

THE ANNENBERG
PUBLIC POLICY CENTER
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: December 8, 2008

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

**The Holiday-Suicide Myth
Newspapers (and TV Shows) Return to Old Ways**

One of the more persistent myths about the end-of-year holidays is that suicides rise during this period. According to a recently completed analysis of news reporting during last year's holiday period, there was renewed repetition of this myth in newspaper reporting. Despite the sizeable drop that occurred during the preceding holiday period in 2006, newspapers displayed a surge in both the number and proportion of stories that supported the myth (see Table 1).

The analysis, released today by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) shows that about half of the articles written during last year's holiday season that made a direct connection to the season perpetuated the myth. That represents a statistically significant increase from the previous holiday period when less than 10 percent supported the myth (see Figure 1 below).

The fact is that the rate of suicide in the U.S. is 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 held steady through 2005, 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 drop in press support of the myth since 1999, it is disappointing to see that so many stories continue to reinforce the myth,” said Dan Romer, the director of Annenberg's Adolescent Risk Communication Institute, which conducted the study. “Reporters who make the link should realize that they are making a connection that just doesn't exist.”

The percentage of stories debunking the holiday-suicide myth has 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. In the years since APPC's alerts, the percentage of stories discrediting the link has increased. Unfortunately, the peak that was observed in the 2006-2007 holiday (91%) was largely reversed during last year's season.

"We are disappointed to see the press reverting to its old ways as it reports this story," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center.

We already see signs of a renewed focus on the myth during this holiday season. In an interview with Matt Lauer on "The Today Show" December 3, the Reverend Rick Warren stated that suicides rise during the holidays. And on "Saturday Night Live" December 6, actor John Malkovich repeated the myth in a comedy sketch.

"An opportunity exists for the press to correct this common misperception," added Jamieson. "Perpetuating the myth not only misinforms the public, but it also misses an opportunity to educate the public about the most important risk factors for suicide, namely mental disorders." Persons suffering from major depression and other treatable mental conditions are at increased risk of suicide. Getting help from an appropriate health professional can reduce symptoms and prevent suicide. The media can play a role in encouraging those suffering from these conditions to seek help.

Another concern regarding press reporting of suicide is the presence of contagion effects. A news story that makes suicide look like an acceptable solution to a person's life situation can give those vulnerable to the act permission to attempt it. Suicides rise after news stories that sensationalize a recent suicide (see <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/NewsDetails.aspx?myId=66>).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide ranks as the 11th leading cause of death among adults. Among adolescents, it is the third leading cause. More information about suicide and reporting that can avoid the contagion effect is available at the following:

http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/Downloads/Adolescent_Risk/Suicide/2001_guidelines809.pdf

[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 1999-2007.

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

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 2007.

