Book Review

Staying safe at school

Chester L. Quarles and Tammy F. Quarles

CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group, Boca Raton, FL, 2011, 2nd edn., 138pp., \$39.95, ISBN: 978-1439858288

Security Journal (2012) 25, 284–286. doi:10.1057/sj.2012.6

Staying Safe at School, 2nd edition by Chester L. Quarles and Tammy F. Quarles is a crime prevention guide designed to educate teenagers on safety measures that can be taken to reduce their risk of victimization in the school domain. Given recent media attention regarding school safety, as well as, anti-bullying campaigns by the Obama administration and the National Crime Prevention Council, a book on the topic is both timely and relevant. However, due to notable flaws in this book including the failure to cite either current or relevant research, unsubstantiated claims and fear-inducing sensationalism, it is not an appropriate text for the target audience. Touted as ‘a guidebook that every parent and school administer should make available to students’, this book sends a misleading and potentially damaging message to youth regarding their victimization risk and level of safety in the school environment.

The book is comprised of 11 chapters, each utilizing language that is geared specifically towards a youth audience (for example, druggies, creeps and so on). The Introduction and Chapter 1, aptly titled *Are You Afraid?*, are largely focused on providing fear of crime and victimization statistics for adolescents, both in general and specifically at school. Although the authors never explicitly state that their text is focused solely on violent crime, no property victimization statistics are provided and instead the focus is on murder (particularly school shootings), robbery, rape and assault. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 provide the reader with an introduction to the topics of crime prevention and risk reduction. These chapters encourage the readers to become more aware of their surroundings and even to determine their own level of risk by mapping the crime at their school and in their neighborhood. In these chapters, Quarles and Quarles provide brief, yet superficial, discussions of key crime prevention topics such as: criminal opportunity, hot spots, target hardening and crime prevention through environmental design. However, despite the titles of the chapters (*Crime Prevention*; *Risk Assessment*; *Risk Reduction*), very few crime prevention tips are actually presented to the reader. The tips that are provided include dressing inexpensively to reduce robbery risk and being friendly to reduce the risk of a physical assault or murder (which is a recommendation based on the authors’ observations of the Columbine shootings).

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the topic of security, particularly the development of a personalized security plan for the reader. Like the previous chapters, these do not provide the audience with many detailed security tips. In Chapter 5, Quarles and Quarles highlight a three-pronged approach to personal safety that includes: alertness, friendliness and vigilance. Chapter 6’s everyday security recommendations are slightly more specific and

include such actions as dressing modestly, dressing for defense (for example, it is easier to run in tennis shoes than heels) and the use of a personal alarm. Chapter 7 titled *Traveling Safely*, includes general safety recommendations for traveling to school or other locations such as choosing a familiar route and traveling with others. Chapter 8 describes 'trouble-makers' that should be avoided including the usual suspects such as gang members, bullies and drug addicts, as well as, atypical ones like Satanic cult members and vigilantes. In Chapter 9, *Becoming a Successful Victim*, the authors provide tips on how to react and minimize potential harm in instances of an actual robbery or sexual assault. Chapter 10 is devoted to sexual assault avoidance and focuses mostly on raising awareness of rape rather than providing practical or evidence-based prevention recommendations. The final chapter, Chapter 11, closes the book by encouraging readers to accept the fact that they *will* be a victim of a violent crime before they reach adulthood and that military-style vigilance is the key to potentially altering that probability.

The remainder of this review will focus on providing support for the assertion that this text is inappropriate and potentially damaging to the target audience. It is not the intention of this reviewer to imply that the authors were purposely misleading while crafting this book, but rather generally careless. One of the most notable flaws is the failure of Quarles and Quarles to cite either relevant or current research. Despite the recent publication date of the book (2011), only two of the citations are from the 2000s. Almost the entire book utilizes sources from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, with the vast majority of the fear of crime and victimization statistics coming from the early 1990s (that is, peak high-crime years in the United States). In addition to being devoid of current research, the text fails to cite relevant research as well. The bullying estimates cited come from an early 1980's Norwegian study, whereas no well-recognized citations are provided for discussions on such topics as criminal opportunity, target hardening or sexual victimization (for example, Ronald Clarke, Marcus Felson or Bonnie Fisher). Further, the quality of the sources is concerning. Statistics from news magazines, safety guides and unpublished dissertations are presented in the text, whereas very few peer-reviewed sources are cited, particularly in the fields of victimization or crime prevention. The result of this flaw is that a misleading and invalid picture of youth victimization is provided to the reader. This is evidenced in one of the prominent, yet false, statistics that the authors present: 'Five out of six of today's 12-year-old children will be the subject of violence as serious as felony assaults, robber [*sic*], rape, or murder' (p. 3).

Another primary flaw with this text is that the authors commonly make unsubstantiated claims that do not appear to be evidence-based or rooted within the literature. One of the most concerning of the claims is made in reference to modest dressing and risk reduction among females. The authors make reference to 'Women in the Middle East' and state that their modest dress standards 'send the message that women who dress modestly are safer in dangerous environments' (p. 52). This statement is not only culturally insensitive, but also devoid of empirical support. This is not the only questionable claim that Quarles and Quarles make in their book. Other examples include reference to school restrooms attracting 'undesirables, thieves, perverts, and rapists' (p. 67), that '... daydreaming, or philosophical contemplation can be dangerous' (p. 115), that 'rapists pick naïve girls who don't think they will be raped' (p. 103) and that one should 'park away from vans' (p. 72). The authors make several unsupported claims regarding the relationship between clothing and risk of victimization and urge the readers to shop at discount stores and even avoid bright

colors that could make them more easily noticed by offenders. In instances where the authors should have relied on empirical evidence, they instead make reference to their own opinions in regard to the extent of bullying in the United States, and provide an anecdotal story of the author setting his daughter's curfew for the date rape prevention section.

The most problematic feature of this book is that it is grounded in fear-inducing sensationalism. From the introduction to the final chapter, readers are constantly being informed and/or reminded that the 'most dangerous place is school', that fear is justified and that they experience a high risk of violent victimization (p. 5). The readers are trained to believe that any incidence of bullying can escalate to rape, that assault weapons are commonly bought and sold at school and that if they do not protect themselves then nobody else will do it for them (including guardians or school staff). An entire section of a chapter is devoted to ritualistic offenders that 'kill the victim in a formal ceremony ... and offer the brain to Satan' (p. 87). In Chapter 1, readers are introduced to the new three R's in school, not reading, writing and arithmetic, but rape, robbery and rebellion. Although the purpose of the text is to make readers feel more secure and safe, it is probable that the tone and content of the book will achieve the opposite and increase fear among readers. Over the course of the text, a misleading view of school safety and youth victimization is presented that ignores both the contextual characteristics of certain schools and the current level of school crime in the United States. A quotation from the final chapter of the book precisely illustrates the concerns raised in this review: 'The first step towards personal safety and security is to accept the fact, even the probability, that you will become a victim before your 19th birthday' (p. 114).

Although a book on school safety and crime prevention is timely given the societal and governmental focus on the topic, due to these notable flaws, *Staying Safe at School* is not an appropriate choice for any audience, particularly the target audience (that is, teenagers). This book highlights the delicate balance that must be made when discussing issues of fear of crime, victimization risk and crime prevention with vulnerable populations, in this case adolescents. Researchers and practitioners need to ensure that they are providing recommendations that empower individuals and not ones that lower their quality of life.

Heidi L. Scherer
Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice,
Kennesaw, USA