There Are No Children Here

by Alex Kolowitz

written by Ashlin Bray
Note to Teacher

This is the story of two boys who grew up in the public housing projects in Chicago in the 1980s.

The book is written by Alex Kotlowitz, who first encountered life in Chicago’s projects as an investigative reporter for The Wall Street Journal. The book is based on his interviews and visits with members of the Rivers family and others living in the projects, as well as his interviews and research involving Chicago politics, the police department, and the Chicago Housing Authority. He also investigated the juvenile justice system in Chicago, the adult corrections system in Illinois, and the public welfare system, which depends on federal financing and state administration.

The story is woven around the culture of gang control of public housing, the local drug business, the prevalence of guns, and the pervasiveness of violence and death. The death of children in gunfights is described, as are funerals for some children. Some torture is also described. Various family configurations also are part of the story.

The dehumanizing side of poverty, the demeaning lack of repair in public housing, and the effects of dependency on long-term public assistance are dealt with in this nonfiction account.

Because of the need for accuracy of quotes, strong language is included.

All references come from the Anchor Books edition of There Are No Children Here, Random House, Inc., copyright 1991, by Alex Kotlowitz.
**Objectives**

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to

1. describe the social realities of living in public housing in a dangerous neighborhood.

2. trace the effects of living in the projects of the developing characters of Lafeyette and Pharoah.

3. discuss racial consciousness and how Lafeyette and Pharoah each came to an understanding of what being black means in their lives.

4. discuss institutionalized segregation, and cite examples to show how this practice discriminated against black children in both education and economic opportunity.

5. describe the role of gangs on people living in public housing.

6. assess LaJoe Rivers as a mother.

7. suggest specific measures to reduce racial tensions in public housing.

8. evaluate the positive and negative aspects of public assistance (welfare), including cash subsidies and public housing.

9. discuss welfare fraud in the context of the extended Rivers family and in relation to the lack of job opportunities.

10. discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the public defender system.

11. assess whether police brutality exists in the Henry Horner residences, and discuss incidents to support this assessment.

12. trace significant incidents in the maturation of Lafeyette Rivers.

13. describe the work and techniques of an investigative reporter.

14. discuss the world of Dawn and Demetrius, including her educational dreams and his role in her success, the size of their family, the impact of children on her education and his job prospects, and the ethics of their illegal use of a vacant apartment in Horner.

15. evaluate whether your own feelings about social issues have changed as a result of reading this book; these issues should include segregation, public housing, the welfare system, the juvenile justice system, and education in a major city.
Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Contrast the trials of Lawrence Jackson and Bobbie Driskel, accused of murdering the family of Urica Winder, and that of Jimmie Lee, reputed boss of the Conservative Vice Lords. Detail the charges, the witnesses, what the verdicts were intended to convey, and how the community reacted to the verdicts.

2. If you were the mayor of Chicago, how would you reduce racial tensions at the Henry Horner residences?

3. Analyze LaJoe Rivers as a person, including your evaluation of her as a mother and as a household manager.

4. Discuss the role and influence—both positive and negative—of Paul Rivers in the lives of Lafeyette and Pharoah.

5. Select one person who appears in this book and discuss how he or she was a positive influence on Lafeyette Rivers.

6. Discuss the implications of the statement, “Churches had lost their authority in areas like Horner.”

7. Evaluate the actions of Francis Higgins and Richard Marianos, the police officer and federal ATF agent involved in the death of Craig Davis.

8. Select three specific incidents, and discuss their importance in the development of Lafeyette’s character.

9. Write a book review of There Are No Children Here, including whether it is convincing, its effect on the reader, and its strongest points.

10. Discuss the presence and role of the police at Horner, explaining how police brutality and racial prejudice are part of the police relationship with residents.

