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The myth connecting suicide to the holidays persists

Stories citing a rise in holiday suicides outweigh those debunking it

PHILADELPHIA – Nearly three-quarters of the newspaper stories mentioning suicide and the holidays over the 2012-2013 holiday period perpetuated the myth that more people commit suicide during that season, according to an analysis by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) at the University of Pennsylvania.

During the 2012-2013 holiday season, researchers found that of the stories mentioning suicide and the holidays, 44 stories repeated the myth while 18 stories debunked it. Another 116 stories discussing suicide in that period drew no connection.

Of those stories making a connection, 71 percent supported the myth, a slight decline from the prior year but greater than the average of 53 percent over the last 14 seasons. (*See Figure 1.*)

The notion that more people commit suicide at the end of the year than at other times is a misperception. Since 2000, APPC has been tracking press reports about this widespread belief. In 1999-2000, the first season that APPC studied the issue, more than 60 stories were identified saying that suicides spike over the holidays. These stories accounted for 77 percent of the stories that talked about a potential connection between suicide and the holidays.

Not only do suicides *not* spike during the holiday period, but the months of November, December and January typically have the lowest daily numbers of suicide during the year, according to data from the National Center for Health Statistics.

“Despite what many people believe, the holiday-suicide link is truly a myth,” said Dan Romer, associate director of APPC, who has directed the study since its inception. “Why are we concerned about stories that focus on the myth? The holidays are a time when the media talk about the stresses of the period. And contagion from press reporting is a validated phenomenon that can influence those who are already susceptible to suicide.”

Although the suicide rate is lower around the holidays, nearly 100 people a day commit suicide during these months. In recent years, following the financial collapse of 2008, the suicide rate has increased, especially for people between the ages of 35 and 64 years old. (See <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6217a1.htm>.) This has increased the need for public health agencies and groups to encourage more accurate reporting about suicide by the news media (see www.reportingonsuicide.org).

The phenomenon of the “holiday blues” may contribute to making the myth credible. And of course, favorite holiday stories, such as the one portrayed in the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*, suggest that the holidays can be a time of great stress with thoughts of suicide. This may be the reason some journalists repeat the story that suicides are higher around Christmas.

Last year, for example, one editorial published in Kentucky, discussing holidays and anxieties, said: “You see a lot of holiday and post-holiday suicides. People often get lost in the shuffle.”

There is clearly a seasonal pattern to suicide rates, with spring and summer usually having the highest rates (Figure 2). So it is difficult to understand how the holiday-suicide myth came about.

Resources on this issue include the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, www.sprc.org, and the Centers for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/suicide/holiday.html. The Surgeon General has released a strategy for the prevention of suicide that encourages more accurate reporting about the causes (www.samhsa.gov/prevention/suicide.aspx).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. For persons between the ages of 15-24, it is the second leading cause of death, and for persons between the ages of 25-44, it is the fourth leading cause. It is now a greater cause of death than traffic fatalities.

