

# Individual Blame or Collective Responsibility?

Existing Mindsets about Diaper  
Need and Systemic Poverty

Elliot Marshall Cohen

Theresa Miller

Andrew Volmert

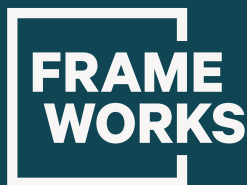
Rae Jereza

Nana Baffoe

Charlotte Shaw

Erin Lowe

DECEMBER 2024



National  
Diaper Bank  
Network



# Introduction

*In Collaboration with the National Diaper Bank Network*

When asked to think about the impacts of poverty, people rarely think about the reality of diaper need, but diapers are essential to ensuring the health and well-being of children and families. This brief reports on research into the complex and nuanced patterns of thinking that many Americans share when it comes to these issues—from blaming individuals for their own experiences of diaper need and thinking that poverty is inevitable, to relying on racist and sexist stereotypes about people experiencing poverty. In order to increase support for systemic solutions that address diaper need and poverty more broadly, this pervasive individualism, stigma, and fatalism will need to be overcome. However, people can hold multiple, often contradictory, assumptions simultaneously. So, while assuming that poverty is an individual failing is common among the public, people can also sometimes see the ways that certain economic processes and government policies produce poverty, and they can recognize an important role for charities and government. Although people can sometimes see that these institutions have a role to play, they are not exactly sure what they should be responsible for. That is, people lack a clear understanding of specific systemic solutions that are needed not just to alleviate poverty but to address the broader social and economic conditions that create poverty in the first place.

This strategic brief identifies challenges and opportunities posed by how the public currently thinks about diaper need and poverty. Based on descriptive research mapping the gaps between what stakeholders and advocates want to communicate about diaper need and poverty and how the public currently thinks about these issues, we offer some initial recommendations to help navigate these challenges and leverage the opportunities.

The brief is part of a larger project undertaken by the FrameWorks Institute, in partnership with the National Diaper Bank Network, to identify new framing strategies to effectively communicate about diaper need and poverty. Further framing research will be needed to identify the most effective ways of talking about diaper need and poverty that build on the preliminary recommendations in this brief.

# What Are We Trying to Communicate?

To develop an effective strategy for communicating about diaper need and poverty in the United States, it's necessary to identify a set of key ideas to get across. To do this, FrameWorks researchers conducted a series of 11 interviews with stakeholders in the field of poverty and basic needs, including advocates, academics, and policymakers, as well as a feedback session with researchers and advocates in the field. Below, we summarize the key ideas that emerged from this process, which represent the core points that need to be effectively communicated and the solutions for which the field wants to build support.

## Key Ideas in the Field

**Poverty needs to be redefined.** Stakeholders said that poverty is not simply a lack of basic needs but rather, it's a complex experience related to multiple intersecting systems, such as employment and wages, housing, education, health care, child care, and transportation. They pointed out that sometimes poverty is too narrowly conceptualized as the lack of certain basic material needs or as the result of an income that falls below the "poverty line," which does not take into account geographical variations in the cost of living. Stakeholders emphasized that when poverty is seen as simply a lack of basic needs, this can limit people's ability to see the complexities of experiencing poverty and the ways that poverty is connected to larger systems.

**Diaper need is the result of poverty and poverty has structural and systemic causes, namely the intersection of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism.** According to stakeholders in the field, when people struggle to afford diapers, it's often because they are experiencing poverty, and poverty results from larger economic, social, and political systems. The systemic causes of poverty intersect and converge with particular intensity in the lives of women and families of color, who disproportionately experience poverty. Stakeholders pointed out that our country's history of slavery, genocide, segregation, and gendered oppression, coupled with ongoing state violence, criminalization of certain migrant populations, and racist public policies, have resulted in people of color experiencing poverty at disproportionate rates. Stakeholders emphasized that the larger economic system is set up in ways that produce, allow, and perpetuate poverty. They pointed out that corporations have much more power than workers, and this leads to exploitation of workers, particularly workers of color, who often work for low and stagnant wages. These factors have all contributed to racialized poverty in the United States.

**The effects of diaper need and poverty are widespread and inequitable.** Stakeholders pointed out that the cost of things people need, including diapers, is prohibitive for many families living in poverty and can worsen the already negative effects of poverty. Not having

diapers interferes with families' mental health, financial stability, and ability to work. Parents can be caught in diaper-related double binds, where they need child care in order to work, but they need diapers in order to get child care, but they need to work in order to afford diapers. This is compounded by work requirements for government assistance that can put families in an impossible situation. Stakeholders emphasized that diaper need is connected to increased anxiety, depression, and shame, particularly among mothers, which can in turn pose risks to children's mental, emotional, and physical health. According to stakeholders, people who are already marginalized and oppressed are being hit hardest by economic and political processes that produce or exacerbate poverty. People who live at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, namely women of color, are more likely to experience poverty and its negative effects.

**Government needs to play a bigger role in addressing poverty.** Stakeholders advocated for a model of government that serves as a helper and protector of those in our society that are most in need. To accomplish this, existing programs need to be protected, funded, and strengthened. Stakeholders listed a range of federal programs that need to be expanded or protected (e.g., WIC, SNAP, CHIP). Additionally, the field advocated for an overhaul of the government's priorities, away from facilitating wealth accumulation for market interests and toward providing basic and universal services such as health care and child care. The field contrasted their model of government with the paternalistic model that they saw as currently shaping policy. In this model, the government acts in the service of the wealthy while disciplining working people and creating barriers to accessing services to motivate people to supposedly work harder. It is common under this model of government to have punitive work requirements as conditions for accessing government support. When it comes to diaper need, stakeholders pointed out that the paternalistic model of government treats mothers experiencing diaper need in unfair and misogynistic ways, including lawmakers refusing to support diaper-related legislation citing mothers' as culpable for having kids.

