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Nearly Half of News Stories Still Making the False Holiday-Suicide Connection

PHILADELPHIA – Nearly half of the news stories over last year’s holiday season that linked the holidays and suicide perpetuated the myth that there is an increase in suicides from Thanksgiving through January, according to an analysis by the Annenberg Public Policy Center.

The annual analysis found that 47 percent of the stories in the Nexis database over the 2015-16 holiday season upheld the false connection while 53 percent debunked it, the same as the prior year (see Figure 1 below).

“People are still confused about this,” said Dan Romer, research director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania. “You find almost as many stories supporting the myth as debunking it.”

In fact, the holiday season usually has the lowest suicide rates of the year (see Figure 2). Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that in 2014 (the latest year of available data), December and January had the fewest average suicide deaths per day. The rate in November was slightly below the average for the year. The highest daily rates usually occur between April and August – and in 2014, were in August and September (see Table 1).

APPC has tracked news coverage on this issue for 17 years, starting in 1999-2000, and only in two of those years have more than 60 percent of stories debunked the myth. About half of the years have seen a roughly even split in the number of news stories that have upheld or debunked the myth that suicides increase around the holidays. In other years, the myth was supported by a majority of the stories.

“This is a very difficult myth to erase,” Romer said.

The current analysis, from mid-November 2015 through January 2016, found that 19 stories debunked the holiday-suicide myth and 17 supported it. A religion story from the Cleveland (Tennessee) Daily Banner supporting the myth said: “We are in the midst of celebrating the commemoration of the birth of Christ. It should be a joyous occasion. But statistics tell us that more people suffer depression and more people are prone to suicide during the holidays than at any other time.”

Some stories don't support the myth – or debunk it

Some stories which were excluded from the analysis didn't endorse the myth but didn't debunk it either. One example is a January arts feature in the San Francisco Chronicle about “the world's most depressed musician,” Morrissey, which quotes a theater director as saying, “Blue Monday is considered the most depressing day of the year. I think it has the most suicides.”

Another example, from the Reno Gazette-Journal in Nevada, tries to have it both ways: “Although it is purportedly a myth that suicide rates increase during the holiday season, this can nonetheless be a difficult time for a great many of us.” Saying that the myth has purportedly been debunked does little to dispel doubts.

“News stories mentioning suicide around the holidays may seek to be helpful, but they can misinform people and fail to provide advice on how to cope with stress during the holidays,” Romer said. “Even a casual reference or an unverified assertion in a quotation can end up supporting the myth and potentially discourage those vulnerable to suicide from seeking the care they need.”

Recommendations for media coverage of suicide (see <http://www.reportingonsuicide.org>) note that reporters should consult reliable sources on suicide rates, such as those produced by the CDC, and provide information about resources that can be helpful to those in need.

Other resources include the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, www.sprc.org, and the CDC: <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>. The U. S. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline can be reached at 800-273-TALK (8255).

Methodology

News and feature stories linking suicide with the holidays were identified through the Nexis database, with “suicide” and “Thanksgiving/Christmas/New Years” or “holidays” as search terms from November 15, 2015 through January 31, 2016. Researchers evaluated whether the stories supported the link, debunked it, or showed a coincidental link. Only domestic suicides were counted; overseas suicide bombings, for example, were excluded. Thanks go to Ilana Weitz, who collected and supervised the coding of the stories, and to Anna Rose Bedrosian and Daniel Bersani-Molina for assistance in coding. Thanks also go to Alex Crosby of the CDC for assistance in obtaining monthly rates of suicide.

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, health, and science 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).

