

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 9, 2014

Contact: Michael Rozansky | mrozansky@asc.upenn.edu | 215.746.0202

Suicide rate is lowest during the holiday season, but news stories continue to say the opposite

PHILADELPHIA – Year after year, the suicide rate is at its lowest in the United States during the holiday season, but nearly three-quarters of U.S. newspaper stories linking suicide and the holidays during the 2013-2014 season incorrectly said the opposite, according to a new analysis.

In the 2013 holiday season, most newspaper stories mentioning suicide and the holidays perpetuated the myth that the holiday season has an increase in suicides, the analysis by the Annenberg Public Policy Center found.

The study found that 70 percent of the stories connecting suicide with the holidays incorrectly upheld the myth (Fig. 1), consistent with the prior year, when 71 percent did. But the number of stories connecting the holidays and suicide – supporting or debunking the myth – was much lower than in 2012-2013. Forty-seven stories in U.S. newspapers made the connection from mid-November 2013 through January 2014, down from 62 in the same period a year earlier.

“Fewer stories explicitly drew a link between suicide and the holidays, so that could be a sign that people recognize there is no connection,” said Daniel Romer, associate director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania.

Highest suicide rate between April and August

The months of November, December and January often have the fewest daily suicides during the year, according to statistics through 2010, the most recent available from the National Center for Health Statistics. The most daily U.S. suicides usually occur between the months of April and August (Fig. 2).

The policy center has been tracking press reports about suicide and the holidays since the 1999-2000 holiday season, when 77 percent of the stories supported the myth. From 2003 to 2009, the rate of stories debunking the myth was generally higher than or equal to those perpetuating the myth. Since then, stories upholding the myth have again predominated press coverage.

“Many of the stories perpetuating the myth seem to have a therapeutic intent, encouraging people to be aware of those who are unhappy over the holidays,” Romer said. “But it does not help to promote misinformation about the likelihood that people will commit suicide during the holidays.” He said that recommendations on media coverage of suicide, which can be found at www.reportingonsuicide.org, discourage the practice of exaggerating the prevalence of suicide.

Examples of false links between the holidays and suicide include these:

- One Maine newspaper quoted an emergency room doctor as saying, “There is an increase in suicide attempts and suicides around the holidays.”
- A newspaper in Wooster, Ohio, reported: “Suicides, and suicide attempts, often rise in the holiday season. That is probably why November has been designated Suicide Prevention Month.” (This is doubly false: Suicide Prevention Month is September.)

Resources on suicide include the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, <http://www.sprc.org/>, and the Centers for Disease Control at <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/suicide/holiday.html>. The U.S. Surgeon General’s strategy for the prevention of suicide encourages more accurate reporting on the causes: <http://www.samhsa.gov/prevention/suicide.aspx>. In addition, the U. S. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is at 800-273-TALK (8255).

Methodology

Newspaper stories linking suicide with the holidays were identified through the Nexis database, with “suicide” and “Thanksgiving or Christmas or New Year’s or holidays” as search terms from November 15, 2013 through January 31, 2014. Researchers evaluated the stories as supporting the link, debunking it, or showing a coincidental link. Only domestic suicides were counted; overseas suicide bombings were not counted, for instance. Thanks go to Ilana Weitz, who collected and supervised the coding of the data, and to Zakya Hall, for assistance in coding 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.

Follow APPC on Twitter ([@APPCPenn](https://twitter.com/APPCPenn)) or on Facebook (www.facebook.com/appc.org).

Figure 1. Percentage of stories supporting the myth vs. those debunking it. Excludes stories citing both in a coincidental manner (no causal association).

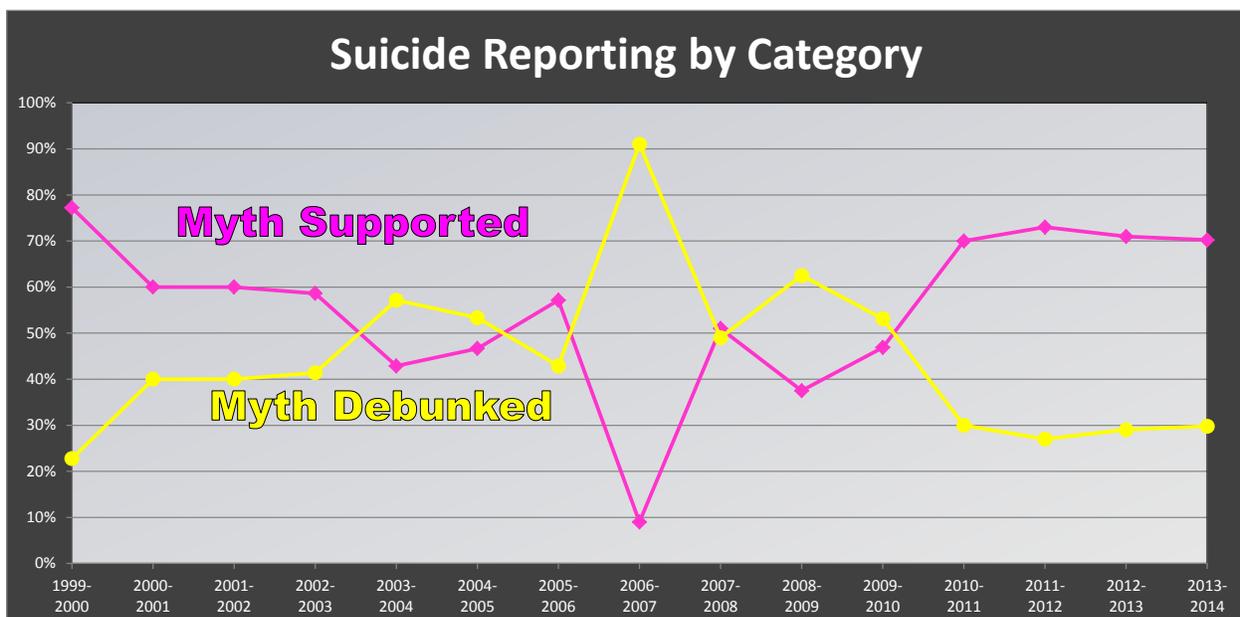


Figure 2. Average number of suicides per day in each month from January 1999 to December 2010. Data from November, December and January are circled. The average rate per year is shown in blue. Source: Centers for Disease Control's National Center for Health Statistics.