**Diaper banks are a vital part of alleviating the effects of poverty, and broader structural changes are also needed.** Stakeholders emphasized that ensuring families have diapers will improve the lives of caregivers and children, by helping remove barriers to work and child care and helping to improve overall health and well-being. To this end, they argued that diaper banks should be better funded and integrated with other forms of direct services and support (e.g., access to food, housing, and other social services). Stakeholders pointed out that to alleviate the most acute, harmful effects of poverty, there need to be improved direct services to people living in poverty, including reforms to remove bureaucracy and streamline access to services (e.g., by consolidating points of service so that more services can be accessed in one place). They also emphasized that a wide-angle perspective needs to be taken when thinking about solutions to poverty, and that substantial policy changes, such as universal health care and child care, are required to fully address poverty. Moreover, stakeholders emphasized that to fully address poverty, the root causes need to be addressed—meaning that deep systemic and structural changes to our political and economic systems are needed. These changes could

take various forms but could include things like increasing the political power of lower income people, increasing labor power, ending economic exploitation, and government-led universal services, paired with policies aimed at more equitably distributing wealth.

# Challenges & Opportunities

To investigate how the public thinks about diaper need and poverty, FrameWorks researchers conducted 20 one-on-one, two-hour interviews with a diverse group of participants living across the United States in January and February 2024. These interviews were analyzed to identify the deep, implicit ways of thinking, or cultural mindsets, that members of the public use to think about diaper need and poverty.

Based on this research, FrameWorks has identified challenges and opportunities that communicators face in getting across the key ideas outlined above. We offer initial recommendations about how to respond to the challenges and leverage the opportunities, which communicators can start using right now, with the important caveat that further research is needed to identify specific, evidence-based framing strategies the field can use to move public thinking in the right direction.

## WHAT ARE CULTURAL MINDSETS?

Cultural mindsets (or mindsets) are deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how people understand the world and how we make decisions. They emerge from and are tied to cultural and social practices and institutions with deep historical roots. For example, a dominant mindset in American culture is *Individualism*, or the idea that an individual's personal choices are responsible for their life outcomes. Relying on individualism tends to background another important mindset, systemic thinking, which would otherwise allow for the recognition of the role of larger societal processes in shaping people's lives. When it comes to poverty and diaper need, public mindsets about these issues are intertwined with ways of thinking related to the intersections of systemic racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. At the same time, in moments of social upheaval, mindsets can be pushed into flux and become destabilized, leading to changes in thinking.

It's also important to acknowledge that there are multiple mindsets that people use to think about a given issue. For example, while Americans often think individualistically, people also have access to more ecological and systemic mindsets. When these mindsets are active, they bring into view social systems and the ways that environments shape outcomes alongside individual choices.

# Challenges

## CHALLENGE #1

**Members of the public often blame individuals for experiencing poverty and diaper need rather than thinking about larger systemic causes, such as structural racism, patriarchy, and capitalism.**

Members of the public often assume that individuals are solely or primarily responsible for their own life situations, based on individual motivation, traits, and choices. This is a broad pattern that is well established and familiar. People often assume that willpower and drive automatically result in success, and that a lack of motivation leads to poverty. In this view, hard work and dedication are seen as automatically resulting in financial success, and inversely, laziness and complacency are seen as primary causes of poverty. When employing this way of thinking, individual choices are seen as the main causes of whether someone experiences poverty or not. People assume that those experiencing poverty have made impulsive, short-sighted, and even unintelligent choices to get there.

Members of the public sometimes blame individuals for experiencing diaper need by relying on racist and sexist stereotypes and tropes about individuals experiencing poverty. Particularly prevalent in the context of diaper need is the trope of the “welfare queen,” a stereotyped and pathologized Black woman assumed to be promiscuous and morally reprehensible, “cheating” the system by having children she can’t afford and does not take care of in order to live off government assistance. Participants used coded language like references to “buying crack” that signaled the way this trope is racialized. Beginning in the 1980s, the character of the welfare queen was pushed by politicians and popular media into the American collective memory of welfare as a central image of its supposed failure. Over time, depictions of this character shifted away from purported fraud and focused more generally on “welfare dependency.” While this mythical character originated decades ago, it persists in news and popular culture today. Portrayals of Black mothers on welfare are not only common in news, but they retain many of the traits of the welfare queen character.

Because members of the public may be less familiar with diaper need and its causes and consequences, people fall back on their deep assumptions about mothers in poverty. The idea of the welfare queen in particular was cued by thinking about diaper need, and this trope backgrounded any systemic thinking, leading people to disparage and castigate mothers experiencing diaper need, seeing the need as an individual moral failing and not as a systemic problem.

In addition, when thinking individualistically about the causes of poverty, members of the public tend to assume that people who continue to experience poverty see themselves as victims, which further entrenches them in poverty. In this view, a lack of personal responsibility and a “victimhood mentality” prevents people from taking action to get out of poverty, which is often assumed to be passed down over the generations. This thinking is racialized and leads to pathologizing the behavior of people of color, who are assumed to “normalize” poverty in their families and communities. When thinking about diaper need, members of the public applied the assumption about the victimhood mentality.

