

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Holiday-Suicide Link The Myth Persists

Despite the Annenberg Public Policy Center's nine-year effort to debunk the connection, newspapers continue to perpetuate the myth that suicides rise during the end-of-year holiday period. According to an analysis of news reporting during last year's (2008-09) holiday period, the proportion of stories that supported the myth remained at approximately the same level as during the previous holiday period (see Table 1 below).

The analysis released today by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) shows that nearly 40 percent of the articles written during last year's holiday season that directly linked suicide and the holiday season perpetuated the myth. That represents a small and statistically non-significant decrease from the previous holiday period when about 50 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 through 2006, the most recent year for which national data are available.

As part of its efforts to improve the 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.

"Although there has been a slow decrease in press support of the myth, the story continues," said Dan Romer, the director of APPC's Adolescent Communication Institute, which conducted the study. "This is unfortunate because the public should know that this is not a season of increased risk for suicide."

The percentage of stories debunking the holiday-suicide myth has steadily increased since APPC began releasing its annual analysis. 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. It is

encouraging that last year the percentage of stories that discredited the link reached 62 percent. A story that appeared online last holiday season in the *British Medical Journal* may have helped to get the word out: http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/337/dec17_2/a2769.

“We are heartened to see more voices refuting 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.”

Perpetuating the myth not only misinforms readers but it also misses an opportunity to educate the public about the most likely sources of suicide risk, including major depression and substance abuse. 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.

Persons with serious mental health conditions are also at increased risk of being influenced by press reports of suicide, including potentially imitating what they read or see in the media. The press can help to reduce the chances of such “contagion” effects by accurately reporting on the prevalence of suicide.

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 and reporting guidelines for the media are available at the following:

[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)

[National Center for Injury Prevention and Control](#)

Table 1. National search results of stories linking the holidays with suicide for years 1999-2008.

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

Note: Stories were coded into three categories: ones in which the myth was supported versus clearly debunked as false (Holiday Link). Other stories in which suicide and the holidays were linked but no causal association was suggested are termed coincidental.

Figure 1. Percentage of stories that supported the myth versus debunked it for each holiday period from 1999 to 2008.

