

What It's Like To Be In Hell

By Adam Walinsky; Adam Walinsky, a New York lawyer, recently visited Chicago's housing projects

The illusions end on Damon Street, all of them: liberal, Reaganite, black solidarity, beneficent government, the innocence of man. Here are the Henry Horner Homes, 19 10-story buildings, red brick outside and cinder block inside, erected with Federal public housing money and managed by the Chicago Housing Authority. Vacant lots surround them. Most of the broken windows have been replaced with plastic sheeting. The people who live there - well, listen.

Dominant authority is exercised by the gangs: organized groups, led by men of 30 or 40, organizing and recruiting down to the age of 8. The Blackstone Rangers have been here for more than 30 years. The gangs engage in regular and constant warfare for control of the drug and vice trades. They are armed with pistols, rifles, automatic weapons and occasional grenades. Firefights may erupt at any time. Children dodge machine-gun crossfire as they leave the school. Sudden bullets smash through windows into apartment walls. Watch the residents walk; they have the affinity for ground of seasoned infantry soldiers.

Most of the violence is not accidental. Women and children are mugged by youths of all ages. Boys are constantly pressured to join the gangs and engage in criminal activity. Fifteen-year-old girls are recruited for prostitution. Beatings are common. So are killings. One murdered boy was placed sitting up in the elevator, a warning to others. Eight-year-olds, serving as drug salesmen, have been shot in the foot to encourage greater effort. Some who have informed to the police, or testified at a rare court hearing, have been "cocktailed," their apartments firebombed with the family inside.

Children grow as in the midst of a war. They are terrified to play outside. A mother of four says: "I move the furniture back and the house be they outdoors." Mothers walk children the one block to school and back again. The children almost routinely witness friends and acquaintances shot and bleeding to death on the street. They become withdrawn, uncommunicative, sullen, violent. They have nightmares about the deaths of their families.

The neighborhood has no place to buy food: The last grocery was firebombed a year ago. The women take their public-aid checks and food stamps on shopping expeditions across town once a month. There is no bank or check casher either. The women must take their aid checks downtown to cash them and then hope to make it home. If the food stamps or money are stolen, there is no replacement: "Just do the best you can until next month." Cab and car services will not enter the area. Stores refused to deliver. Furniture must be picked up and struggled home.

Move out? This is not the worst housing project in Chicago. Even if there is room in another, the Housing Authority assigns better apartments only when bribed. Bribes are also necessary for repairs. One woman had her apartment door smashed by an intruder. The emergency repair office said no door would be available for two weeks. "Move your icebox in front of the door," they advised.

She put a chair in the doorway and sat there watching television for two weeks, not daring to sleep at night or leave during the day. Her children did not go to school; her sister brought in food. The Housing Authority makes no attempt to screen tenants. It gives apartments to 18-year-olds; these then often serve as centers for gang activity. So they live side by side, predators and their prey.

The police sometimes come when they are called, though they are often a long time arriving. On the other hand, hardly anyone else comes at all. The former Mayor, Jane Byrne, once spent a well-publicized week in the Cabrini Homes project, during which it was flooded with police, and crime disappeared. The Mayor and police departed and life resumed as before. The late Mayor, Harold Washington, was black, but he did not come here. The Housing Authority and police were his, but that did not seem to change life in Henry Horner. His successor, Eugene Sawyer, did not come here either.

About five weeks ago, a brilliant and searing account of life in Henry Horner appeared on the front page of The Wall Street Journal. Reporter Alex Kotlowitz chronicled a summer in the life of a 12-year-old, Lafayette Walton, as the boy dodged bullets, eluded recruitment and watched his friends die. After the piece appeared, the Housing Authority called on the youth's mother - to ask what she was doing talking to the press. It was the same question the gangs asked. Senator Bill Bradley came on a quiet visit to see for himself. No one else seems to have noticed. (In Detroit, the police do not keep count of shot children; the newspapers counted 270 last year. The Federal Government has funded a Family Bereavement Center, to reassure children who have seen shootings that they should not fear the occurrence of others.) It is impossible to see this place without outrage - at blacks and liberals who refuse to face the reality of self-destructive black violence, who will neither inquire into its sources nor act to protect its victims, who are afraid even to acknowledge its existence. Rage at the Reaganites, who have contrived an attitude of Government that denies any responsibility for the crippled life of Lafayette Walton. Contempt for all the bland benevolent politicians, making speeches and accepting human rights awards, ignoring all these issues because they don't play well in the polls. Rage at well-off blacks who have abandoned these their fellows, and at whites who would fob off all responsibility on blacks. Anger at myself, ensconced in comfort, self-righteously denouncing the inaction of others.

More than outrage is required, however. The mothers of these children are stereotypes of welfare mothers. They are uneducated. They have no jobs. One in 100 is living with a husband. Indeed, they are also inescapably part of the cause of all this. As they are the mothers of the child victims, they are also the mothers of the gang predators. They have birthed and raised the violent ones, but they do not know them: "When the gangs get them," says one, "they take everything out of them that makes them your child."

So they try, uncomprehendingly, to protect their younger children from the fate and the activity of their oldest. They are in many ways limited people, seemingly passive, without the energy or ability to escape this trap; these are the ones who were left behind as others got jobs and moved away. Here is the tangle of the underclass at its most tragic.

And yet to sit with these women, to listen to them describe their lives with often poetic compression, is to be moved almost to tears by their courage, their endurance in the midst of suffering, their determination to continue on, to give their children all the love and protection of which they are capable. One who had been threatened by the gangs with reprisals for calling the police was asked why she did not go to stay with her parents farther out on the West Side. "That just brings the trouble on them too. You got to take what comes with your own life."

These women and their children -even those children growing inexorably into gang members themselves -these are all Americans. They hope American hopes and dream American dreams, however dim those seem from this outcast place, this territory without the law.

The pathology of the black lower class has grown and festered for 40 years, and it will not be solved in four. But we will never solve it if we do not begin. However limited our knowledge, surely it is not beyond our capacity to extend the rule of law, the protection of bodily safety to all citizens of the United States. Surely we can impose some minimal discipline within which a reconstruction of decent life can begin. Surely we can give such a token of our commitment to our fellow citizens, that their American children may live. Yet we do not.

This is the deficit of heart and courage that would be addressed by serious candidates for the Presidency of the United States.

***What It's Like To Be In Hell*-Newspaper Article**

Reaction Rubric

Standards: The students will be able to discuss the purpose and effectiveness of non-fiction writing.

The students will be able to draw personal connections.

The students will be able to compare the interpretation of a novel to the interpretation of other sources.

The students will be able to study literature that will expose them to outlooks from different cultures, areas, and ideas.

The students will be able to apply book noting skills.

The students will be able to value the diversity of opinions and perspectives.

CRITERIA:

* Explain how article correlates to characters in There Are No Children Here.

*React to article.

*Participate in whole-group discussions, offering insight.

*Subsearch article

8-10 points

Student offered insight and feelings in response that were elaborate and clear.

Student accurately made comparisons and identified differences.

Student respectfully participated in whole-group discussion.

Student subsearched article completely and correctly.

5-7 points

Student offered some insight and/or feelings to article.

Student's comparisons and differences identified had some errors.

Student participated half-heartedly in whole-group discussion.

Student subsearched half of the article.

0-4 points

Student offered barely any insight or feelings to article.

Student's comparisons and differences were not accurate.

Student was disrespectful and/or did not participate in whole-group discussion.

Student did not subsearch article.