## A COMMON METAPHOR FOR POVERTY

Members of the public often use metaphorical language to describe poverty, such as “falling into” poverty, “getting stuck in” poverty, and needing to “climb up” or “get out of” poverty. This language reveals a common metaphor in people’s thinking, that of *poverty=hole*. Metaphors help people understand less available concepts by mapping them to more familiar ideas. It appears that people are relying on their embodied experience of movement in space in order to think about the more abstract idea of poverty.

Participants generally used this metaphor in the context of individualistic thinking and blame, in keeping with people’s general tendency to blame individuals for their own poverty. However, we sometimes see this hole metaphor used in more productive, contextual ways, and it’s possible that it can be used to open space for thinking about systems—if used correctly. The question of whether or not the metaphor of *poverty=hole* predisposes thinking in a more individualistic direction, or if it can be used by communicators in more productive ways, needs to be tested in subsequent research. One variation of the metaphor that people often use that explicitly does not blame the individual was that of *poverty=trap*. When thinking and speaking with this metaphor, participants in the research talked about poverty as something that was intentionally created by a more powerful third party, which a person could “fall into” through no apparent fault of their own.

## How this thinking makes it harder to communicate

- The assumption that individual choices and willpower are the main causes of wealth and poverty makes it hard for people to see the larger systems and structures that affect people’s lives.
- At times, these individualistic ideas can be used to justify the status quo, making it difficult to challenge current systems and advocate for change.
- Individualistic racist thinking and tropes related to children and families, such as the welfare queen trope, make it difficult for people to see the systemic causes of diaper need and poverty, including systemic racism and sexism.
- When the poverty that people of color experience is pathologized, it is difficult for people to see the systemic changes that are needed to address racialized poverty.

## CHALLENGE #2

# The public often assumes that economic inequality is natural, and poverty is inevitable.

There is a common mindset among the American public that economic inequality is just the natural way of things. This stems from a common assumption that our economic system works “naturally,” without outside interference. People reason that the “invisible hand” of the neoliberal capitalist market naturally results in some people having more money than others. This thinking is related to thinking about social hierarchies, or the view that it is natural that some people will always be ranked above others in power or wealth.

Relatedly, when thinking about the role of larger economic systems and structures in bringing about poverty, people talked about how corporations operate to maximize profits at all costs, as if it were the unquestionable and inevitable order of things. As part of naturalizing the capitalist economy, people sometimes talk about corporations as if they are natural entities who can't be blamed for pursuing profit at the expense of people, because this is their natural function. And people reason that the way corporations function, including profiteering and exacerbating income inequality, is a natural part of the way the economy and society works. This thinking is applied to diaper need in at least two ways. First, people assume that those who can't afford diapers are not being paid enough by a corporate employer. Second, people can sometimes see that prices for essentials have been raised to increase corporate profits. However, these are often assumed to be unchangeable processes.

When people naturalize economic inequality and social hierarchies, they reason that poverty is an inevitable part of our society. The assumed inevitability of poverty is often thought about in a zero-sum way, wherein people reason that there are limited resources and wealth, so in order for one group to gain economically, another has to lose out. Additionally, the assumption that social and economic hierarchies are natural is often mapped onto historical societies, leading people to assume that poverty has always existed throughout history in the same way it does today, and that it continues to exist today because it has “always” been that way.



## MISFORTUNE AND “BAD LUCK”

Members of the public can sometimes recognize the ways in which poverty may be the result of unfortunate events, such as natural disasters, family situations (e.g., divorce or abusive relationships), and illness. While people reason that this kind of “bad luck” is distinct from the kind of “bad choices,” meaning an individual was to blame, there isn’t much deeper thinking about why or how bad luck leads to poverty in this thinking. People tend to think about bad luck in fatalistic ways, as if poverty resulting from a storm destroying a home is as inevitable as severe weather itself.

Thinking that bad luck causes poverty offers a partial explanation of poverty that does not focus on individual blame. However, as it stands, this way of thinking is less an alternative and more a complement to individualism, ultimately reinforcing the assumption that poverty is largely due to individual choices. Even when there are circumstances outside of an individual’s control, the thinking goes, it is still ultimately up to individual to figure it out for themselves.

### How this thinking makes it harder to communicate

- When people naturalize economic inequality and social hierarchy, the idea of significantly reducing or eliminating poverty can seem unrealistic or unimaginable.
- Relatedly, when people naturalize how corporations operate, it makes it hard for them to see how corporate profiteering fits within an economic system that actively produces wealth-inequality and poverty. This can make it hard for people to see how the economy has been designed in inequitable ways, and how it can be redesigned to be more equitable.
- The assumption that poverty and inequality have always been part of human societies makes it hard for people to imagine an alternative future without inequality.

### CHALLENGE #3

## People assume that diapers are not a basic need, because they are widely available or alternatives exist, which leads to judgments of deservingness.

Thinking about diaper need and poverty is shaped by a set of intertwined assumptions about “needs” vs. “wants,” the assumed availability of resources, and judgments of deservingness. Frequently, these understandings come together to undercut the idea that diaper need is a collective and urgent problem.

People often assume that those living in poverty should only spend their money on basic needs, which are narrowly conceptualized as food, water, clothing, and basic shelter, and that anything else is an unnecessary luxury. In this view, certain items and resources count as basic

needs that all human beings must have access to in order to live life with a minimum level of physical safety. In this thinking, needs are distinct from wants: items and resources that human beings do not necessarily need to survive, but often desire. People often assume that anything other than extremely limited basic needs are unnecessary wants.

People may reject the idea that disposable diapers are a basic need that should be made more available, if they believe they are already available or that alternatives exist. And indeed, people often assume that diapers are already easily available, through charities, churches, and government programs. In this view, parents should already be able to easily get diapers. If they can't, there must be something wrong with the parents.

People also sometimes think about disposable diapers as a want rather than a need for another reason: They assume alternatives exist. When thinking this way, people reason that disposable diapers are an optional commodity, whereas reusable cloth diapers are reasoned to be cheaper and are assumed to be already available to those who need them. Often, people acknowledge that reusable diapers take more time and effort, but this gets entangled with ideas of deservingness. Parents who are unwilling to do the extra work are not deserving of disposable diapers, and parents who will do the extra work don't need disposable diapers.

While people can sometimes see how circumstances beyond an individual's control might affect whether they experience diaper need and poverty, people often rely on underlying assumptions about individual responsibility and blame. Depending on how responsible they are assumed to be, individuals experiencing poverty and diaper need are considered more or less deserving of support. In this view, what people experiencing poverty and diaper need "deserve" and whether or not it is considered a need or a want, is influenced by assumptions about how much they are thought to be to blame for their experience.

When thinking about diaper need, the public can rely on deep assumptions about who is deserving and what counts as needs. Some parents are assumed to be more deserving than others, and as we've seen, this is shaped by racist tropes. Parents who cannot get diapers if they are widely available are likely to be the kind of parents who don't deserve support. As one participant said, "It doesn't take a genius."

## **How this thinking makes it harder to communicate**

- The assumption that diapers are already available, including via charities, may make it harder for charities to communicate about diaper need, because the very existence of the messenger is taken as a sign that the problem is being solved already. This thinking makes it hard for people to recognize the urgency and prevalence of diaper need.
- The assumption that reusable diapers are a realistic alternative makes people less likely to recognize how diapers are a need, not a want, and it therefore makes people more likely to minimize the urgency and prevalence of diaper need.

## CHALLENGE #4

# The public often holds individual parents primarily responsible for child care, including providing diapers, rather than seeing this as a collective responsibility.

Deep assumptions about how families should work shape the way people think about diaper need. When thinking about children, people often default to the idea that parents are primarily responsible for how children do in life. This includes an assumption that parents are primarily responsible for child care. People often connect this thinking to morality—the thinking goes that “good” parents ensure that their children are well-cared for and have “good” outcomes in life.

Perhaps because of the way diapers are connected to infants and therefore birth and nursing, the thinking about parental responsibility in the context of diaper need often centers on mothers in particular. In this thinking, people assume that mothers have a natural biological connection to their child that makes them more likely to care for their child than other caregivers (notably, fathers). This is a form of gender essentialism, often based on fuzzy ideas of biology, wherein men and women are assumed to be essentially different, and this thinking is used to explain gendered differences in child care and family responsibilities. People apply these assumptions about mothers as the primary caregivers to thinking about diaper need.

When people assume that mothers are biologically more likely to care for children, this leads them to assume that mothers will (and should) be primarily responsible for the care and life outcomes of their children. In turn, this leads people to think about diapers as the purview of mothers; they are seen as the ones who have to figure out how to get diapers, whether through purchasing them or receiving donated diapers through charity. Because some people think that donated diapers are already available through churches and charities (and sometimes the government) and that it must be an issue with the caretaker (i.e., mother) if they are not accessing these already available diapers.

This thinking about diaper need as the purview of mothers is related to ideas about individualism and deservingness. When people assume that individual mother’s choices are the main factors that lead to poverty, they reason that mothers who can’t afford diapers have made “bad” choices. In turn, this leads people to reason that parents (particularly mothers) only deserve the bare minimum in terms of support—in essence, that mothers who experience poverty should take what they can get from charities and be grateful for it.

If diapers are assumed to be available (see above), then mothers are to blame if the infant doesn’t have them. Compounding this, when mothers are seen as being naturally compelled to care for infants, this narrows the focus of responsibility for diapers, obscuring the role of larger systems. To make matters worse, when poverty is assumed to be an individual failing, then only mothers who have made bad choices experience diaper need.

## How this thinking makes it harder to communicate

- The assumption that individual parents (mainly mothers) are primarily responsible for child care and providing diapers, leads people to blame parents and mothers who cannot afford them or access them for free.
- The focus on individual parental responsibility makes it harder for people to think about the collective responsibility that we, as a society, have to promote children's health and well-being, including by ensuring all children have the diapers they need.

### CHALLENGE #5

## People assume that government assistance goes to people who don't deserve it, and getting government assistance makes people less deserving.

At times, members of the public are suspicious of policies and programs meant to alleviate and address poverty. Ideas about deservingness (as discussed above) lead people to reason that there will always be “undeserving” people who “cheat” the welfare system. People often assume that people experiencing poverty are not working hard enough and that government assistance is an unearned reward.

Relatedly, people assume that government support makes people complacent because they don't have to work. This thinking leads people to reason that welfare incentivizes people to be dependent on the government. These two assumptions—the belief that people only need government assistance because they are not working hard enough, and therefore they don't deserve it, and the belief that government support makes people work less hard—reinforce each other.

As described in Challenge #1, particular people, namely Black women, are sometimes stereotyped as particularly dependent, irresponsible, and immoral and therefore, are less deserving of support. At the same time, there is a common false assumption that Black women are the greatest beneficiaries of government assistance. When thinking in this way, people doubt the effectiveness of government assistance for people experiencing poverty, because they reason it is being given to those who don't deserve it and won't use it to pull themselves out of poverty like they should.

Relying on this assumption, people think that any government support to address diaper need would go to people who don't deserve it and would only make the problem worse. Alternatively, people may assume that government support to address diaper need is already widely available, and they may assume that this support is itself part of the problem.