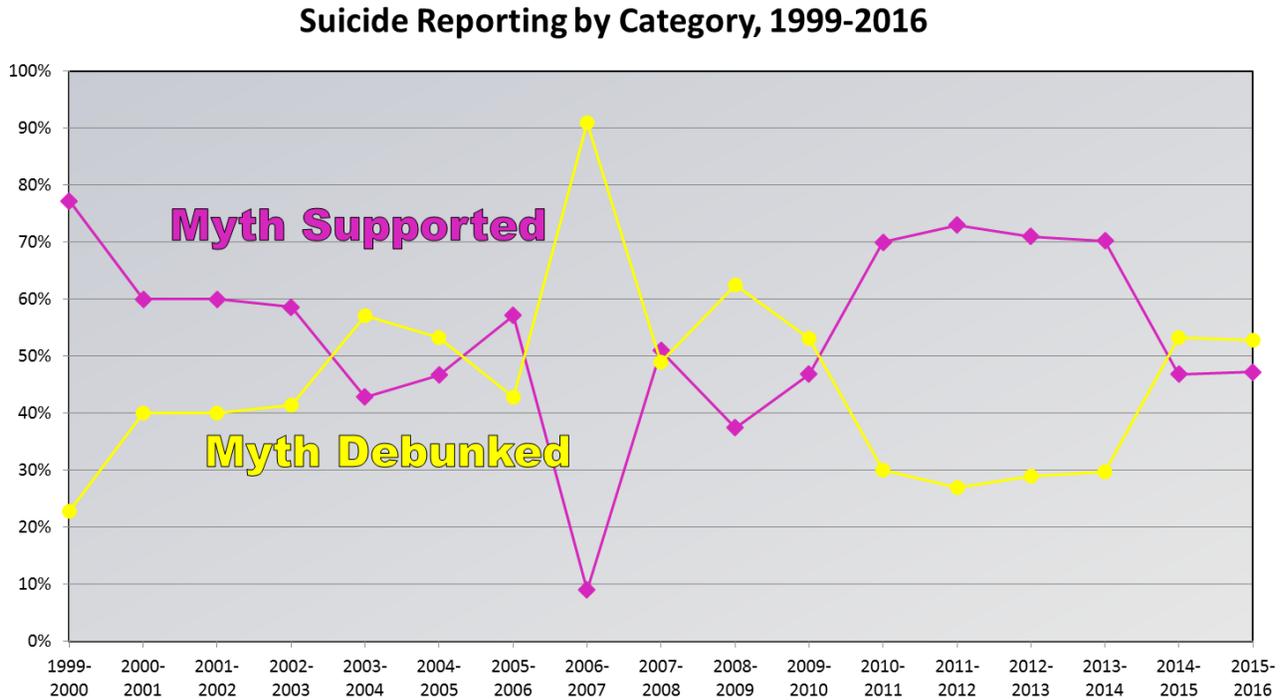
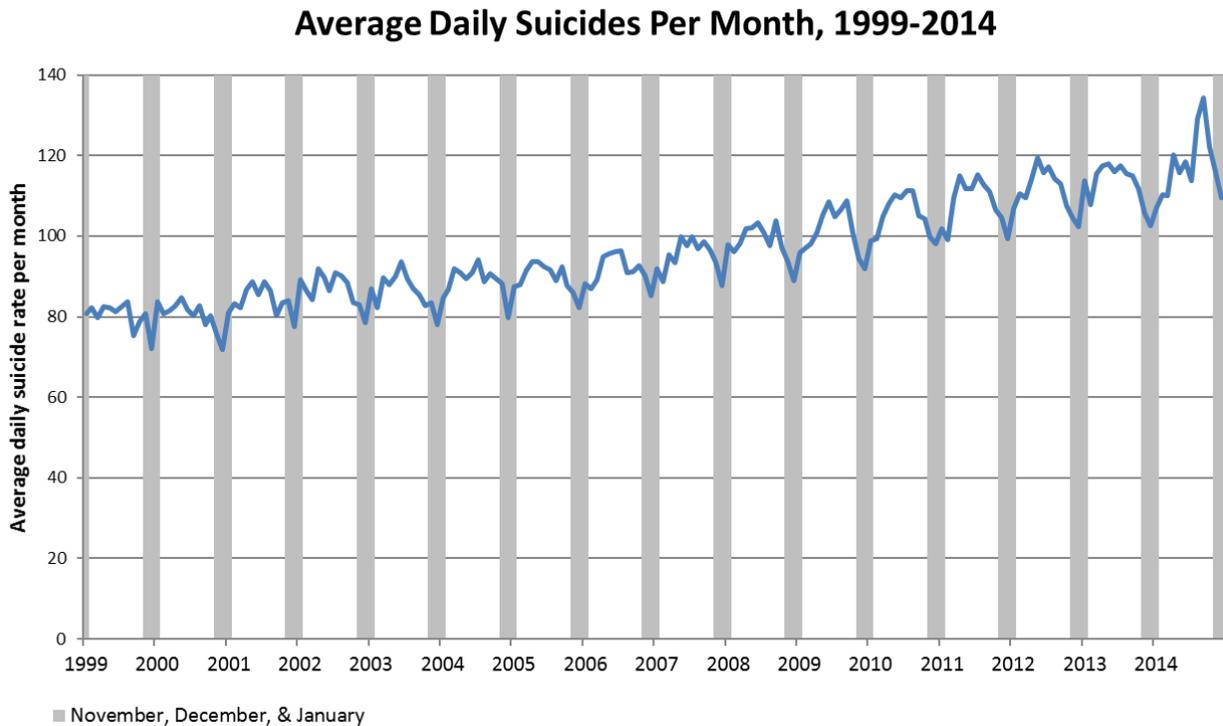


Figure 2. Average number of suicides per day in each month from January 1999 to December 2014. Data from November, December and January are shaded. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics.



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Table 1. Average number of suicides per day in each month in 2014. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics.

Average Daily Suicides per Month, 2014

Month	Average # of suicide deaths per day	2014 Rank
January	107.1	12
February	110.4	9
March	109.9	10
April	120.2	4
May	115.7	7
June	118.3	5
July	113.6	8
August	129.1	2
September	134.4	1
October	122.2	3
November	115.9	6
December	109.4	11
2014 Average	117.2	

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics.