



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CONTACT: Dan Romer, 215-898-6776 (office); 610-202-7315 (cell)

After 11 Years of Setting the Record Straight, Stories about Holiday Suicides Still Outnumber Those Debunking the Myth

Does the suicide rate go up around the end of year holidays? Since 2000, the Annenberg Public Policy Center has been tracking press reporting about this widespread belief. In the end of the millennium year of 1999, APPC identified over 60 stories that ran during that holiday period saying that suicides do indeed spike over the holidays. This prompted us to examine the evidence. As seen in the figure below based on official suicide deaths in the U.S., the months of November, December, and January typically have the lowest daily rates of suicide in the year. Despite what many believe, the holiday-suicide link is a myth.

Since we began our annual study, the number of stories supporting the myth has declined (see Figure 2). But surprisingly, the number of stories each year claiming that the link is real remains stubbornly difficult to eliminate. In some years, the number of stories was quite small. However, last year the number of stories supporting the myth actually outnumbered the ones that debunked it (14 vs. 6).

“It’s clear that the myth continues to be circulated even though a quick search on Google would show it to be wrong,” noted Dan Romer, who has directed the study since its inception. “After 11 years of setting the record straight, it’s surprising how resilient the idea is.”

There is clearly a seasonal pattern to suicide rates. The spring and summer are usually the highest months in the year. So, it is difficult to understand how the holiday-suicide myth came about. The phenomenon of the “holiday blues” may play a role in making the myth credible. But it is unlikely to be a major factor in suicide rates over the holidays.

The problem with reinforcing the myth is that media content that makes suicide appear to be more common can encourage vulnerable individuals to consider it. Although we have no direct evidence for such an effect of the holiday myth, other

evidence indicates that the media can influence vulnerable people to attempt suicide. This has led various public health agencies and organizations to encourage more accurate reporting by the media (see www.reportingonsuicide.org).

In addition, a government sponsored website, SPRC.org, provides helpful information about suicide prevention. CDC also offers its viewpoint about the holiday suicide myth, and provides links to related resources, at <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/suicide/holiday.html>.

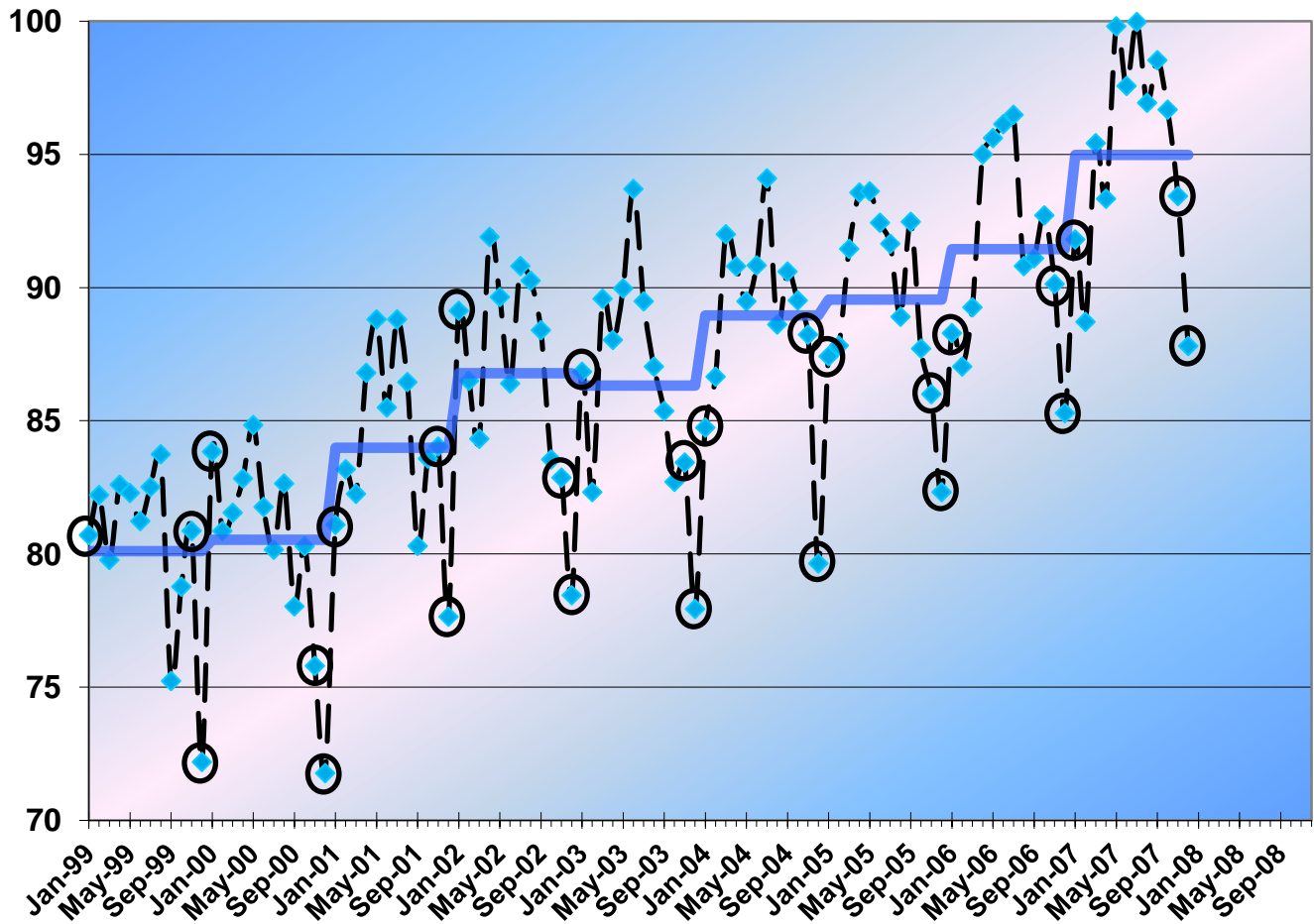
According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. For persons between the ages of 15-24, it is the third leading cause of death, and for persons between the ages of 25-34, it is the second leading cause.