## How this thinking makes it harder to communicate

- The assumption that government assistance goes to undeserving people, and that this creates dependency, makes it difficult for people to see the need for improving and expanding government services to alleviate and address diaper need and poverty.
- Racist stereotyping about who deserves support can lead people to reason that either government assistance shouldn't exist at all or that it must be tied to punitive conditions, such as work requirements.

### CHALLENGE #6

## People are skeptical of institutions that could address diaper need, assuming that governments misuse their power and charities take advantage of people's generosity.

Skepticism about government can lead people to see government assistance to address poverty or diaper need as not only unhelpful but as a form of control. There is a common assumption among the American public that power is being misused by a select few, at the expense of the many. This “system-is-rigged” thinking can make people deeply distrustful and even openly hostile to government. In this way of thinking, people can sometimes assume that the government is intentionally making people dependent (see Challenge #5) in order to control people. Sometimes this line of thinking is applied directly to diaper need, with some people hostile to the idea of government addressing diaper need due to their suspicion that government assistance is a form of control.

People sometimes apply system-is-rigged thinking to nonprofit organizations working to address diaper need. People sometimes assume that nonprofits are run by people who are using their power to personally enrich themselves, at the expense of both the people who donate and the people who are supposed to be served. In this way of thinking, people assume that these organizations are secretly run like for-profit corporations, with the leaders of nonprofits getting rich instead of helping people. While members of the public can sometimes see the vital role that nonprofits play in addressing diaper need (as shown in the “Opportunities” section), these suspicions about charities are part of public thinking about diaper need. Any support offered by nonprofits will be viewed with skepticism by people relying on this assumption.

## How this thinking makes it harder to communicate

- The assumption that the government is a rigged system being rigged to control people makes people suspicious of, or even hostile to, the idea of government support for people in need.
- Suspicions about charities can undermine people's support for nonprofits working to address diaper need and lead people to be skeptical of nonprofits as messengers.

# Opportunities

## OPPORTUNITY #1

### Sometimes people can see how a lack of access to opportunities can cause poverty and diaper need.

While people often rely on individualistic mindsets when thinking about poverty and diaper need, more systemic and structural thinking is also available to the public. Members of the public can sometimes see that limited opportunities, like limited access to quality education, can lead to poverty and that, in turn, poverty can limit these kinds of opportunities. With less chances and choices, the thinking goes, people are more likely to fall into poverty and less likely to get out. While this thinking is somewhat vague at times, people can sometimes recognize that people experiencing poverty do not have access to the opportunities that money provides.

At times, people can see the relationship between poverty and place. In this view, poverty is seen as something that happens in a particular place, where there is less opportunity. This may be because of job opportunities, access to quality education, or cost of living. Members of the public reason that living in places with less access to opportunities makes it more likely that people might experience poverty and have more difficulty finding the opportunities needed to get out of poverty.

This kind of productive thinking helps people recognize the role of larger structures, rather than leading people to exclusively blame individuals. However, it is important to note that opportunity thinking and individualism can often go hand in hand—with people acknowledging that while opportunities play some role, the ultimate responsibility for whether someone experiences poverty is still on the individual.

### How this thinking makes it easier to communicate

- When people can see that access to opportunities shapes whether people experience poverty, this may make it easier for them to see the role of larger systems in alleviating and addressing poverty (rather than placing the onus on individuals).
- However, people's understanding of the types of opportunities that are needed—and the role that larger systems and structures play in giving people access to these opportunities—needs to be further developed and expanded upon to help avoid individualistic thinking.

## OPPORTUNITY #2

# The recognition that diapers are a basic need can help people see the urgency of diaper need.

People can sometimes see that diapers are essential and necessary for the well-being of children and families. This thinking is directly connected to the assumption that experiencing poverty means lacking basic needs. While this thinking about basic needs can be limiting and lead to judgments about needs vs. wants (see Challenge #3), it can also be employed to think more productively about the necessary resources that caregivers and children cannot do without. When thinking about poverty in this way, people can sometimes see that diapers are a key need, essential to physical health, because they can see how not having them has negative physical health effects on young children, such as rashes and other illnesses. In this way, when people recognize that diapers are an essential need, they are sometimes able to recognize that diaper need can be an urgent issue, and that having the diapers a baby needs can improve the physical health of young children.

## How this thinking makes it easier to communicate

- When people think about diapers as basic needs, they can sometimes see diapers as vital to children's physical health.
- In turn, thinking about diapers as essential to health can help build public support for programs that provide diapers.
- However, this thinking about diapers as basic needs tends to be narrow and is often paired with thinking about deservingness. To build public support for broader system change to alleviate and address diaper need, the thinking about diapers as basic needs must be expanded and built upon.

## OPPORTUNITY #3

# People can sometimes see that diaper need and poverty have negative mental health effects.

Members of the public can sometimes see the ways that poverty can have harmful effects on people's mental health, particularly that of parents and caregivers. This is largely understood in terms of the stress of lacking basic needs. In this view, insecurity and precarity can cause distress and lead people to be in a constant state of agitation.

This is particularly acute in the case of diaper need. When members of the public see diapers as essential resources, they often reason that experiencing diaper need would cause distress. This is particularly true when thinking about the effects on mothers, who are assumed to be the primary caregivers for children.

While the emphasis on individual responsibility and a mother's role can sometimes lead to individualistic and sexist thinking (see Challenges #1 and #4), at other times, the recognition of a mother's primary role in caring for young children enables people to see some of the negative effects of diaper need on mothers. When people assume that mothers are the primary caregivers, they often reason that mothers bear the brunt of the distress caused by lacking diapers. In turn, this can lead people to reason that diaper need can be detrimental to mothers' mental health—resonating with the field's understanding. When thinking in this way, people consistently reason that diaper need causes mothers to feel shame, but they can also sometimes see the way that diaper need can cause mothers to feel anxiety and depression.