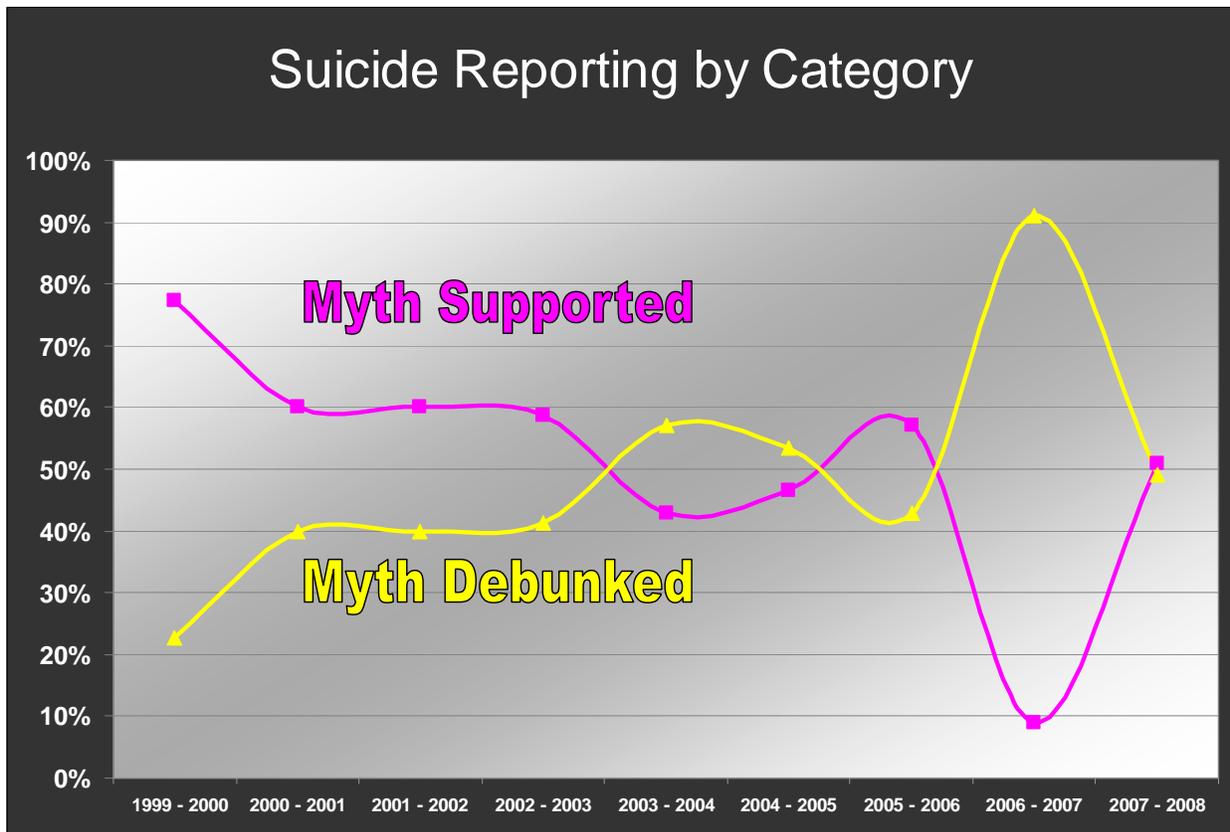
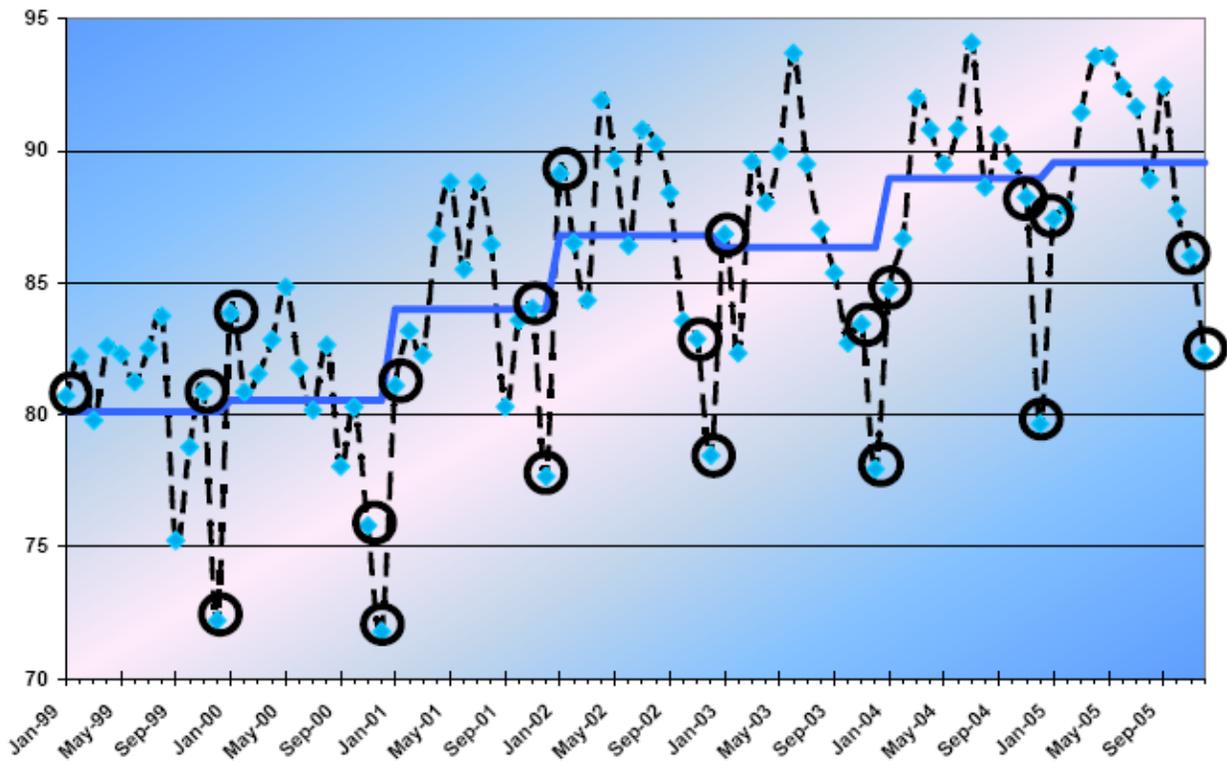


Figure 2. Suicide Average Daily Rate per Month



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 the search terms. Coders independently evaluated the stories for content either supporting the link, simply noting that a suicide occurred on or near a holiday, or actually debunking the myth.

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 Risk Communication Institute was established in 2002 to focus on strategies that promote the mental and behavioral health of adolescents.