I started to ask mothers, “Can you tell me how many diapers you have on hand right now?” Almost every one told me with exact specificity how many they had — on or over 10 or 20. And they knew exactly how long that number of diapers would last, based on how often their children defecated and urinated, if their kid was sick, if they had a diaper rash at the time. So just intimate emotional and cognitive labor that goes into keeping such careful track of diaper supplies.

They were worrying and figuring out, “OK, I don’t have as many as I thought I did. What do I do now? Do I go find some more?” So I’ve seen some things in my house. While in my own social network, there might be someone with very little disposable.” I talked to mothers who would go without their own food. They also use things that are disposable like paper towels with duct tape.

They are making diapers out of their own period supplies or adult incontinence supplies when they can get a sample. One of the questions I often ask is, “Why don’t they just use cloth?” A lot of the mothers that I spoke with had tried cloth diapers, and they found that they were very cash and labor-intensive. If you can buy a full startup kit of cloth diapers, you’re looking at anywhere from $100 to $1,000. And these moms never had that much money. Most of them didn’t have in-home washer and dryers. Some of them didn’t even have homes or consistent access to water, and it’s illegal in a lot of laundromats and public laundry facilities to wash your old diapers. So the same conditions that would prevent moms from being able to readily afford disposable diapers are the same conditions that keep them from being able to use cloth.

Q: What coping strategies stood out to you?

A lot of the moms had been through the welfare system, and so they’re living in the constant fear of losing their children. This is especially true among mothers of color, who are much more likely to be caught up in the child welfare system. People can’t necessarily see when your baby’s hungry. But people can see a saggy diaper. That’s going to be one of the things that-tag them as a bad mom.

Diapers and managing diapers was so fundamental to their identity as good mothers. It was often described as a way of saving diaper money. They use things that are disposable like paper towels with duct tape. They’re making diapers out of their own period supplies or adult incontinence supplies when they can get a sample. One of the questions I often ask is, “Why don’t they just use cloth?” A lot of the mothers that I spoke with had tried cloth diapers, and they found that they were very cash and labor-intensive. If you can buy a full startup kit of cloth diapers, you’re looking at anywhere from $100 to $1,000. And these moms never had that much money. Most of them didn’t have in-home washer and dryers. Some of them didn’t even have homes or consistent access to water, and it’s illegal in a lot of laundromats and public laundry facilities to wash your old diapers. So the same conditions that would prevent moms from being able to readily afford disposable diapers are the same conditions that keep them from being able to use cloth.

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