However, there is also public thinking that assumes that mental health struggles cause poverty, which can lead people to default to individualistic ideas blaming individual “traits” for causing poverty. A more systemic understanding of the negative mental health effects of diaper need on whole communities and families is thin in current public thinking about these issues.

### **How this thinking makes it easier to communicate**

- When people can see that maternal mental health is affected by diaper need, it can make it easier for them to recognize that diaper need is a serious issue that needs to be addressed.
- The understanding of the negative effects of diaper need on the mental health of mothers and other caregivers could be expanded and developed to build support for systemic changes to address diaper need and thereby improve mental health.
- A more systemic understanding of the relationship between mental health and diaper need must be developed to avoid individualistic ideas about mental health issues “causing” poverty.

### **OPPORTUNITY #4**

## **People sometimes think more systemically when thinking about the role of corporations in poverty and diaper need.**

While thinking that naturalizes the economy and corporations exists among the public, so too does the view that wealthy individuals and large corporations are taking from, and taking advantage of, less wealthy people. When people employ this thinking, they reason that this is motivated by greed and profit, which people see as unethical. This is related to system-is-rigged thinking, wherein a few powerful people are assumed to be manipulating systems to their own advantage, at the expense of the rest of us. While system-is-rigged thinking can lead people to unproductive ideas, such as suspicions about nonprofit organizations (see Challenge #6), people sometimes employ this same thinking about a select few manipulating systems to reason that the powerful are the wealthy and the corporations, and the system that is rigged is the economy itself.



The fact that people can sometimes see the corporate pursuit of profits as a cause of poverty has effects on how people think about diaper need. When thinking in this way, people can recognize that poverty is the result of corporations paying wages that are not enough to afford what people need. In this view, people can see how low wages, while increasing the corporation's bottom line, make it impossible for some caregivers to afford diapers.

Corporate profiteering is also thought to play a direct role in making essential needs unaffordable, including diapers. People sometimes recognize that corporations are price-gouging, charging far more than the cost of a good, in order to maximize their profit. This is particularly relevant when people think about diaper need because there is an assumption that price-gouging is more likely to occur with basic needs. Corporations can charge whatever they want, the thinking goes, because people are captive, forced to pay any price because the product is essential. In this way, thinking about diapers as a basic need and thinking about the way larger economic systems are rigged by the powerful can come together to provide a partial systemic explanation for diaper need.

Previous research by the FrameWorks Institute found that the public does have the capacity to think about larger systems as having been designed—as the results of human decisions and therefore changeable. However, in the context of poverty and diaper need, this thinking is currently backgrounded and not part of the public understanding of these issues. It seems that thinking about poverty is far more naturalistic and less systemic (and brings in more racist and sexist stereotypes) than thinking about the economy as a whole. This may mean that poverty is the wrong level at which to discuss certain issues. Instead the lens should be widened to include the larger economic system, allowing people to access more of their thinking about how the economic system is designed.

## **How this thinking makes it easier to communicate**

- When people recognize how corporate accumulation of wealth produces poverty and diaper need, this can make it easier for them to understand the importance of systemic change to fully address diaper need and poverty.
- Recognizing that systems, particularly the larger economic system, are designed and can be redesigned is an important aspect of public thinking that can be expanded and built upon to help people understand how broader systemic change is needed to address poverty and diaper need.

## OPPORTUNITY #5

# People can sometimes see a role for government and nonprofits in alleviating poverty and diaper need.

Despite the public's widespread skepticism about government assistance, there is still some productive thinking about the role of government. Members of the public can sometimes see a meaningful role for the government in providing programs to alleviate poverty. There are two related ways that people think about a positive role for government: one which sees a limited and forceful role, and the other that sees a more expansive and supportive role.

In one line of thinking, people see the government's role as a protector, meant to keep people safe from the worst and most egregious forms of harm in a limited way. In this view, the government's role is seen as being limited to providing for people's immediate safety and basic material needs. In another line of thinking, there is a somewhat more expansive role for government as a caretaker. In this view, government's role is to ensure people's health, education, and well-being.

These two ways of thinking about government map onto diaper need. Whether people think about the government as a protector or as a caretaker, they tend to reason that the government is responsible for providing diapers, which are seen as a basic need in the government as protector view, and as part of ensuring people's well-being in the caretaker view. These two ways of thinking about the role of government are not clearly distinguished among the public; instead, people can hold a spectrum of views related to government responsibility for addressing poverty and diaper need. It's important to note, however, that an undercurrent of deservingness remains, with a common assumption that government is responsible for providing diapers to those who "really" need them.

Additionally, sometimes people think that nonprofit organizations can have an important, if limited, role in addressing poverty. When thinking about solutions to poverty, people often assume that nonprofits can fill the gaps by providing help for people whose needs are not being met through market processes of commodity production and consumption, or through government programs. However, this thinking can be limited by the idea that charitable aid is voluntary, not a responsibility, obligation, or something owed to those experiencing poverty. This way of thinking also maps onto diaper need, with people assuming that it is generous for nonprofits to provide diapers to those who need them, but that it is not a responsibility or obligation. Nonprofits are often seen as helpful in addressing diaper need, but sometimes people assume that nonprofits have funding limits and are not able to reach everyone, and therefore, poverty and diaper need will just continue to exist. Despite these limitations, this kind of thinking lets people see a vital role for nonprofits in addressing diaper need, and it may help people be open to seeing the need for nonprofit and government collaboration in addressing diaper need.

## How this thinking makes it easier to communicate

- When people can see that the government is responsible for alleviating and addressing poverty—whether in a more limited role as protector or a more expansive role as caretaker—this can make it easier to build a sense of collective responsibility that society as a whole has for providing diapers to children and families and ensuring their well-being.
- Thinking about nonprofits as a stopgap in addressing poverty can be expanded to build understanding of the ways that nonprofits can and do provide what is otherwise unaffordable to people in need.
- The thinking about government and nonprofits can be further expanded on and developed so that people can see how each plays a role in alleviating and addressing poverty and diaper need.

# Initial Recommendations

## RECOMMENDATION #1

### Explain how systemic racism and sexism contribute to diaper need and poverty.

- **Explain** the history of systemic racism and sexism in our laws, policies, and institutions and how this has contributed to inequitable outcomes today. Don't assume that audiences already understand how systemic inequities work. Instead, offer concrete explanations and specific examples. This will help fill in the current gaps in public thinking about the role that systems and structures play in creating poverty, and it can help overcome racist and sexist thinking about the causes of poverty.
- **Connect** diaper need to these systemic explanations. This will help shift people's thinking away from blaming individuals to understanding the broader structural factors that cause poverty.

## RECOMMENDATION #2

### Talk about how our economic system has been designed, explain how it produces inequities, and talk about how it can be redesigned.

- **Show** the ways in which our economy has been designed inequitably, through policies, laws, and decision-making, and how this design has contributed to poverty and diaper need. Concrete and systemic explanations can help overcome thinking that the economy is "naturally" unequal.
- **Talk** about how the economy can be redesigned to be fairer and more just, through things like government regulation, labor power, and funding expanded social services, and describe how redesigning the economy will help address poverty. This can help overcome thinking that poverty is inevitable and there's nothing society can do about it.

### RECOMMENDATION #3

## When talking about people who are experiencing diaper need, connect individual stories to systems stories.

- **Connect** stories about individuals experiencing diaper need and poverty with detailed explanations of how systems work to both perpetuate and alleviate poverty. Talking about the larger systems at play in individuals' lives can be a powerful way to help people see the broader structural factors that cause poverty and help overcome individualistic thinking.
- **Be sure** to talk about systemic racism and sexism when talking about systems that contribute to poverty. This can help shift people's thinking away from individualistic racist and sexist tropes and toward more systemic understandings of poverty and diaper need.

### RECOMMENDATION #4

## Build on people's understanding of the role of corporations within a capitalist economy in order to strengthen systemic understanding of diaper need and systemic poverty.

- **Go beyond** only talking about the cost of living, and explain how our current economic and political system is designed to maximize the wealth of a few at the expense of collective well-being.
- **Avoid** simply blaming capitalism without explaining exploitation and greed. Instead, explain how putting profits over people works by showing how it leads to specific harms, such as diaper need and systemic poverty, for particular groups.
- **Explain** how our public policies could shift society toward prioritizing the well-being of children and families. When explaining flaws in large systems, it is important to avoid fatalism. Make sure to emphasize the ways the system can change.

## RECOMMENDATION #5

# Talk about the role of government in addressing diaper need and poverty.

- **Provide** examples of governmental policies and programs that exist or should exist to provide diapers to children and families and address poverty more broadly. This can help build on the public's existing understanding of the government as caretaker or protector by showing, not telling, and can help overcome fatalistic thinking that there's nothing to be done.
- **Focus** on what government-funded programs and policies can do for people experiencing poverty, rather than what people experiencing poverty need to do to participate in these programs. This can help avoid unproductive thinking about "deservingness" in relation to government assistance.
- **Avoid** abstract talk about government. Get concrete and connect policy with well-being. Emphasize how policy and governmental actions affect people's everyday lives and well-being, including access to diapers. This can create space for people to see a necessary role for government. Important: This does not mean shying away from critiques of the ways that government is not meeting its obligations.

## RECOMMENDATION #6

# When talking about the role of nonprofits in addressing diaper need, explain how these organizations work and what they do.

- **Give** a detailed explanation of the work that nonprofits do, including their goals, who they serve, and how they meet their objectives, when the topic of nonprofit work comes up in communications. This can help to overcome people's suspicions about nonprofits' work.
- **Explain** how nonprofits, such as diaper banks, work in conjunction with government assistance and how both are necessary to fully address diaper need and poverty. This can help fill in the gaps in public understanding about the role of nonprofit organizations and their relationship with governmental programs.

## RECOMMENDATION #7

# When talking about diapers and health, connect discussions about the physical health effects of diaper need to broader discussions about overall well-being.

- **Connect** the physical, mental, and emotional health effects of diaper need for children and families in communications about diapers and health. This can also include discussions of the effects on children's learning and development, such as when they don't have access to diapers and therefore can't attend pre-K schooling. Talking about the interconnected effects of diaper need can help expand people's current thinking about health and diapers to a more encompassing understanding of how diaper need affects the health and well-being of children and families.
- **Talk** about the positive physical, mental, and emotional health effects of reducing diaper need for children and families, not just the negative effects of diaper need, in communications about diapers and health. This can help expand people's thinking about health and well-being and help overcome fatalism about systemic solutions to address diaper need and poverty.
- **Be clear** about the causal relationship between negative health effects and diaper need: the material deprivation and precarity of poverty has negative effects on the mental, physical, and emotional health of children and families. This can help to avoid assumptions that mental health issues cause poverty.

