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Winter Holiday Suicide Myth Continues to be Reinforced in Press Annenberg Public Policy Center Study Finds

The annual analysis by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) of news reporting during the previous winter holiday period reveals that newspapers continued to perpetuate the myth that suicides rise during the holidays. The proportion of stories that supported the myth during the 2009-2010 holidays remained at approximately the same level as during the previous holiday period (see Table 1 below).

Released today, the APPC study shows that nearly 50 percent of the articles written during last year's holiday season that made a direct connection between suicide and the holiday season perpetuated the myth. That represents a small and statistically non-significant increase from the previous holiday period when about 38 percent supported the myth (see Figure 1 below).

The rate of suicide in the U.S. is in fact lowest in December, and peaks in the spring and fall. Data collected by the National Center for Health Statistics (see Figure 2 below) show that this pattern has not changed in recent years (2007 is the most recent year for which national data are available).

As part of its efforts to improve coverage of suicide in the press, APPC has been tracking holiday suicide reporting since 2000 when it released its first press alert on newspaper coverage of the myth. As Figure 1 shows, there has been improvement in coverage over this time period, but progress in recent years has slowed. In the 1999-2000 holiday period, only about 23 percent of the stories that made a link between the holidays and suicide debunked the myth. Although this percentage has increased over the years, it only increased dramatically during the 2006/07-holiday period when it reached 91%. In other years, it has hovered around 50%.

“It is unfortunate that the holiday-suicide myth persists in the press,” said Dan Romer, the director of APPC’s Adolescent Communication Institute, which conducted the study. “Aside from misinforming the public, the sort of reporting misses an opportunity to shed light on the more likely causes of suicide.”

Considerable research indicates that mental health conditions, such as depression and abuse of drugs, can increase the risk of suicide. While persons suffering from these and other treatable mental conditions are at increased risk of suicide, getting help from an appropriate health professional can reduce this risk. The press can play a role in encouraging those suffering from these mental health conditions to seek help and to do so at any time of the year.

“The press has an important role to play in debunking the holiday-suicide myth,” said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center. “It is essential that the public be given accurate information on this important subject.”

Persons with serious mental health conditions are also vulnerable to media reports of deaths by suicide, particularly those that describe the method or glorify the act. The press can help to reduce the chances of such “contagion” effects by following the media coverage recommendations developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institute of Mental Health, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the APPC among others (see [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)). There is also a national suicide prevention lifeline (1-800-273-TALK) that is ready 24/7 to assist persons coping with suicidal crises.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide ranks as the eleventh leading cause of death among adults. Among adolescents, it is the third leading cause. More information about suicide is available at the following sites:

<http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/suicide/holiday.html>

<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/>

Table 1. National search results of stories linking the holidays with suicide for years 1999/2000 to 2009/2010.

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
Holiday Link	101	35	30	29	14	30	28	32	43	64	32
Myth Supported	77%	60%	60%	59%	43%	47%	57%	9%	51%	37.5%	47%
Myth Debunked	23%	40%	40%	41%	57%	53%	43%	91%	49%	62.5%	53%
Coincidental	36	19	24	17	6	14	89	39	120	213	88
Total	137	54	54	46	20	44	117	71	163	277	120

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. Percentage of stories that supported the myth versus debunked it for each holiday period from 1999/2000 to 2009/2010.