Table 1. National search results of stories linking the holidays with suicide for years 1999/2000 to 2010/2011.

Type of News Story by Year	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011
Holiday Link	101	35	30	29	14	30	28	32	43	64	32	20
Myth Supported	77%	60%	60%	59%	43%	47%	57%	9%	51%	37.5%	47%	70%
Myth Debunked	23%	40%	40%	41%	57%	53%	43%	91%	49%	62.5%	53%	30%
Coincidental	36	19	24	17	6	14	89	39	120	213	88	93
Total	137	54	54	46	20	44	117	71	163	277	120	113

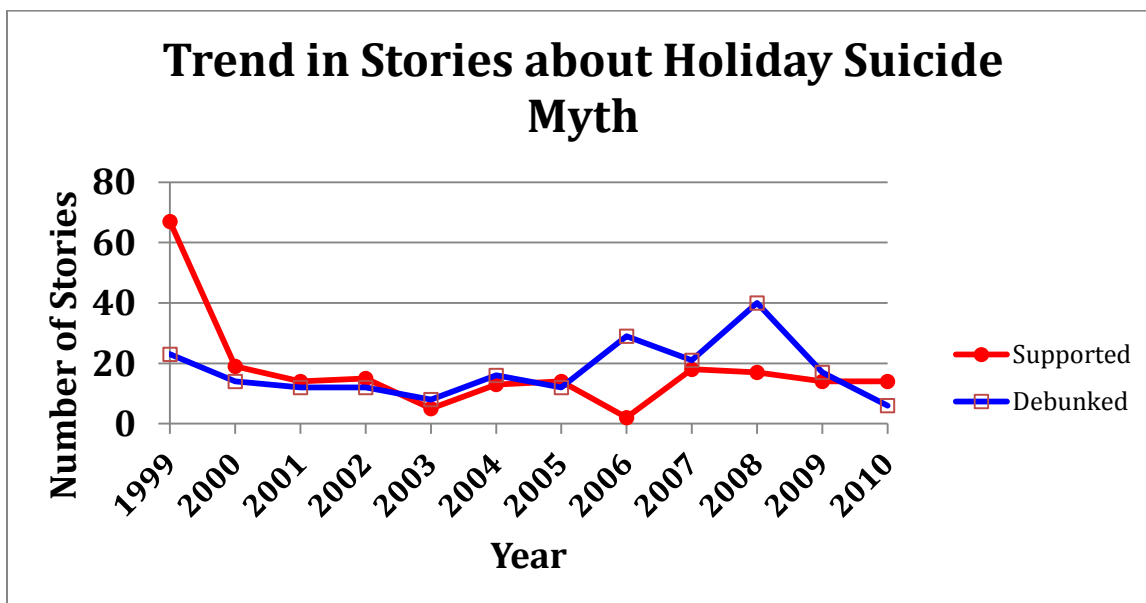
Note: Stories were coded into three categories: Those in which the myth was supported, those in which the myth was clearly debunked, and stories in which suicide was said to coincide with the holidays but no causal association was suggested (coincidental).

Figure 1. Suicide Average Daily Rate per Month



Note: Circled points represent daily rates for November, December, and January of each year. Source: National Center for Health Statistics.

Figure 2. Number of stories per holiday period that supported or debunked the suicide myth.



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, 2010 to January 31, 2011. Coders independently evaluated the stories for content either supporting the link, simply 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 Sue Lee and Eian More who collected and coded the data.

The **Annenberg Public Policy Center** (<http://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. The Adolescent Communication Institute was established in 2002 to focus on strategies that promote the mental and behavioral health of adolescents.