# Conclusion

While diaper need is an urgent issue stemming from systemic poverty, current public mindsets that blame poverty on individuals can make it difficult for people to recognize the importance of this issue. This individual blame often takes the form of racist and misogynistic tropes. Additionally, people can be deeply skeptical of institutions offering support for people in poverty, assuming that government assistance creates dependency and that nonprofits are really seeking profit. There is more productive thinking available, albeit less common. People can sometimes see that diapers are an essential need and that poverty can happen because of larger structures that limit opportunity and systems that take advantage of people. Moreover, people can sometimes see that government is responsible for providing diapers (through the protector view of government) and at times, for addressing poverty more broadly (through the caretaker view of government). Sometimes, people can see how nonprofits fill gaps left open by incomplete government programs and economic shortfalls.

This strategic brief offers some initial recommendations to address the challenges and leverage the opportunities in public thinking about diaper need and poverty. In the next phase of this research, FrameWorks will design and test framing strategies to better communicate about diaper need and poverty. These frames will be designed to foreground the productive ways of thinking about poverty and diaper need, while backgrounding the unproductive thinking about these issues, with the end goal of changing the narrative about poverty and diaper need and building public support for systemic solutions.



# Endnotes

1. For a more detailed account of the methods and sample composition for this research, see the Methods Supplement that is available as a complement to this brief.
2. Institute for Women's Policy Research. (2015, June 1). *Spotlight on Women of Color*. Status of Women in the States. <https://statusofwomendata.org/women-of-color/>
3. Sanderson, R., Volmert, A., & Pineau, M. G. (2024). Self-Made Individuals and Just labor Systems: Public Thinking about work in the United States. *FrameWorks Institute*.
4. For these reasons, and others, many scholars have argued that individualism is a key part of whiteness as a social construct, in part because individualism denies collectivity and historical causes. For more on this see: Hartmann, D., Gerteis, J., & Croll, P. R. (2009). An empirical assessment of whiteness theory: Hidden from how many? *Social Problems*, 56(3), 403–424.
5. Miller, T., Volmert, A., Rochman, A., & Aassar, M. (2021). Talking about poverty: Narratives, counter-narratives, and telling effective stories. *FrameWorks Institute*.
6. Miller, T., Volmert, A., Rochman, A., & Aassar, M. (2021). Talking about poverty: Narratives, counter-narratives, and telling effective stories. *FrameWorks Institute*.
7. Jost, J. T., & Banaji, M. R. (1994). The role of stereotyping in system-justification and the production of false consciousness. *British journal of social psychology*, 33(1), 1–27.
8. Volmert, A., Gerstein Pineau, M., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2016). Talking about poverty: How experts and the public understand poverty in the United Kingdom. *FrameWorks Institutes*.
9. Miller, T., Volmert, A., Rochman, A., & Aassar, M. (2021). Talking about poverty: Narratives, counter-narratives, and telling effective stories. *FrameWorks Institute*.
10. Volmert, A., Gerstein Pineau, M., & Kendall-Taylor, N. (2016). Talking about poverty: How experts and the public understand poverty in the United Kingdom. *FrameWorks Institutes*.
11. Lindland, E., Volmert, A., & Rochman, A. (2021). Communicating about Intergenerational Urban Poverty and Race in America: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations. *FrameWorks Institutes*.
12. King, M. D. (2022, August 30). New Interactive data tool shows characteristics of those who receive assistance from government programs. [Census.gov](https://www.census.gov).
13. Sanderson, R., Volmert, A., & Pineau, M. G., (2024) Self-Made Individuals and Just labor Systems: Public Thinking about work in the United States. *FrameWorks Institute*.
14. Volmert, A., Pineau, M. G., & Cohen, E. (2023). By and For the People? Cultural Mindsets of Democracy and the US Political System. *FrameWorks Institute*.
15. Bevens, J. (2022). Corporate profits have contributed disproportionately to inflation. How should policy makers respond? *Economic Policy Institute*.
16. Sanderson, R., Volmert, A., & Pineau, M. G., (2024) Self-Made Individuals and Just labor Systems: Public Thinking about work in the United States. *FrameWorks Institute*.
17. Volmert, A., Moyer, J. (2024) What Does Caring Mean?: A New Framing Strategy to Shift Thinking about Kids and Families. *FrameWorks Institute*.

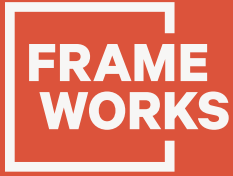
# About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Learn more at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org)

# About the National Diaper Bank Network

The National Diaper Bank Network (NDBN) leads a nationwide movement working to end poverty in the U.S. so children, families, and individuals can access the material basic needs that all people require to thrive... including clean, dry diapers, period supplies, and other basic necessities. Launched in 2011, its active membership includes more than 300 basic needs banks serving local communities in all 50 US states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. More information on NDBN and diaper need is available at [nationaldiaperbanknetwork.org](http://nationaldiaperbanknetwork.org), and on [X \(@DiaperNetwork\)](#), [Instagram \(@DiaperNetwork\)](#) and [Facebook \(facebook.com/NationalDiaperBankNetwork\)](https://facebook.com/NationalDiaperBankNetwork).



National  
Diaper Bank  
Network

# Individual Blame or Collective Responsibility?

Existing Mindsets about Diaper  
Need and Systemic Poverty

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the FrameWorks Institute.

FrameWorks Institute. (2024). *Individual Blame or Collective Responsibility? Existing Mindsets about Diaper Need and Systemic Poverty*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

Designed by Constructive · © FrameWorks Institute 2024