tremendously important. To us, inclusive hygiene means eliminating the visible and invisible barriers to hygiene that individuals face so that as many people as possible can have comfortable access to public washrooms, regardless of their skin sensitivities,

arthritis, OCD or any other health condition, disability, neurodiversity, general hygiene concerns or stage of life.

Bringing together this group of experts in Washington, D.C. showed us all there is so much more to learn to make a significant impact. More importantly, it highlighted the significance of open conversations to not only build a roadmap to address this issue together, but to normalise the discussion for the wider population.

It is time to raise awareness for the millions of people who are challenged by the state of hygiene in public washrooms, shine a light on existing success stories to inspire actionable solutions for businesses and work together to drive change.

Tork and Global Handwashing Partnership have turned the key takeaways from this event into actionable steps below and are sharing them with the people who have the power and influence to drive change – including business owners, facility and operations managers and others.

1. Create a common language around “inclusive hygiene” in public washrooms that everyone in your organisation can understand and can get behind. This will make sharing feedback, ideas and insights more effective.
2. Raise awareness of the issue and the scale of its impact to your business and society as a whole. To accomplish this, encourage conversation to help remove the stigma and shame that prevents people from speaking up about their experiences and the barriers they face in comfortably accessing proper hygiene in public washrooms.
3. Help educate the public, government, businesses and other stakeholders of the visible and invisible barriers preventing people from accessing proper hygiene when at work or in public and showcase what your organisation is doing to progress the issue.
4. Share success stories of what’s working to help generate ideas to create innovative solutions and a roadmap to improve the washroom experience for as many people as possible.

Join us on social media @Tork and [our website](#) to find out how to make your washrooms more inclusive. You can follow our journey and share your stories, ideas and innovations as we pursue inclusive hygiene in public washrooms.

¹ Data from the 2024 Tork Insights Survey of 6,000 individuals 18-65+ and 900 respondents representing businesses in the United States, Mexico, UK, Germany and France.

² Data from a 2021 report from QS Supplies. QS Supplies used essential toilet-finding tool PeePlace to count the number of washrooms in different parts of the world and used official population figures to calculate the number of washrooms per 100,000 people.

³ Hanifin JM, Reed ML; Eczema Prevalence and Impact Working Group. [A population-based survey of eczema prevalence in the United States](#). *Dermatitis*. 2007 Jun;18(2):82-91. doi: 10.2310/6620.2007.06034. PMID: 17498413.



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