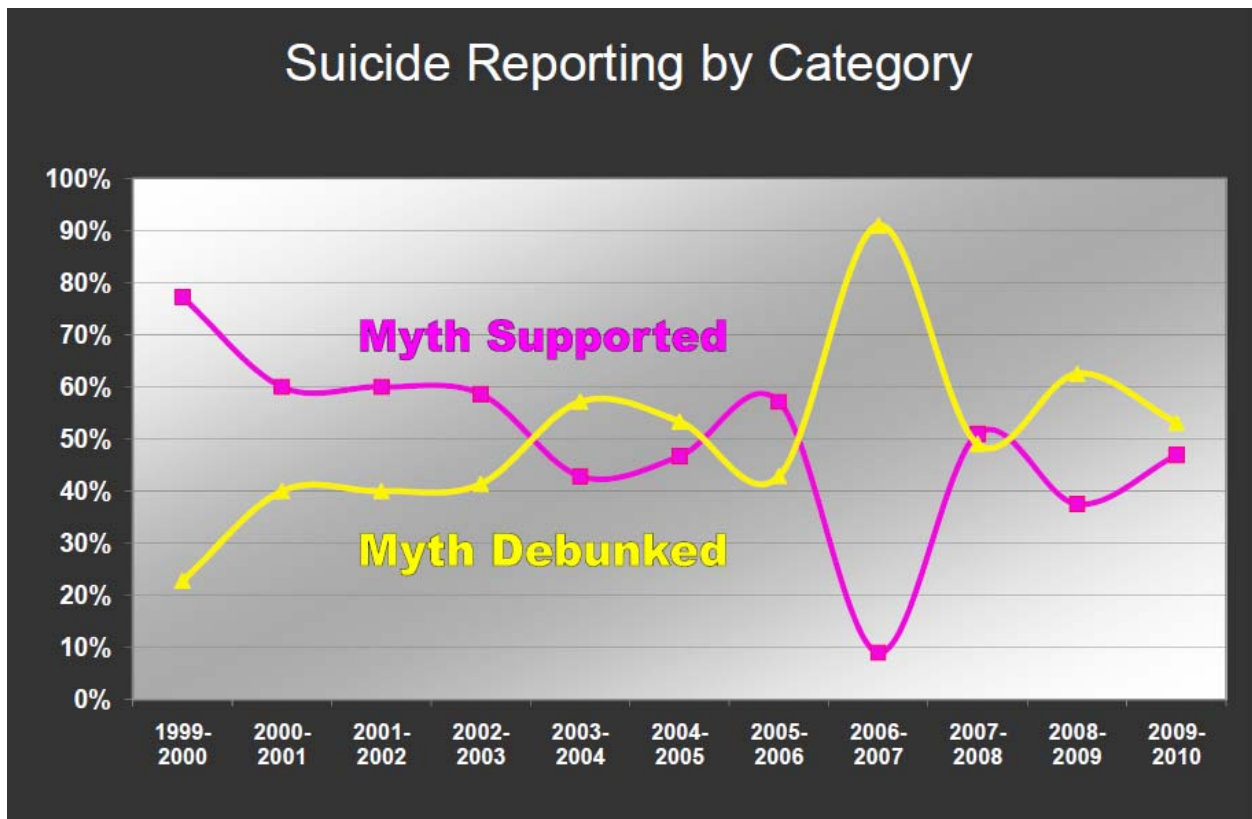
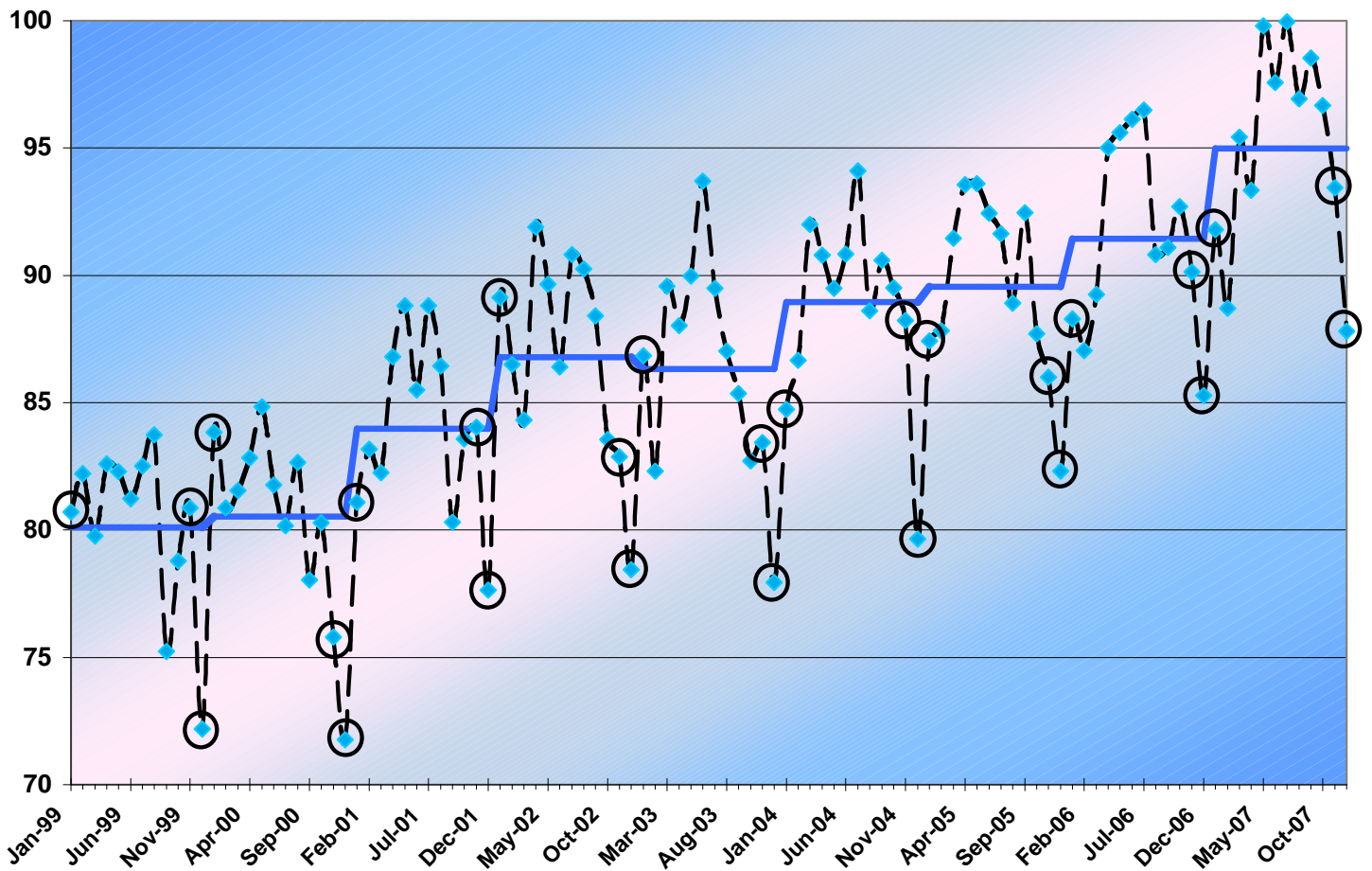


Figure 2. Average Daily Rate of Suicide per Month



Note: Months of November, December and January for each year are circled.
Average annual rate is indicated by flat line each year.

Source: National Center for Health Statistics

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, 2009 to January 31, 2010. 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).

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.