11. Describe the juvenile court system and how Lafeyette’s hearing and sentencing affect him.

12. Discuss the research involved in writing There Are No Children Here, and analyze the author’s techniques for presenting information, including whether he is trying to present a particular point of view.
There Are No Children Here

Introductory Poems and Preface

1. What is the topic of the Langston Hughes poem?

2. What is the tone of this poem?

3. What is suggested by the Longfellow excerpt?

4. How does the author meet the boys Lafeyette and Pharoah? How do they tie into the theme of the book, which is part of the subtitle, *The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America*?
Six

VOCABULARY

**Molotov cocktail** – an explosive made from a bottle and gasoline, then lit and thrown

**respite** – relief

**stoic** – unwilling to express emotions

**verbalize** – to put in words; talk about

1. As the summer of 1987 ends, what does Pharoah keep asking Lafeyette to do?

2. Why does Lafeyette continue to avoid the railroad tracks?

3. Pharoah has a physical symptom of stress that becomes a motif in this book. What is this symptom? Has it improved over the summer?
5. How do Terence and Lafeyette interact?

6. How does Pharoah react to the visit and to Terence’s advice?

7. What happened in an earlier event when Terence was arrested for a crime he did not commit?

8. What does Pharoah send Terence as a gift?
Seventeen

VOCABULARY

anathema – poisonous, hated
anonymity – being unknown
attrition – erosion; whittling away
cause célébre – a famous incident
cynicism – hardness of outlook; pessimism
demeaning – insulting
exploitation – being used
gentrified – improved; made more pleasant; readied for richer people
indelible – not able to be erased; permanent
invulnerability – being strong; unable to be harmed
menacingly – threateningly
patriarch – the senior member; leader
pensive – deep in thought
provocation – a reason to be provoked; cause for action
welshed – failed to keep, as a promise

1. Describe “stadium nights.”

2. If a fan gives Pharoah or another kid an extra ticket, what kinds of complications can prevent the kids from enjoying the game?

3. Describe the relationship between the neighborhood and the stadium.
Twenty-four

VOCABULARY

hallucinogen – a drug causing people to hallucinate
psychotic – mentally unstable
schizophrenia – a mental disorder featuring disconnection from reality

1. Why do you think the author describes two incidents with Judge Mahan, one doubling someone’s bail requirement and one allowing someone on probation to move to Kentucky?

2. Why does LaJoe stay away from the courtroom when Terence is scheduled to stand trial?

3. How does the plea bargaining proceed in Terence’s case?
If the children were no more? We should dread the desert behind us. Worse than the dark before. She liked the idea, although she hesitated, and then said, "But you know, there are no children here. They've seen too much to be children." One of every five children in the United States lives in poverty—an estimated twelve million children, according to the Children's Defense Fund. In cities like Chicago, the rate is considerably higher: one of every three children. Many grow up in neighborhoods similar to Lafeyette and Pharoah's. By the time they enter adolescence, they have contended with more terror than most of us confront in a lifetime.

Historical Context of There Are No Children Here. The end of the 1980s marked the end of the Cold War, in which the Eastern Bloc (in particular, the Soviet Union) and the Western Bloc (in particular, the United States) opposed each other in an ideological war centered on the two blocs' antagonistic attitudes toward communism. As white and, later, black middle-class families left city centers to live in safer, more peaceful suburbs, many inner-city urban areas became isolated and impoverished. These phenomena generated feelings of alienation and injustice among inner-city dwellers.

Other Books Related to There Are No Children Here. Alex Kotlowitz's second book, The Other Side of the River (1998), focuses more specifically on race than There Are No Children Here. The characters of "There Are No Children Here" have met mixed fates. Several people the writer interviewed have been killed. And Kotlowitz said readers of the book constantly send him emails, asking how Lafeyette and Pharoah Walton are doing. The lack of a common space or formal entry way in the Henry Horner Homes, the putrid, wasteful mess in the basement, doors falling off hinges in apartments, how hallways provide safety from stray bullets, the lack of grocery stores, restaurants, or businesses near the projects, and the looming money-filled United Center just a few blocks away. There is no respect for boundaries or the separation between public and private space. It's part of what makes life so tiring and dangerous. I know there's more to say.