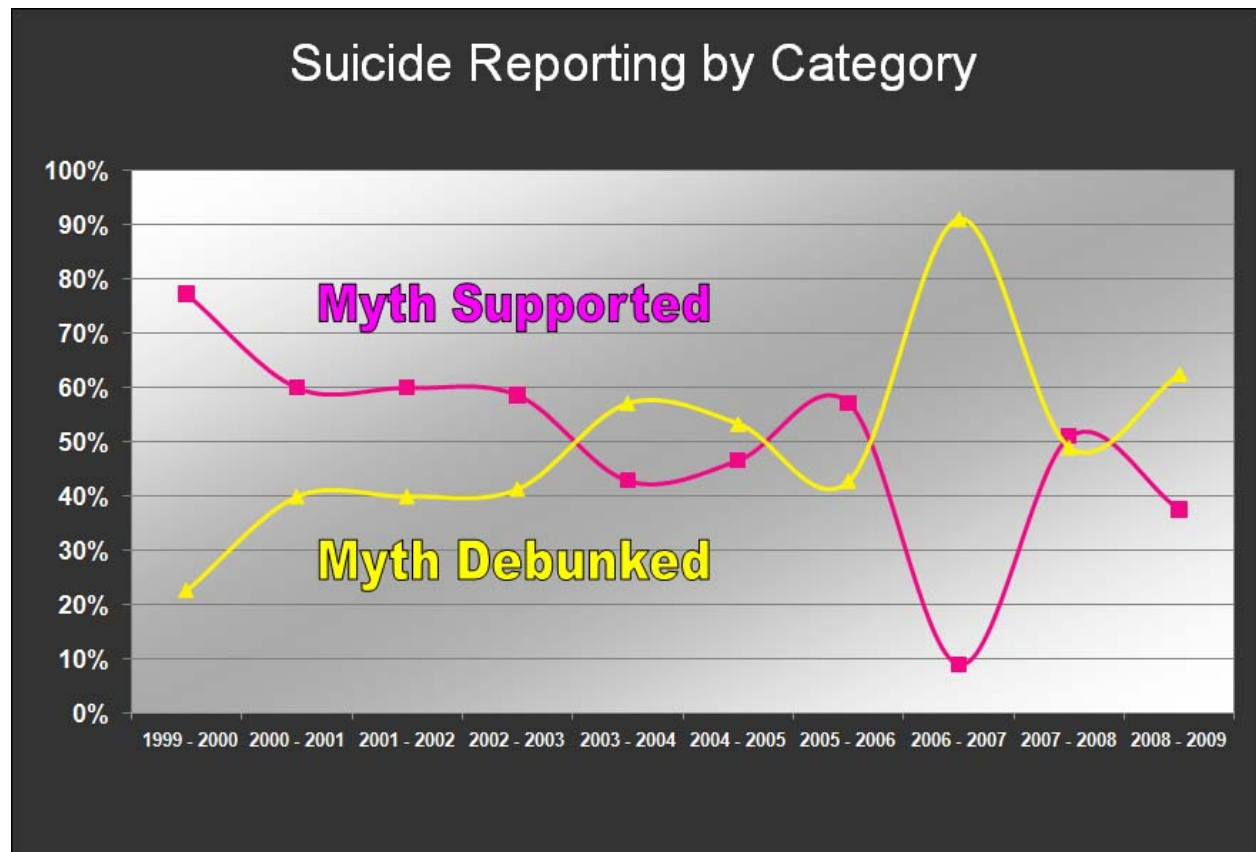
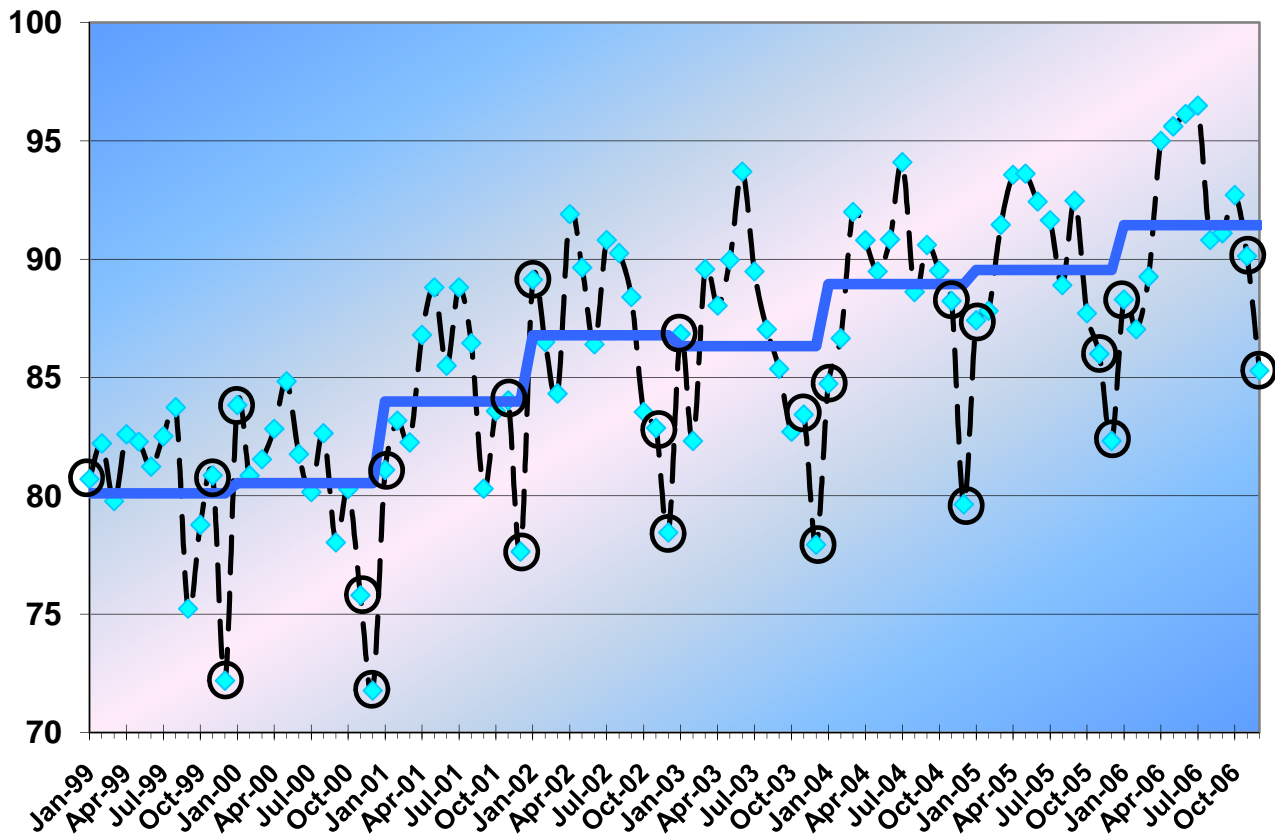


Figure 2. Suicide Average Daily Rate per Month



Note: Months of November, December and January 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. 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.