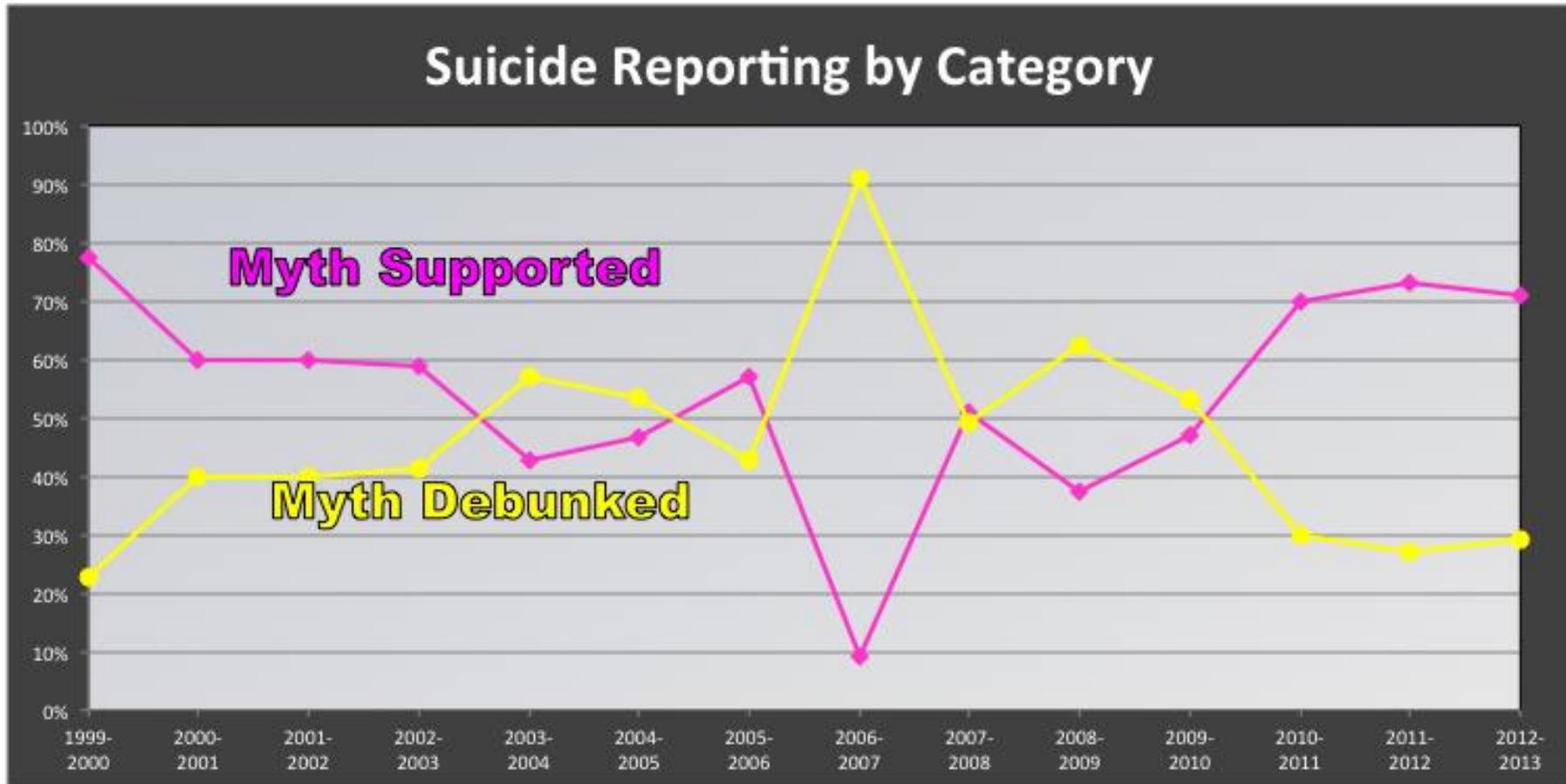
Methodology

Newspaper reports linking suicide with the holidays were identified using the Nexis.com database with “suicide” and “Thanksgiving/Christmas/New Years” or “holidays” as search terms for the period of November 15, 2012 to January 31, 2013. Researchers evaluated the stories for content either supporting the link, noting that a suicide occurred on or near a holiday (coincidental link), or actually debunking the myth. Only stories about domestic suicide were coded (e.g., suicide bombings in other countries were not included). Thanks go to Ilana Weitz, who collected and supervised the coding of the data.

The **Annenberg Public Policy Center** (www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/) was established in 1994 to educate the public and policy makers about the media’s role in advancing public understanding of political and health issues at the local, state and federal levels.

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Figure 1. Percentage of stories that supported the myth vs. those that debunked it.



Note: Stories were coded into three categories: Those in which the myth was supported, those in which the myth was clearly debunked, and stories in which suicide was said to coincide with the holidays but no causal association was suggested (coincidental). Coincidental stories are not included in this figure.

Figure 2. Average number of suicides per day in each month from January 1999 to December 2010. Data from November, December and January are circled. Data from the National Center for Health Statistics.

